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Provision of social assistance

The case of the two municipalities of Estonia

Social Policy and Social Exclusion in the Baltic Countries

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Introduction

Social reintegration has been stressed by several world organisations (UN, ILO, EU) and focused on in several scientific discussions. It is proposed that the European Commission make an Annual Social Cohesion Impact Statement, and that a social impact statement should be included in all new policy proposals. “*Social exclusion is a reality in Europe and will pose a growing threat to social stability and further integration if not counteracted. Europe must therefore continue to reach out to people in need*”, declared Tom Johannesen, Secretary General of the International Federation of Social Workers, in his NGO Report dated June 1997.

On 12 May 2000, the European Committee for Social Cohesion (CDCS) adopted its Strategy for Social Cohesion. This document, approved by the Committee of Ministers on 13 July, represents a statement of intent setting out a precise agenda for the Council in the social field for the coming years. It does not define social cohesion as such, but instead seeks to identify some of the factors of social cohesion such as:

- setting up mechanisms and institutions which will prevent divisive factors (such as an excessive gap between rich and poor, or multiple forms of discrimination) from becoming so acute as to endanger social harmony;
- the importance of decent and adequately remunerated employment;
- measures to combat poverty and social exclusion, particularly in areas such as housing, health, education and training, employment and income distribution and social services;
- strengthening social security systems;
- developing policies for families, with particular emphasis on children and the elderly;
- partnership with civil society bodies, in particular trade unions, employers’ representatives and NGOs

(*Strategy for Social Cohesion*. European Committee for Social Cohesion. Cf. http://www.coe.int/T/E/social_cohesion/, reference made on 28 November 2002)

The European Council agreed at the Nice Summit in December 2000 that Member States be requested to implement two-year National Action Plans on Social Inclusion for combating poverty and social exclusion, setting specific targets, taking into account national, regional and local differences, and listing the indicators used to assess progress.

The concept of sustainable human development has become topical in countries of rapid societal change as a result of a growing gap between society and the individual and losses in social and human capital as an outcome. The power structures can accept the dangers caused by the losses of social and human capital, but at the same time, support for long-term strategies for sustainable human development has actually been exchanged for merely dealing with current acute problems.

The restoration of independence in Estonia has created potential grounds for democratic participation and its institutional carriers in Estonia. Major changes have taken place in basic economic, social and political understandings, as well as in the relationships between people, in demands made of the labour force, etc. As a result, development from a totalitarian command economy into a market economy with democratic participation has been a rapid but painful process endangering sustainable human development in the country and creating poverty as well as social exclusion.

The Estonian Human Development Report 1997 points out the dangers of decreasing cohesion of Estonian society and the need for the reintegration of society, stressing the urgency required to reach out to people who are involuntarily excluded and disadvantaged. In 2001, a new metaphor referring to “two Estonias” was the subject of much debate among the population. The first Estonia is formed by the wealthy, socially integrated part of the population, the ‘winners’, while the other, opposing part of the population has to cope with the high risks of poverty and exclusion and are known as ‘losers’. To integrate the ‘second’ Estonia with the ‘first’ needs a number of ‘bridge-building’ measures from both sides (cf. Øyen, 1997). One of these measures involves clearly developing the social security system, including social assistance provisions to those in need. The need for social assistance has grown rapidly together with the processes of social differentiation.

The new social, economic and political situation of the country has encouraged the government to initiate shifts in the social protection system. The transition from a totalitarian command system to a democratic civil society has been paved with several unpopular decisions made by politicians. Today, the main structures of new social policies are more or less established in Estonia, but there is a lot of disillusionment and dissatisfaction among the population. Estonia as an accession country to the EU and represented by the Estonian government has taken responsibility for formulating the Joint Inclusion Memorandum and started revising a National Action Plan of Social Inclusion.

The aim of the current paper is to evaluate the impact of developments in social assistance provisions from two perspectives: (1) the capacity of public social protection in general by relieving social problems; and (2) the administrative capacity of social assistance provisions, with special emphasis on local municipal and social workers as the main providers of social assistance.

Background to the study

Theoretical point of departure and social evidence

Social cohesion and dissociation form two poles of social integration. Cohesion is reflected by high functionality and developmental capacities in a society, creating accessibility to mainstream society for everyone. Social dissociation refers to social disintegration processes, such as decreasing functionality, with social exclusion forming an important part of this.

‘In its literal sense, social cohesion is all about what binds societies together. All societies are the result of an interplay between centripetal and centrifugal forces; the things that bring people together and the things that drive them apart; the forces of unity and the forces of division; the interests of the individual and the interests of the community. All societies have to try to arrive at a workable means of accommodating these forces. Conflict is a necessary and permanent feature of life in society; it is not, therefore, a matter of creating a permanent balance of forces, but more a question of managing a dynamic equilibrium. The challenge, in other words, is to create societies that can manage conflict and change constructively and creatively.’ (*Strategy for Social Cohesion*. European Committee for Social Cohesion Cf. http://www.coe.int/T/E/social_cohesion/, reference made on 28 November 2002)

Social exclusion can be characterised as a decrease in capacities and the detachment of social and human capital in relation to the exposure of power and influence. Social exclusion can be found in every society. At the same time, it is especially clear-cut in transitional societies, including Estonia. As a rule, losses in social and human capital are costly. Consequently, it is better if losses are kept to a minimum. The objective conditioning of social exclusion is connected with rapid societal transition processes and changing social welfare systems. Subjectively, it is caused by an involuntary loss of welfare resources and the inability to restore the previous situation. The status of the socially excluded can be subjectively perceived as alienation, disillusionment, powerlessness to control and change the situation.

The Norbalt Living Conditions Survey (1994) revealed that different social groups run varying risks of social exclusion (Kutsar, 1997). In many cases, social exclusion stems from the loss of a job as a negative life event and is followed by the individual's failure to return to the labour market. The socially excluded lack welfare resources in ‘having’, ‘loving’ and ‘being’ dimensions as defined by Erik Allardt (1975). The Norbalt (1994) survey revealed that the accumulation of risks of social exclusion is more likely among people in older age groups, those with lower levels of education and those belonging to minority ethnic groups.

Data from the Household Income and Expenditure Surveys of the Estonian Statistical Office have shown a slight improvement in the poverty rate in the country. In 1996, 36% of households were living below the poverty line, including 19% living in direct poverty (80% of the poverty line). By 2000, the proportion of those living in direct poverty had fallen to 15%, but still no fewer than a quarter of households had resources which did not

reach the poverty line. At the same time, the proportion of people living at risk of poverty (20% above the poverty line) grew from 18% of households in 1996 to 20% in 2000. A lack of economic resources holds people back from social activity but also affects personal growth, so endangering the development of human capital in general.

Social practice from the 1990s has shown that social exclusion divides Estonia regionally into 'successful' and 'not so successful' (possibly one of the criteria for the creation of the 'two Estonias' metaphor). The successful regions are more often major cities and county centres, while the rural periphery and also some small monofunctional settlements are deemed to be not so successful (cf. Kutsar & Trumm, 1999). It is possible to see the division of regions. At the periphery, the processes of social economic marginalisation (high unemployment rates, including a large number of long-term unemployed and discouraged people) and the acute need for social assistance provision are evident.

Social capital is one of society's resources, revealed in collective actions taken by people, in mutual collaboration and in functional informal networks. According to Francis Fukuyama (1995), social capital is a social norm that allows co-operation between two or more individuals and can be observed as group cohesiveness. Low levels of social capital in a society, according to Fukuyama, lead to political dysfunction, such as the centralisation of administrative power (as in the case of France) or an unresponsive political system (as in the case of Italy). Political centralisation weakens local governments and gives way to growing evidence of corruption.

Poverty and social exclusion pose risks to social capital as they both decrease trust between different sectors of the population. On the other hand, living in a transitional society with high levels of mobility between social strata, 'individuals' lifeskills' strengths and weaknesses (cf. Nelson-Jones, 1993) – take on crucial importance in allowing people to cope with everyday life. This is particularly the case when we compare with the situation in more stable and developed societies, where 'individuals moving between different social strata is supported by a range of universal social skills that help them to form flexible new social networks (Lauristin, 2001).

Individuals who live on welfare contributions cannot retain high levels of trust towards other people. Their focus of control remains outside of them and is in the hands of others in the form of decisions made about their 'life situations and socio-political regulations of social protection which are made without their participation. This kind of situation also destroys social capital as a personal expression of the norm of joint actions.

European Values Surveys (1990 and 1999, cf. Saar Poll, 2001) have revealed decreasing trust between people in Estonia. In 1999, only 23% of respondents claimed they could trust the majority of people (in Sweden, this figure was 58%, in Finland 66%, and in Latvia even less than in Estonia – 17%). The survey also revealed that Estonian society has moved away from liberalist market economic thinking and action towards a social market economy, viewing it as more desirable. Social participation is low, and many people do not belong to any of the listed voluntary organisations. Saar Poll also found that people feel a sense of alienation from the state and are not interested in politics. The Norbalt II Living Conditions Survey in 1999 (Marksoo *et al.*, 2001) showed that social participation and trust in institutions as preconditions for social capital are weak and linked to the personal economic performance of respondents. Of respondents in the first income quintile, only 30% had

trust in Parliament (*Riigikogu*), and 29% trusted the government; in the fifth quintile, the respective figures were perceptibly higher – 51% and 47% respectively.

Social security

The market, the state and civil society – all these institutions have a clear-cut role in social integration as well as in alleviating social exclusion and creating conditions for empowering social capital in the country. The state is responsible for the formulation and implementation of the relevant social protection schemes, the market enables the creation of new opportunities as well as new risks, and civil society deals with several aspects of social justice and solidarity. The concept of solidarity (as another expression of social capital) forms a powerful vehicle for social integration, meaning its common social values and the social order constructed around it.

From the socio-political point of view, there are a number of opportunities to alleviate social exclusion and promote social integration, starting from common security provided by the state and followed by full application of the culture of individual opportunities. Recent developments in Estonia have confirmed that there is a growing need for mediating institutions between the state, the market and the individual, such as centres for the promotion of entrepreneurial spirit, local activation centres and social welfare offices providing the needy population with social assistance.

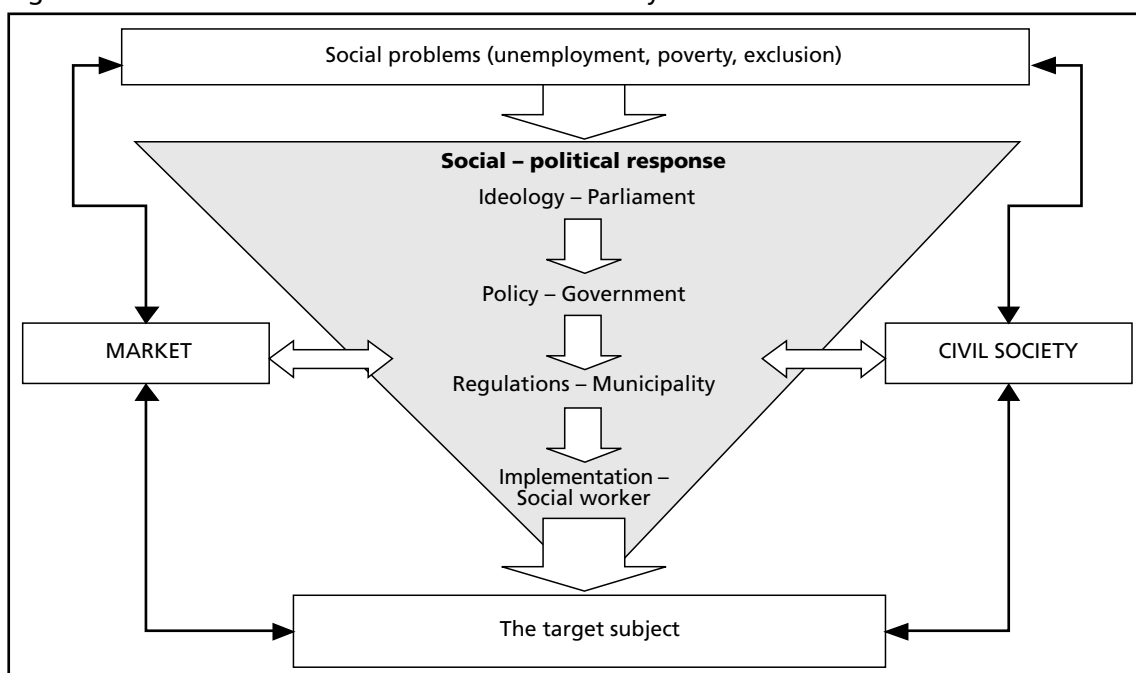
The security afforded by state social provisions appears to depend on three factors: adequacy, accessibility and affordability (Duffy, 1998). In this context, adequacy refers to the minimum standards offered, and to the proportion of the needy population who are covered; accessibility means the complexity of regulations, their eligibility and implementation; while affordability refers to the ability of both individuals and households to purchase goods and services and the cost of providing these.

There are specific rules on implementing social protection measures that may impact in a discriminative manner on some social groups in particular. For example, unemployed people who have not registered at the labour office as unemployed will not be offered training and courses or nor have the right to health insurance in Estonia.

By transferring responsibilities from the state to local government level, regulations come closer to people. This seemingly functional situation poses several risks should the resources for redistribution fail to be adequate enough. As a result, at the periphery and in other problematic areas with high risks of social exclusion (high unemployment, poverty, low educational level among the population, etc.), the redistribution of resources cannot follow the needs of those with acute problems with coping.

State social security provisions. In Estonia, the State plays a key role in creating social security for its citizens. The state social security system operates according to the principles laid down in the Social Welfare Act and various regulations of the Ministry of Social Affairs. This is the traditional hierarchical model of social security administration, the formal bureaucratic division of statuses and respective roles within the social security system (Figure 1, overleaf).

Figure 1. Formal hierarchical model of social security administration in Estonia



The functioning of this model assumes clear subordination between the levels of action, where Parliament passes the laws and formulates political ideologies, the government provides guarantees with policies and regulations that are implemented at a local government level, and social workers are the main implementers of laws, policies and regulations in respect of helping individuals and/or households to cope. This system can work if (1) there is a collective understanding of social security objectives and tasks among those concerned and the levels of action; (2) there is a clear organisational structure of social security provisions with balanced role division, and (3) there is a system of monitoring and evaluation. State authorities bear overall responsibility for social security, while the private and civil sectors hold only a complementary position. However, the social security mechanisms in Estonia are implemented through different structures and bear different concepts at the same time, as can be revealed further in this study.

The perspectives of social policy in Estonia for the period 2000-2010 have been settled by the Ministry of Social Affairs and approved by the Decree of the Minister of Social Affairs, No. 129 dated 20 April 2000 (Cf. <http://www.sm.ee/introduction.html>, reference made on 20 May 2002). The strategy plan of the Ministry of Social Affairs is an important strategy document presenting the long and short-term objectives and what needs to be done to achieve them. The main strategic objectives for 2000-2010 by sector are as follows.

Strategic objectives of the labour sector, 2010

- as much employment as possible for people of working age;
- interests of both parties at work protected fairly;
- safe, employee-friendly working environments.

Strategic objectives of the health sector, 2010

- a population noticeably more knowledgeable on health at individual, community and professional level;
- a restructured, cost-effective health network based on future needs analyses;
- a quality-assured, well-informed, motivated health network that can learn;

Strategic objectives of the social welfare sector, 2010

- a stable social insurance system that covers all the traditional social risks;
- a well-balanced system of social benefits that encourages people to work and promotes independent coping;
- a network of social services that is based on recipient needs, motivates and promotes independent coping.

The perspectives of social policy in Estonia are as expected of an accession country by the European Union and bear the ideals of *social Europe*.

Social work – the forgotten sphere of activity in Estonia

In a way, social inequality has become more rife in Estonian society, the loss of human and social capital has become evident, the social protection system has gone through serious reconstruction, and social work is returning to professional status. The reinvention of social work as a profession and as a field of knowledge found its way back to society when Estonia restored its independence and started to look for new ways of development. New social problems, such as unemployment, poverty, homelessness, social exclusion, increasing delinquency and drug abuse, which were becoming more widespread, reflected the acute social demand for skilled and educated social workers. Today, there are a number of colleges and universities where social work is taught as a major subject.

The social worker, in the new professional sense, has a number of parts to play – as a creative listener, bookkeeper, lawyer, advisor, inspector, teacher, friend and – sometimes – mother. As one social worker with whom we worked together in a focus group said – *‘the job of the social worker has widened so much, and now we deal with all kinds of problems in everyday life – from the cradle to the grave’*.

Social workers in a transitional society such as Estonia are developing their professional identity and expanding their field of knowledge. They spend lot of time searching the Internet for new regulations and studying new laws concerning not only social policy but also entrepreneurship, land and property restitution, labour market regulations and so on and so forth. They work with one ‘client’, be it an individual, a family, a group at risk, or a whole community. And they are confronted daily with oppression and deprivation and fight against the risk of personal burnout.

The world as a whole is becoming more and more complicated, uncovering new social problems and risks to the survival of mankind. As a response to these changes, the context of social work is also in rapid flux. But one fundamental element remains the same; namely that social work is located within some of the most complicated arenas of human experience, impacted upon by social difficulties that affect different individuals, households or social groups with varying severity.

The study

Problem context of the current study

Ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the main structures of new social policies are more or less established in Estonia. The main cornerstones of this long-term process have been the taxation reform (establishing the independent budget for social protection costs), the implementation of contemporary health and pension insurance systems (in order to increase individual contributions and responsibility), the launch of means-tested social assistance (providing relief for unemployment, poverty and social exclusion), community work and social services. Absolute social expenditure, as well as people's individual "share" of the GDP, is increasing.

However, there is still no clear understanding of the aims, tasks and regulations of social security. This particular feature is characteristic of most countries in transition. Janos Kornai (1997: 277) asks: "Where can the post-communist states look for a model of an efficient welfare state?"

Mart Laar, former Prime Minister of Estonia, has stated: "We will develop a welfare society, but we do not want to copy the welfare pattern that our Nordic neighbours have developed".

According to Kornai (1997:277), the debate on welfare reform in the post-communist countries is a shambles. It has taken place on various planes: among politicians, within and between political parties, between finance ministries and the ministries responsible for managing the welfare sector, among opposing pressure groups, and among various schools of thought in the academic world. Reforms all too often reflect compromises between diametrically opposed principles or embody no guiding principle whatsoever.

Table 1. Positive and negative factors regarding the implementation of various welfare regimes in Estonia (Lauristin, 1997).

Influential factors in Estonia	Welfare regimes (according to Esping-Andersen, 1990)		
	Socialist	Liberal	Conservative
Legislation	+/-	-	+/-
Political ideology	-	++	+
International standards	++	+/-	+/-
Values and traditions	-/+	-	++
Political interests (parties)	-	+	+
Social needs	++	-	+
Taxpayer interests	-	++	+
Government	-/+	-	+
Administrative resources	+	-	+/-
Economic resources	-	+	+

Despite the fact that all post-communist states are searching for their own national welfare mix, the current outcome of the reforms is similar throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Ferge (1999) points out the following features:

- the role of the (central) state in social policy is deliberately reduced in all its former functions as owner, service provider and donator of funds;
- the wide ranging welfare activities of companies – be they state firms or newly emerging private enterprises – are disappearing, often with valid reasons;
- local authorities have regained their relative independence and have become responsible for the well-being of their citizens. This is a major gain of democratisation, although some new problems will have to be solved;
- the re-emergence of the voluntary and NGO sector is also a major gain, even if its role is not always clear and funding remains a problem;
- many functions executed formerly by collective (central or local) bodies are falling back on the family or community. While theoretically this may improve the quality of services, in reality it may overburden the new executors.

In short, universality as a basic principle is practically disappearing in post-communist countries. This process may be manifest (formal dismissal of particular benefits) or – and more often – latent (permanent devaluation of benefits). The latter can be seen in Estonia as well (Table 2).

While many transition countries cannot maintain the system of universal benefits inherited from the Soviet era, adopting a targeted policy entails many risks (Gorniak, 2001; Milanovic, 1997; World Bank, 1997):

- a system based on strict targeting principles carries high administrative costs and is open to misuse. Groups entitled to benefits may not apply if the system is too complex, while others may question its legitimacy if they feel that they are being punished for not meeting official criteria for eligibility;

Table 2. Dynamics of the actual value of social benefits in Estonia. Estonian kroons

Date of change of the value of benefit	Subsistence benefit		Unemployment benefit		Child benefit	
	Nominal value	Actual value	Nominal value	Actual value	Nominal value	Actual value
2.09.1993	280	280	180	95	90	48
1.10.1994	320	210	180	63	105	36
1.01.1996	320	153	180	45	130	33
1.02.1996	390	180	180	44	130	32
1.01.1997	460	195	180	40	150	34
1.11.1997	500	192	180	37	150	31
1.03.1998	500	182	300	58	150	29
1.01.1999	500	177	400	76	150	28
1.01.2000	500	171	400	74	150	27
1.01.2001	500	162	400	70	150	26
1.01.2002	500	153	400	66	150	25

Source: Kuddo et al., 2002

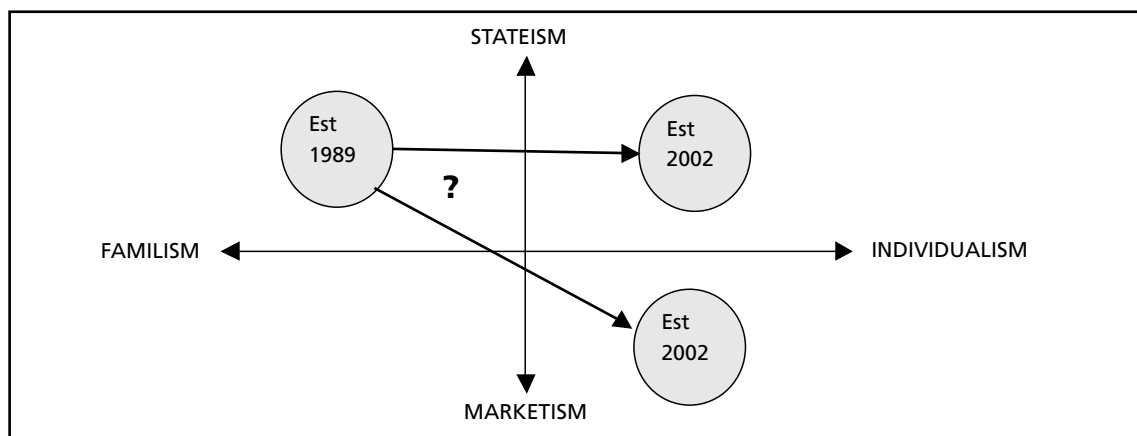
- means testing in particular seems impractical in countries in which the extent of the 'grey economy' equals or exceeds that of the formal sector;
- this also risks of stigmatising potential recipients who, for that very reason, may not claim their benefits;
- the narrow targeting of benefits involves a risk of targeting errors, such as (1) errors of exclusion – citizens not in need may be entitled to benefits; and (2) errors of inclusion – benefits can be entitled to the non-poor citizens;
- the additional risk to the poor can be seen in the decentralisation of welfare services. Strong links between the scale of welfare payments and local government budgets could result in a situation whereby some governments provide rather generous benefits but other governments, due to their limited resources, can provide only minimal social assistance. A situation such as this has been experienced in Estonia, where subsistence benefits were relinked to the central government budget in 1999.

The basic ideology of social security in Estonia is still fluctuating between liberal and socio-democratic values (Figure 2). The legislative framework of social policy bears concepts taken from the Nordic welfare model (equal rights, universalism, central role of the state, etc.), while the mechanisms of implementation are rather similar to the Anglo-American welfare regime. The main challenge, therefore, is to establish the most rational welfare mix.

The position of local governments. As recent developments in the social security system show, the main burden as regards the implementation of social protection in Estonia rests on *local governments* and *social workers*. The question still remains as to which types of capital these players cover (the professional skills and professional awareness of social workers and the organisational and monetary capacities of the municipality, along with the co-operation characteristics between various agents and power structure levels).

The legal foundation of the local government system in Estonia is formed by the Constitution of the Republic (1992) and the Local Government Organisation Act (1993), which establish the functions, jurisdiction, responsibilities and organisational structure of local authorities – both council and government – along with their relationship with local bodies and the national government. 'The independent and final resolution and regulation of

Figure 2. Social security system in transition in Estonia: an abstraction



local issues' is the major principle of local authority. Everything considered to be of local importance should be decided locally.

There are 247 units of local government, representing both rural (205) and urban (42) municipalities, and ranging in size from Tallinn, with 427,500 inhabitants, to Ruhnu, with as few as 68. As more than two-thirds of municipalities have a population of fewer than 3,000 people, many of them have found it advantageous to co-operate on the provision of services and implementation of administrative functions.

The increase of local government responsibilities has been hampered by a severe lack of resources. Budgets for local governments are regulated by the Municipal and Town Budgets Act (1993) and the Local Taxes Act (1994). These acts are the main source of revenue for local governments: taxes, subsidies from the state budget, income from economic activities (entrepreneurship, income from property, etc.), loans and other revenue. Most of the budget is made up of revenue from taxation. Of all revenue from taxation, personal income tax received through central government taxation¹ is predominant.

Subsidies from the state budget are other major sources of income. The allocations from the state budget to local governments include both general purpose and targeted subsidies. As targeted subsidies are allocated for implementing specific central government functions which are delegated to local governments, their size and use are taken into account in the state budget. General purpose subsidies are intended to cover the costs of the obligations imposed by legislation. On average, the local government budget per capita amounted to EEK 5,557 in 1999.

While the basic concepts are provided by the law regulating local governments, special laws (such as the Elementary and High School Act, the Social Welfare Act and the Construction and Planning Act) spell out local government tasks more specifically. In addition to the responsibilities assigned to them by law, local governments have the right to take on problems that have not been assigned in legal terms to any other party for decisions or regulation.

The local authorities in Estonia have wide-ranging tasks to do, but these are not made particularly explicit in the various legislative acts and the level of detail varies across sectors. In general, local authorities feel that the legal foundation is unclear and that there are many areas (such as public order, emergency services, social welfare and healthcare) where competencies are shared and unclear.

A number of surveys have referred to the low institutional and administrative capacities of local governments and presented a range of recommendations to improve the situation. Decisions have been made to implement most of these recommendations within the scope of the administrative reform initiated in 2001.

Research issues of the study. The current study focuses on the provision of social assistance at local government level and deals with the following research issues.

- What have been the major shifts in the provision of social assistance in general and at local government level?
- How have implementation mechanisms changed since Estonia became an independent state?

¹ The tax shared between the state and local governments is made up of personal income tax (44% state, 56% local) and fees for the use of natural resources (shares vary depending on the resource in question)

- Who are the vulnerable groups, and how much are they taken into account when it comes to targeting the provision of social assistance?
- What are the major differences in the provision of social assistance between two local governments (one being a 'loser', the other a 'winner') as two instances of the effects of decentralisation?
- What are the characteristic features of the professionalisation of social work?

The counties of Pärnu (as an example of a successful region) and Jõgeva (an example of a region which is not so successful) – both in terms of sustainability – have been taken as two cases in this study.

Method

The study applied qualitative methods involving in-depth interviews (focus groups and expert interviews). The framework of the interviews was formulated in co-operation with the project partners – the Institute of Applied Social Research of Norway (FAFO) and the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Tartu.

There were four general areas of focus in the interviews:

1. Developments in the Estonian social protection system in general and in social assistance in particular. This subsection attempted to map the changes in the purpose of social welfare provision, people's real-life situations, social assistance values, needs and resources, and individuals in need.
2. Organisations, regulations and implementation agencies. This part of the interview analysed the re-adaptation of the implementation mechanisms of social policy to the changed situation in society.
3. Vulnerable groups versus target groups as regards social assistance.
4. The rebirth of social work and the profession of social worker in Estonia. Here, the emphasis was on the professionalisation of social work.

Detailed interview framework – see *Appendix 1*.

Participants in expert interviews

The experts for the study were selected from a variety of areas and levels of social assistance administration:

1. Head of the Department of Social Insurance and Benefits from the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs;
2. Head of the Estonian Centre for Social Development;
3. Mayor of the town of Sindi

All the experts who were listed for interview agreed to participate in the study.

Participants in the focus groups

The members of the focus groups were proposed by the heads of the Social Welfare Departments of the county governments. In the county of Pärnu, four social workers representing the county government, Pärnu city government, the municipality of Kilingi-Nõmme and the municipality of Sindi took part in a focus group. Seven social workers (from Jõgeva county government, the town of Jõgeva, the parish of Jõgeva, the town of Mustvee, the parish of Pajusi, the parish of Torma and the town of Põltsamaa) took part in a focus group in the county of Jõgeva.

The interviews covered all areas indicated in the interview framework. In the county of Pärnu, the structure of the interview was more formalised, and information for the analysis was collected by means of more detailed questions. In Jõgeva, information was gleaned from the answer to the first question asking the social workers to describe one of their most recent working days and followed by the interview framework. The descriptions given were rather detailed and analytical, highlighting the main activities of local social workers, problems occurring, perceived changes in regulations, characteristics of applicants and the role of the social worker in general. All other questions addressed to the focus group attempted to clarify the problems that arose during the interview.

Both focus groups were active, co-operative and inspiring. Participants maintained a positive attitude throughout the interviews. By way of feedback, participants deemed the group work to be effective and useful for their mutual communication and the exchange of experiences and ideas.

Information on the counties of Pärnu and Jõgeva

The two regions of Estonia included in the study – Pärnu and Jõgeva – have different cultural, economic and social backgrounds. Both of them have a number of resources for development but are still lagging behind the most developed areas of Estonia, the capital city of Tallinn and its environs.

The *county of Pärnu* is located in the south-western part of Estonia and is the largest of the 15 counties of Estonia, 4,806 km² in area. This county makes up 11% of Estonian territory (45,200 km²). Pärnu, the centre of the county, was once a member of the Hanseatic League. Via Baltica is the main highway passing through the county.

The county is made up of 23 local authorities of equal status, including three towns (Pärnu, Sindi and Kilingi-Nõmme) (Figure 3) and 242 rural settlements. The town of Pärnu is the largest administrative unit, with 51,400 inhabitants. The population of other local authorities is between 590 (Lavassaare) and 5,000 (Audru). As regards the ongoing administrative reform in Estonia, intensive discussions are in progress relating to the future administrative division of the county. The main reason for the change of administrative reform is the low administrative capacity of the current municipalities due to the small population, along with limited economic and social resources. In 2001, the county government of Pärnu presented three different scenarios for an administrative structure for the county of Pärnu: 1) modest reform resulting in 29 municipalities; 2) intermediate reform

– 11 municipalities; and 3) radical reform, proposing only two municipalities: the city of Pärnu and parish of Pärnu to include all former rural municipalities

The *county of Jõgeva* is located in the central-eastern part of Estonia. The centre of the county, the town of Jõgeva, is situated about 160 km south-east of Tallinn and 50 km north of Tartu. Up until 1949, the county of Jõgeva was a part of northern Tartu and the county of Viljandi. In 1962, the final borders were set for the Jõgeva region and this is how they remain today, 2,604 km² in area. In 1990, Jõgeva region was renamed the county of Jõgeva.

In terms of administration, the county is divided into ten parishes and three towns, each with equal municipal status (Figure 4). The number of inhabitants in the local communities varies from 6,348 (the town of Jõgeva) to 1,426 (the parish of Pala). The local government populations are somewhat smaller than average for Estonia. According to the recent development plan for the implementation of administrative reform, the current local governments will be reorganised into three municipalities, with administrative centres in Jõgeva, Põltsamaa and Mustvee.

Socio-demographic structure of the population. The population of Estonia is getting older. Between 1959 and 2000, the proportion of the population aged over 60 has approximately doubled (Sotsiaaltrendid 2, p. 15); over the same period, the number of children has fallen by 18% (amounting to 17.9% in 2000). The ageing process is more apparent among women (due to their higher life expectancy) and in rural areas (due to migration of young people to the cities).

The Estonian two counties included in the study – Pärnu and Jõgeva – are in 4th and 12th position respectively, of fifteen counties, in terms of size of population. Both counties are more or less ‘average’ as regards the age and gender structures of their populations.

There are about 100,300 people living in the county of Pärnu (comprising 7% of the entire population of Estonia). The population density is 21 inhabitants per km², while the Estonian average is 32. Due to the abundance of woods, bogs and marshes, the county is unevenly populated: two-thirds of the population live in Pärnu and its environs. The population is made up as follows: Estonians – 83%, Russians – 12%, other nationalities – 5%. On average, Estonians account for 64% of people in Estonia. Since the mid-1980s, more people have settled in the county than have left it.

The county of Jõgeva is mainly rural, and the rural population forms 68% of the total population of the county. The same figure for Estonia as a whole is 31%. The ethnic make-up of the population is relatively homogeneous (80% Estonians) compared to the rest of Estonia (65% Estonians). The population is ageing, and 15% of inhabitants are of retirement age. The natural increase in the population has been negative since 1994. In 1999, 409 births and 538 deaths were registered. The net migration is negative as well.

Labour market. The labour market situation in the county of Pärnu is rather favourable compared to the Estonian average (Table 3). The level of unemployment is one of the lowest among the Estonian regions, and labour market participation and the employment rate are only slightly less than average for Estonia.

The structure of employment in the county of Pärnu has changed to a remarkable extent over the last few years, first of all following the general pattern of development in the Estonian labour market, with decreasing primary sector and rapidly increasing third sector and increasing numbers of employees in private enterprises. In 1999, 41% of all employed people were working in the service sector.

The employment level in the county of Jõgeva has remained at a decreased level since 1994. Of the population as a whole, only half are active on the labour market and the unemployment rate is higher than the Estonian average (17.3%). The main decrease in employment has taken place in construction and in the primary sector (particularly in agriculture), where the number of employed people fell by a half. The increase in the third sector (32%) is noticeable.

Historically speaking, the county of Jõgeva has always been an agricultural area due to its fertile soil and favourable climatic conditions. In 1989, around three-quarters of all people employed were employed in agriculture. The collapse of agricultural production has led to radical changes in the labour market. As the result of these processes, agricultural produc-

Table 3. Population aged 15–74 by economic status and county (2000), annual average, thousands (www.stat.ee).

	Jõgeva	Pärnu	Estonia
Labour force			
Total	16.3	45.4	705.1
Employed	13.6	40.3	608.6
Unemployed	2.8	5.0	96.5
Inactive persons	13.8	30.0	399.0
Total	30.1	75.3	1104.1
Labour force participation rate, %	54.3	60.2	63.9
Employment rate, %	45.1	53.5	55.1
Unemployment rate, %	17.0	11.1	13.7

tion has decreased and the relative importance of the service sector has increased. Most of the property of former collective farms has now been privatised, and numerous industrial and service-oriented small and medium-sized enterprises have been formed. However, agriculture still remains the main sector of employment.

Household income. Transitions have had a seriously detrimental impact on the living standards of households in Estonia. Economic decline, hyperinflation, emerging unemployment and the liberalisation of prices have led to rapid pauperisation of the population. The purchasing power of the population started to increase in 1997, when the average disposable income increased by 15.3% and the consumer price index increased by 'only' 11.2%. Over the period 1996-1999, purchasing power in Estonia increased by 7% (Sotsiaaltrendid 2, p. 57).

The average income of households in the county of Pärnu is comparable with the average for the country as a whole (94.3% in 1997 and 100% of average in 2000). The county of Jõgeva is one of the poorest regions in Estonia, where the incomes of the population are considerably lower than the average for Estonia in general (72.5% in 1999).

Municipal tax revenues. Taxes are the main source of income for local governments. Most tax revenue is generated from personal income tax (46.5%). Municipal budgets are dependent on the wealth (income) of households. In the counties of Pärnu and Jõgeva, the average income tax is lower than average for Estonia (in Jõgeva almost half as much), which reduces the options of local government to do what they have to do. Additional subsidies are provided for poorer regions so as to alleviate the differences in resources. In the county of Jõgeva in 2000, 43% of the total revenue came from the state budget in the form of subsidies (Table 4).

Social assistance in local municipalities is provided by social workers. Their tasks and responsibilities are set by the Social Welfare Act and are co-ordinated by the Department of Social Welfare of the county government. Subsistence benefits are of prime importance among the various social assistance measures.

Subsistence benefits are awarded to households living below the minimum level of subsistence (EEK 500 per consumption unit) in amounts necessary to guarantee that they reach the minimum level of subsistence. In 2000, more than EEK 300 billion was paid out in subsistence benefits (24% of the total assistance given). Of the resources for subsistence benefits, the county of Pärnu received 3.2% and the county of Jõgeva 4.6%. Of approx.

Table 4. Local budgets revenue (2000), thousand kroons

	Jõgeva	Pärnu	Total
Type of revenue per capita, kroons			
Local budget income	2,267	3,042	3,653
Of which personal income tax	1,436	2,074	2,551
Subsidies from state budget	2,400	1,245	1,101
Total revenue	5,563	5,391	5,481
Share of type of revenue from total revenue, %			
Local budget income	40.8	56.4	66.7
Personal income tax	25.8	38.5	46.5
Subsidies from state budget	43.1	23.1	20.1

Source: <http://www.stat.vil.ee>

500,000 successful applications, 20,000 came from Jõgeva and 15,000 from the county of Pärnu (Table 5).

Figure 5 shows the average amount of subsistence benefit per successful application and permanent resident of the region. The average sum paid to recipients in 2000 was EEK 617. In the county of Pärnu, this figure was EEK 618, and in the county of Jõgeva it was EEK 720 (16% more).

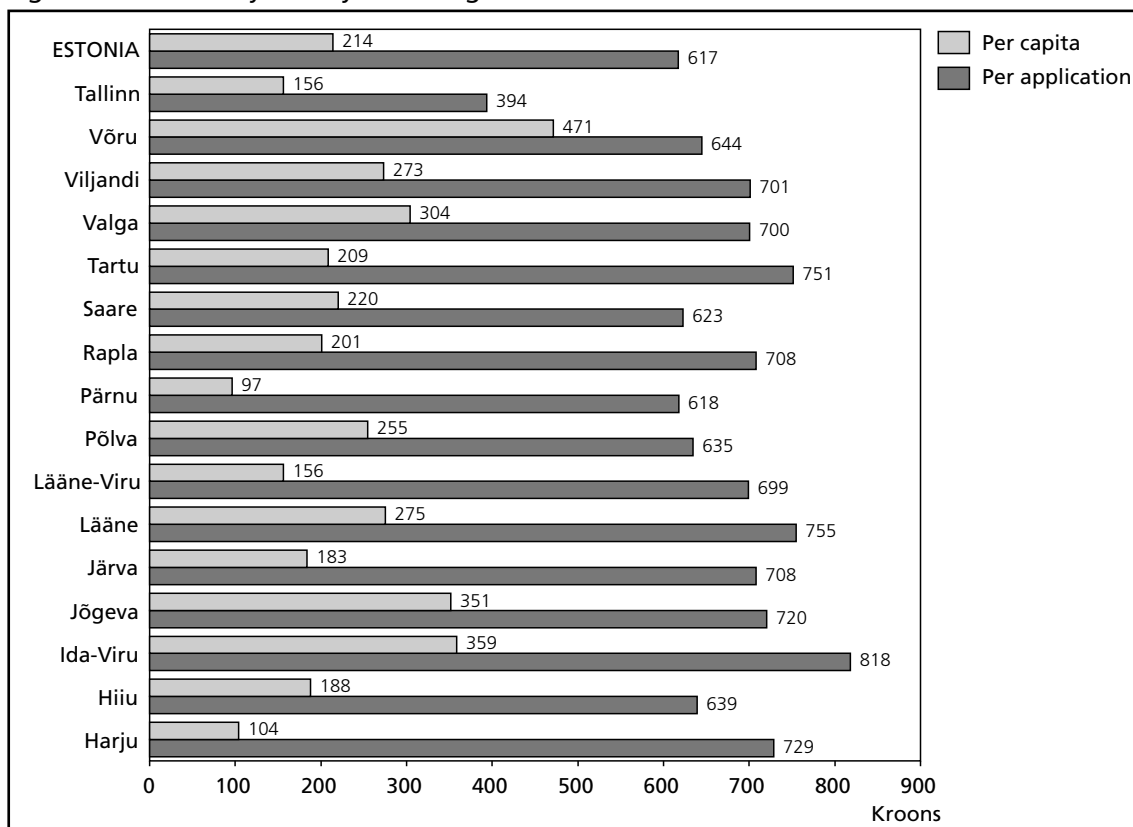
The amount of subsistence benefit given varies significantly between different municipalities. These differences are due to several factors – the population structure (e.g. proportion of elderly people or children), the labour market situation (the number of unemployed people), the wealth of the municipality (resources for additional benefits), the housing structure (proportion of housing with central heating), etc.

Of all the municipalities in the county of Pärnu, the most generous are Paikuse (EEK 848) and Vändra (EEK 835), while benefit levels are at their lowest in Aru (EEK 457) and Audru

Table 5. Benefits to guarantee reaching of the minimum level of subsistence and supplementary benefits to facilitate household subsistence, 2000 (<http://www.sm.ee>)

	Jõgeva	Pärnu	Total
Subsistence benefits to guarantee minimum level of subsistence, kroons	14,193,377	9,635,062	305,301,983
Supplementary social benefit, kroons	961,723	1,255,438	10,007,412
Benefits total, kroons	15,155,100	10,890,500	315,309,395
Number of successful applications to guarantee breadline	19,710	15,600	494,754

Figure 3. Amount by county of average subsistence benefits in 2000.



(EEK 467): almost half the amount given by the most generous. Comparing the number of successful applications, it can be seen that Paikuse has passed fewer applications than any other municipality.

In the county of Jõgeva, subsistence benefits are distributed more equally among the municipalities than is the case in the county of Pärnu. On average, recipients of welfare contributions in the county of Jõgeva receive about EEK 100 more than recipients in the county of Pärnu. The amount of benefit given was highest in Torma (EEK 854), followed by the town of Põltsamaa and the parish of Pajusi (both EEK 805). The smallest amounts received were found in Pala (EEK 600), Mustvee (EEK 612) and Kasepää (EEK 629), where incomes are at their lowest and unemployment is the highest in the county.

Figure 4. Relative positions of Jõgeva and Pärnu by disposable household income (percentage of average).

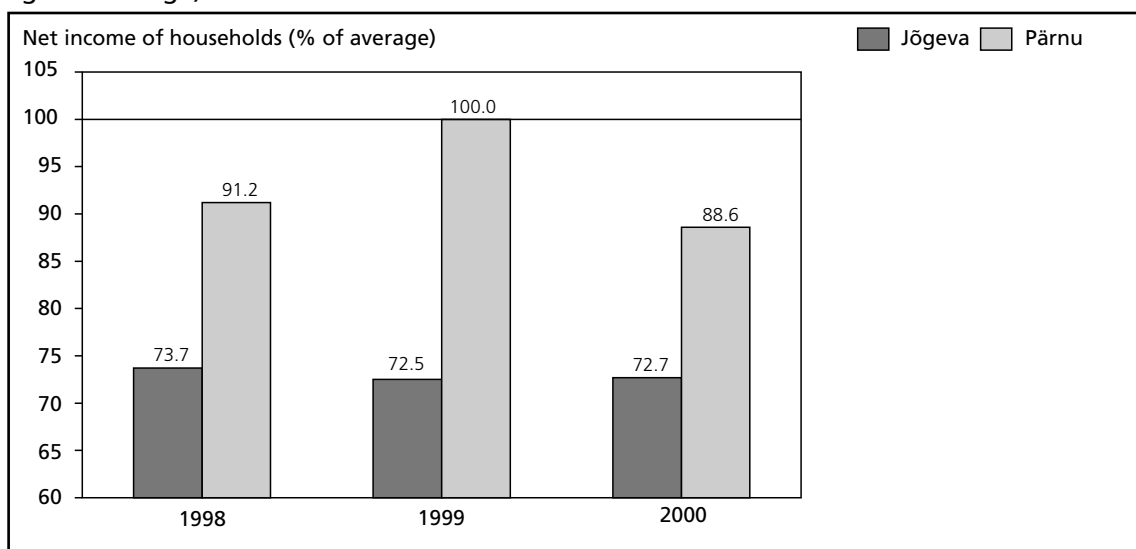
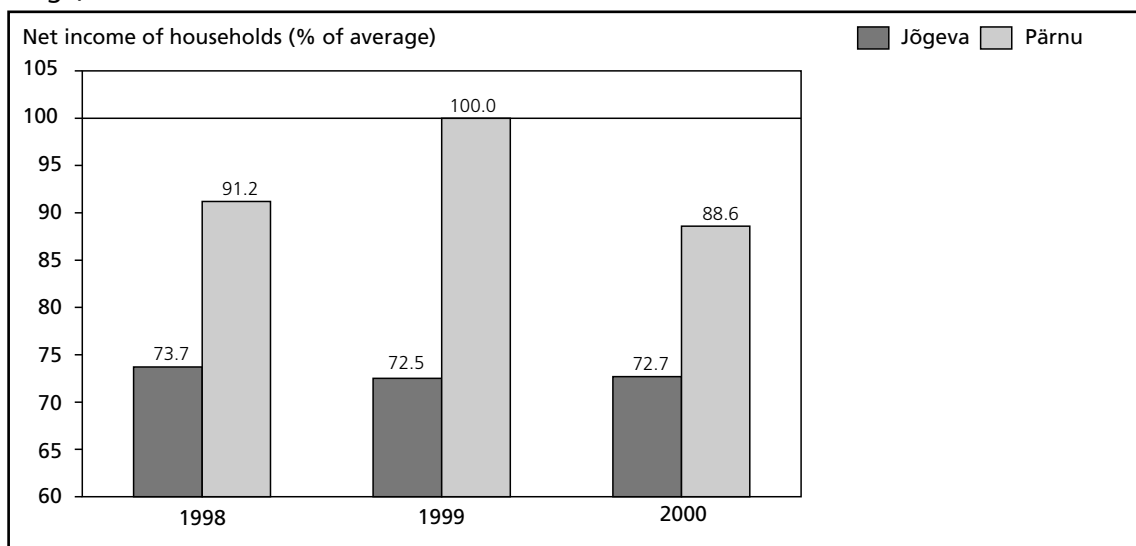


Figure 5. Relative positions of Jõgeva and Pärnu by unemployment rates (percentage of average).



To conclude, subsistence benefits form a relevant portion of social assistance measures within the scope of the Estonian social protection system and are the most important tool for guaranteeing the minimum standard of living for local residents. Despite the universal criteria for the implementation of subsistence benefits for the republic as a whole, the actual amounts given to recipients vary across regions and municipalities. It has not been possible to detect any one factor influencing the amount of benefit given in the various municipalities .

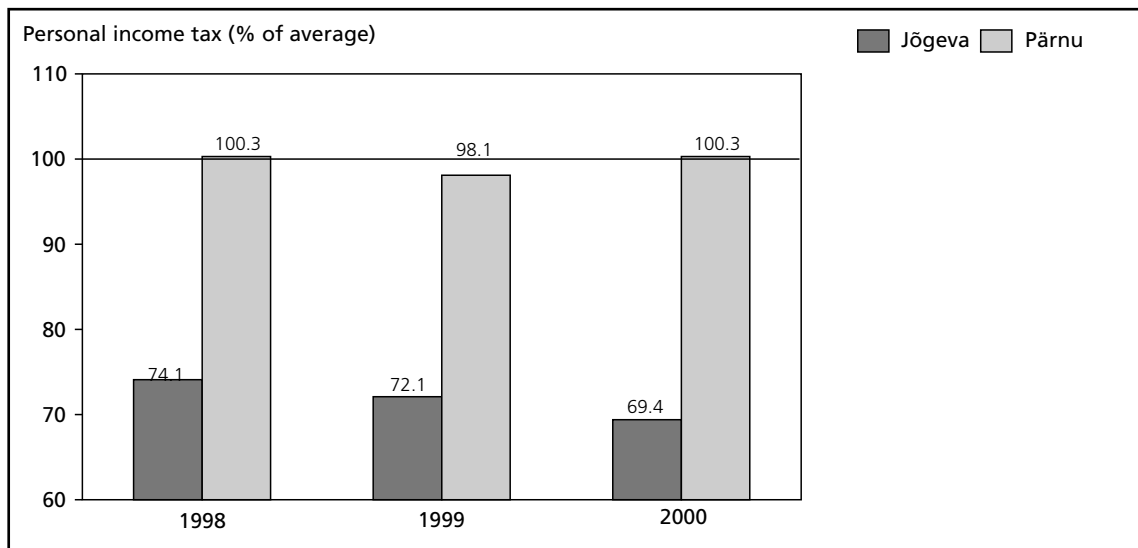
Within the scope of the Strategy for the Regional Policy of Estonia, three key indicators have been formulated in order to attain the objectives of the regional policy of Estonia:

- The average standard of living (measured as the average income of a household) would be lower than 75% of the Estonian average;
- The unemployment rate (measured using ILO methodology) would not exceed the Estonian average by more than 35%;
- Municipal tax revenues (measured as personal income tax in local budgets) would be lower than 75% of the Estonian average, excluding Tallinn.

The average income per household in the county of Pärnu is close to the average for the country as a whole. The situation was at its most favourable in 1999. In 2000, the growth of incomes has slowed considerably compared with the rest of Estonia. The county of Jõgeva has remained one of the poorest regions and is one of the target regions for regional policy programmes

The rate of unemployment is the second criterion determining the need for regional policy programmes. In the county of Pärnu, unemployment levels have been among the lowest for a long time. Figure 5 shows that unemployment is about a fifth to a quarter lower than the average for the country as a whole. In the county of Jõgeva, the situation is exactly the opposite – unemployment is more than 20% higher than average.

Figure 6. Relative positions of Jõgeva and Pärnu by average personal income tax levels (percentage of average).



Looking at personal income tax levels, the conditions of the two counties are the same. Pärnu operates on the same 'country average' position, while Jõgeva lags behind many others. Figure 6 shows that over the three years, the situation has shown a tendency to deteriorate rather quickly here.

The facts presented led to the conclusion that upon further analysis, the focus group interviews indicated one average – and rather typical – region of Estonia (Pärnu) and one weakly developed area with serious social problems.

Analysis: social assistance in practice

Views of social workers

This analysis is based on the information collected from two focus group interviews; one with social workers in the county of Pärnu and the other in the county of Jõgeva. The analysis follows the transcribed text from the complete interviews. At the first level of analysis, the main issues discussed were separated under different headings. The second phase of the analysis aimed to gather together the most important keywords and opinions under specific headings. Below is a description of the main outcomes of the analysis, along with small explanations (*in italics*).

Characteristic changes of the social assistance system

Social assistance in Estonia has moved on from paternalistic state care towards relying more on individuals' capacity for self-help. Looking back over the past decade, most attention has been reactive on account of crises in society. Only in recent years has more attention started to be paid to the prevention of all kinds of social ills and to the reprofessionalisation of social work, with its increasingly variable working methods. The focus group participants in Pärnu and Jõgeva pointed out several critical aspects of social assistance provision.

Changing regulations and expansion of social work tasks. Social workers attending the focus groups pointed out several tendencies in the development of social assistance. They found that the social assistance system is becoming more and more complicated and is still rather unstable – regulations are often changed, so straining the entire system. As one of the group members noted, [...] *as of 1 January 2001, new regulations concerning social protection for the disabled were implemented; changes were introduced to methods of reporting.* These changes were apparent even to the leaders of the focus groups (researchers). The first focus group met six months previously, and the functions and tasks to which the social workers referred as regards the provision of social assistance had expanded rapidly over this period, especially in respect of counselling activities. Here, the difference between the two focus groups becomes evident: in Pärnu (the earlier group), social workers were more focused on (subsistence) benefits, while in Jõgeva (the group which met six months later), social workers spontaneously took problems with counselling and guardianship as their starting point.

Networking. The interplay between state institutions (employment agencies, social security board, tax offices, employers, etc.) has increased, as reflected by respondents, but it is still inadequate and not, they feel, functional. [...] *However, co-operation mainly involves asking for information missing from the registers, they say.* In general, the group considered co-operation to solve the problems of 'clients' to be weak. One of the social workers gave an extreme example: *a dead body was found on the road. No institution (the police, hospital, emergency services) was able to deal with it for a variety of reasons (the person was not registered*

in this region; it was just a dead body and so could not be “cured”, etc.). The local social worker cared – she took the body off the road in her own car and organised the funeral. This example characterises the position of social work as a last resort – if a matter is no-one else’s concern, it is the concern of the social worker.

One of the obstacles to the expansion of co-operation between institutions is the fact that over recent years, the formalisation and bureaucracy of the social security system has been increased. [...] ... *‘Networking’ used to be based on informal contacts and was carried out mainly by phone. Now official and formal contact (by regular mail, stamped and signed) is required.*

Another obstacle is the lack of information and/or corresponding registers, but also insufficient co-operation between different agencies and social assistance administration levels. [...] *The division of tasks of the state (Ministry), county and local government is still problematic. The resources and ‘rules of the game’ are dictated from above by the Ministry, which is not aware of local problems and needs for assistance. Actual assistance is the responsibility of local governments, which are unable to make the rules and distribute resources adequately. The county has a controversial role to play in protecting the interests of the state by means of inspection and control. At the same time, the county has an obligation to represent local needs and interests.*

Another unresolved problem that restricts networking opportunities is the division of tasks between the potential networking agencies. The focus group discussed a situation, asking the question of who cares ‘... about the poor, not working and living without a permanent place to call home, not registered with any local government?’ [...] *One example from real life: an unemployed man, of no fixed abode, collided with a car. Who pays for his treatment? The man came from the parish of Jõgeva, where he spent the night, the accident happened in the town of Jõgeva ... but he was born in Puurmani ... ! Nobody does, they agreed, or again, as social practice has shown, a social worker takes over as the last resort.*

Money. An acute and long-lived lack of resources for social assistance provision has become even more serious over recent years due to an increase in social problems. As social problems develop and become more numerous as well as more complex, so greater resources are required in order to alleviate them. One of the most acute factors indicating the increasing need for social assistance is the imbalance between the minimum wage and benefit levels. The minimum wage is too low (equivalent to the poverty line) and does not guarantee a normal standard of living. As a matter of fact, this situation results in people having to decide between taking on employment at the minimum wage and living on benefits. For the most part, this problem is evident in rural areas, where unemployment is rife and employers prefer to pay only the minimum wage to their staff. [...] *Subsistence benefit amounts to around one-third of the minimum wage but also covers recipients’ housing costs. This leads to a situation whereby living on benefits is more practical than working for the minimum wage. This means people having to decide between income poverty and living on benefits.*

Change in the general social work strategy. The focus group participants pointed out that there has been a clear shift from benefits and towards services when it comes to providing social assistance. This shift has taken place partly because of the discontinuation of (additional) cash benefits: social workers are trying to provide assistance in the form of services instead. [...] *The most important change is in the expansion of the application of guardianship and home services, they agreed.*

They also mentioned some perceived changes to priorities in respect of the provision of social assistance. Firstly, they noted an increasing focus among social workers on preventive work and active intervention. The focus group participants in Jõgeva referred to child protection as one example of emerging preventive work. [...] *The most important field of preventive work is child protection, to prevent the emergence of a poverty culture. One positive result is that every social worker is encouraging the unemployed to contact employment agencies.*

Focusing on problem solving, instead of temporary alleviation of the symptoms, was another principle for reconstructing the priorities of social work. The Pärnu group was especially concerned about the inefficiency of benefits where they have been given to recipients for an entire year, or even longer. [...] *This kind of social assistance provision solves nothing: people in need are still facing long-term unemployment, are discouraged, addicted to alcohol, suffer the breakdowns of their families and have poor living conditions in general,* the group members concluded.

Changing landscape of social assistance

As noted above, the focus group participants found that social problems in Estonia have deepened and taken on a clearer shape in Estonia. This situation is directly reflected in social workers' everyday professional practices.

Unemployment and personal strategies of the unemployed. The first social problem they pointed out is increasing unemployment. [...] ... In some municipalities, about 40% of the population of working age is jobless. At the same time, unemployment as a social problem is multi-faceted. Evidence is also revealed of 'hidden employment', part of the grey economy. In this case, noted in particular by social workers in rural areas, people who are not in gainful employment work for cash-in-hand and do not pay tax, and at the same time they claim social assistance. [...] They get their 500 kroons from social workers by way of subsistence benefit, and at the same time they go around chopping down trees or something like that, in some cases working really hard. And they do nothing to make society prosper: taxes are not paid and things are not handled the way they should. [...] ... Starting from tax policies that should be regulated in a more effective way so as to enhance people's interest in paying tax.

There is one additional factor that holds back some jobless people to attend training or pick up a job –the lack of resources for using transport. This mostly concerns people in rural areas who have to spend rather a lot on everyday transport to get to work or training and back. In the opinion of the focus group, this situation ... [...] ... *restricts access to jobs, education, training – services that are available in other areas.*

People who are gainfully employed but not covered by social protection. If the above-mentioned personal strategy of unemployed people related to the issue of deserving social assistance, the issue at hand refers to cases in which employers avoid paying tax, or pay only the minimum possible amount of tax. One strategy they employ involves paying wages cash-in-hand. Employees lose out, because they are in gainful employment but do not pay tax, so they are left out of the social protection system. [...] ... *Some companies pay wages cash-in-hand. 'Cash-in-hand' means that people have no pension, and often no sick benefit fund or health insurance either.* At the same time, there is a noticeable increase in the cost of living in a society that puts even greater strain on the everyday lives of the poor, of those living on

welfare or those without social protection [...] *The price of a number of goods and services (medicines, heating, transport) has gone up, affecting low-income groups, including the elderly. But in spite of inflation, the subsistence level remains unchanged.*

School dropout rates. The social workers in the focus group expressed great concern about the decreasing numbers of young people enrolling at school. They see this as another source of people who will seek social assistance and live on benefits in the near future. This is also one factor determining the expansion of social work in society. [...] *One recent problem which has emerged is that of the motivation of school administrators due to the increase in competition between schools to free themselves of problematic and – in some senses – ‘inconvenient’ children who hold back the general success of the school. The prospects for the futures of these ‘dropouts’ are all dependent on the initiative of the social worker.*

Alcohol addiction. Unemployment, poverty and living on benefits in society are as a rule accompanied by alcohol abuse and other addictions. The focus group participants discussed the situation and found that this problem is especially severe in rural areas with high unemployment. [...] *It is very sad to see families where the fathers drink up every last penny of their wages or benefit money. This sense of responsibility has survived more in women. There is an old saying that if a man drinks, half a house is on fire, but if a woman drinks, the whole house is on fire. Fortunately, there are fewer drink problems among women than is the case with men.*

Family breakdown. Commuting between home and work where people had jobs which necessitated staying somewhere other than home lays the foundation for family breakdown. The focus group participants gave several examples from their work where families split up as they were unable to handle the strain caused by enforced separation due to one spouse having a job in another area. In several cases, the commuting spouse (mostly the husband) formed another informal relationship, or even another family. The separation of home and job locations is due mainly to a lack of openings in the region and may not be the result of freedom of choice.

Poverty culture. One of the social workers was concerned about the future of children growing up in ‘recipient families’. She has experienced a situation in which both parents and independent (adult) children were claiming benefit at the same time – both generations had problems coping with everyday life. The children adopt the mentality and lifestyle of their parents: they are helpless, lack motivation and wait passively for support. Their personal politics are biased on account of constructive self-help solutions.

The group found that over the decade since Estonia gained independence, the ‘poverty wheel’ has started to turn and the expansion of the poverty culture has become evident. [...] *Another experience comes from the town of Jõgeva. Children in nursery school were asked to name the most exciting places they have been in their lives. Most of them mentioned new department stores or playgrounds. One said that he has visited grandma in Tartu. Most of the children have no option of getting away from home occasionally, visiting other places, taking on board new experiences,* observed one of the members of the focus group in Jõgeva.

Changing target groups of social assistance

Social workers are highly critical of the targeting of social assistance. They are of the opinion that formulating the target groups as stipulated by the government is not always based on social analyses. As a result, people in need and people meeting target group criteria are unable to coincide in many cases. Consequently, providing help and support may somehow be addressed to the wrong people and households, thus allocating (generally insufficient) funds and other resources ineffectively.

The interviewees agreed that the recipients of long-term social assistance could be a good point of departure as regards discussion on target groups.

Unemployed households. Most often, long-term recipients of social assistance live in households where others are unemployed or inactive. The proportion of unemployed households among recipients is rapidly increasing due to a new regulation which provides people who are unemployed but not registered with the opportunity for assistance. In some municipalities, unemployed households make up around three-quarters of all recipients. At the same time, the social workers agreed that unemployed people entitled to social assistance decrease in number during the summer as it is easier to find casual work at that time. [...] *In fact, unemployed people either go out and pick berries in the forest or find a job on a farm so that they have nothing to do with the social worker during the summer.*

Families with children. Many households with children, especially households with a lot of children, can be found among the long-term recipients of social assistance. In fact, these form a relatively stable category of social assistance recipients. *Single parents and large families are the main social assistance recipient categories. The proportion has remained the same. [...] ... Big families with a lot of children, and women taking maternity leave and raising their kids (one or two of them) alone. These people are given assistance all the time throughout these three years.*

The elderly and the disabled. The income of pensioners in most cases is much higher than the subsistence level. However, the high cost of housing brings them just down to subsistence level: some retired people with an income of EEK 5 less than the minimum level of subsistence receive subsistence assistance and housing benefit, while some pensioners fall into the poverty trap. It can be stated positively that pensions have increased a number of times, thus making the increase comparable with inflation in the country. The focus group participants stated that over recent years, the number of elderly people claiming benefit has fallen, so reflecting the effectiveness of the work of the government.

Income poor. People who are gainfully employed but receive insufficient remuneration are among the long-term recipients of social assistance. The focus group participants deemed this kind of situation to be unusual; people working for the good of society but who are still unable to make ends meet. [...] ... *Many people receive assistance benefit because their wages are so low ... Wages have not risen and ... the number of low-income recipients has increased,* in the view of one focus group member.

Persons with temporary problems coping. The focus group participants in Jõgeva and Pärnu gave several examples from their own work where people are suffering temporary hardship as regards coping with everyday life and need social assistance for only a short time. [...] ... *For the most part, this includes people with health problems, people taking enforced holidays, etc. [...] ... Individual cases of this type, such as a factory in financial difficulties where*

wages are not paid for a month or two, and adequate documents are issued. [...] There are also temporary recipients of social assistance who change jobs or are unemployed for a short time.

The problem pointed out by the group is that 'normal' households (working, two parents, few children, healthy, not young, not old and not excessively poor) do not attract their attention and support. If they are in need, they do not meet the criteria of any one target group.

To conclude, the risk groups receiving social assistance are quite traditional and similar in society as a whole. On the one hand, this demonstrates that subsistence benefits go to the people who genuinely need them. It emerged that there has been a change in the relative importance of the retired among those who need help, whereas the relative importance of the unemployed and families with children has risen. On the one hand, this shows the direction of development of society, but on the other it proves that the coping system is testing the effectiveness of the rest of the system. If pensions have risen above this 'coping line', families with children then inevitably remain below that as child benefit is so low. [...] ... When talking about priorities – to whom do social workers give preference, and who is preferred by the system – it is clear that children take priority. Even if mothers fail to maintain the highest possible standards, children are still given preference, and this is probably justified.

Attitudes concerning social assistance vs. social justice

Plural understanding of the necessity of social assistance inspires discussions over social justice among people. This is also the question of solidarity and social capital. In a transitional country, the old (Soviet) type social capital is not functional any more, at the same time, people are not so enthusiastic in creating new social capital. As the NORBALT surveys (1994 & 1999) have confirmed, people in Estonia are poorly organised: their participation in voluntary organisations is low and their capacities to function as pressure groups are still weak. Low social capital has its impacts on people's attitudes towards social assistance provision.

Grounds of feeling injustice. Although some people understand that social assistance provisions are necessary and life and death issue for some persons as revealed from the focus group interviews the interviewees also had experienced situations where people had blamed them in supporting people in need not deserving it. The opinions among the population differ drastically. [...] In a way, people even envy social assistance recipients because they receive money without working. Just getting money for nothing, as some people think. But it is considered to be a disgrace – "we are not disgraceful", in the countryside there is no shame at all in belonging to that group, no motivation for how to get out of it, etc. [...] ... some say there is no point paying money to X as he would just drink it all anyway. In general, the attitude towards people in severe hardship is not good.

The social workers also pointed out that people feel ambivalent as regards social assistance if it seems in any way unjust. This concerns personal investments and contributions on the one hand and the right to apply for social assistance on the other. The focus group participants recalled cases where a lot of retired people living in their own houses came to the social welfare agency and complained about social workers helping people who have not contributed to their housing. The people complaining feel they have worked hard and paid their own money for their houses, while other people have not gone to all that trouble,

acquired their homes free of charge from the state during the Soviet era, and now they receive housing benefit. This conflict is gathering momentum, as no special benefits are in place at present for homeowners that could make the situation fairer. [...] *The complainers have written letters to various ministries and ask how long this system is going to persist, a system whereby some people receive funding from the state, whereas others have to work and then run the household as well using their own resources.* One of the social workers from the group expressed the opinion that [...] *attitudes would change if we could also help honest retired people who have to keep their own houses in order with their tiny pensions but who in reality get nothing but their medicines and food.*

Social justice issues are also hidden behind bargaining between benefits and wages. Social workers are of the opinion that there are groups of people prone to living on welfare instead of taking up a job. The main reason for this is that the low minimum wage does not motivate them to find gainful employment. [...] *It seems to me that the biggest problem is not that benefits are somewhat comparable to minimum wage. Actually, the fact that the group of people preferring to claim social benefits instead of being gainfully employed is increasing is a serious problem. And look at it from their point of view: there is no point in slogging away at work if you can get the same money for just sitting around at home, smoking.*

Reasons for bad attitudes towards social assistance applicants. The group participants focused on two factors determining bad attitudes among the population towards social assistance applicants: cheating social workers and the misuse of social assistance received. Here, it is possible to determine functional weaknesses of the social security system on the one hand and low levels of personal ethics of recipients on the other.

Social workers can give examples where applicants present certificates indicating that they receive wages that are highly unlikely to reflect reality and are much lower than is actually the case. As a result, some social assistance claimants do not deserve this support. [...] *Their wages are not low, but their official wages are, and this is aimed at the Estonian National Tax Board. [...] However, we discussed these issues in a conversation with the Estonian National Tax Board the other day, and we talked about starting to check these certificates. They made it clear that this is possible only if someone who has received cash-in-hand comes forward and “confesses” to the Estonian National Tax Board. This is the only way the case would be checked out. But the system [of cheating] works very well and people will continue to receive cash-in-hand payments and still claim benefits.*

In some cases, people misuse social assistance provisions by hiding their real social or marital status. [...] *... Some young women raising their first or only child try to appear ‘single’ and receive social benefits. We have tried to monitor this system, but there are cases where they are not as single as they profess to be and cohabit with someone who should (and probably does) take responsibility for this small unit. But there is a tendency for women to stay at home for three years, take the social benefits offered and say that they live alone with the baby. Surely this is one of the strategies people use to receive social benefits that worsens public attitudes concerning social assistance recipients. At the same time, the law accepts formal marriage; it is somehow underdeveloped when it comes to following people’s actual family behaviour and changing family structures.*

However, social workers have noticed a trend among the population of less labelling of social assistance recipients. [...] *People would rather not be the ones receiving assistance, but what actually bothers me is that our people, just like a Chairman of a Board of Directors (refer-*

ring to a person who does not deserve social assistance support but is entitled to it on the basis of documents presented), *are no longer ashamed by it*.

To conclude, it emerged that people are getting used to social assistance in respect of both giving and receiving assistance. However, given the life perspectives of the people receiving assistance, this is more dangerous as they then adapt and come to rely on social assistance.

Who deserves social assistance?

Who deserves social assistance is a highly ethical question often encountered by social workers in their everyday work. When the focus groups were asked this question, it provoked heated discussions among group members.

People suffering temporary hardship. First of all, they were of the opinion that social assistance should be given in the short term to people suffering temporary hardship. Long-term hardship should be relieved by other means (policies on employment, housing, taxation, family, etc.), not by offering social assistance. [...] ... *Someone who is temporarily in trouble needs assistance, and in that case I believe that it is deserved*, one interviewee concluded.

The 'socially inept'. There are groups of people who we could deem to be 'inept' when it comes to coping independently. The interviewees found that as they are 'inept', they may also deserve more attention from social assistance. [...] ... *In addition to people suffering temporary hardship, people who will never be able cope also deserve assistance, as the expense of treating them would be much higher than the 500 kroons a month they receive. This contingent deserves assistance in the way in which it is organised at present. But the rest should have government assistance that would enable them to cope. Keeping them in mental institutes or prisons would be much more expensive. [...] ... This contingent, including lifelong alcoholics, has decayed morally, socially, physically. In fact, they are invalids with severe disabilities, but the law does not see it that way: in the eyes of the law, there is nothing that can be done with them.* This viewpoint provoked vehement opposition from other group members: [...] ... *Disagree here because I think there is a certain mentality. [...] I have seen rather outrageous demands from women, indicating that the state is responsible: the state has to help, not their husbands. Men should not be underestimated in this way.* Another argument: [...] *I know exactly who has been looking for work on their own, and I have offered them jobs, but they simply will not get jobs because they cannot be trusted.*

Single mothers with one or more children. Single mothers raising a child or children form a traditional target group. This was also the understanding of the majority of people interviewed. But one of the interviewees strongly recommended traditional complete family units that can manage without the need for social assistance (both parents working, with a resource level adequate for a normal life), instead of single motherhood combined with social assistance. [...] *I am a supporter of traditional family life, and if there is a question of who is deserving of assistance and who is not, then I would say that I would not give benefits to young single women with children who really want to stay single. I would handle them completely differently: they should get their families and family relations in order.* Single motherhood is more justified in cases where women are over thirty and have specifically planned motherhood

to fulfil their reproductive needs and escape from being alone. [...] ... *This is where I would draw the line. These single mothers deserve social assistance.*

Officially unemployed people. The group found the unemployed to be another traditional group deserving social assistance that is also entitled to this by socio-political regulation. In this case, the group relied on the correctness of this regulation. [...] *If people are officially unemployed, they have the right to receive assistance benefit, and in that case I believe it is deserved.*

Other categories. People without health insurance, people who are unregistered and do not hold personal identity cards also deserve social assistance, in the opinion of the interviewees.

How to become a 'deserving case'? This is the question raised by the group. The main criteria pointed out were that people deserve assistance if they work, if they are involved in public work or if they are retired. [...] *Some people come to my [i.e. the social worker's] office to ask not for assistance but for a job, saying that there is no work available in the town, and that they would like to do some work and then maybe receive some assistance.*

To conclude this topic, proceeding from the Social Welfare Act, every person who is having difficulty coping deserves to receive benefits, and there are basically no restraints. [...] *We are dealing with relationships where fair play is relatively important, so people playing fairly who do not hide their actual income and really are in trouble deserve to receive benefits. [...] The role of assistance benefit is not only to assist, but also to educate and direct. We need to find the people who do not need help and those who really need help and are doing something to alleviate their situation, people who are involved in public work, communal work, etc.*

Changing roles of social workers

Social work as a profession is returning to Estonian society. This part of the focus group discussions revealed problems with the reprofessionalisation of social work. On the one hand, there are problems with finding qualified social workers, while on the other hand the group looked at the development of social work as a sphere of activity, its roles and functions in society as a whole.

The focus group participants pointed out high levels of divergence in the educational backgrounds of social workers. Many of them have other qualifications, not in the field of social work (e.g. some were trained in agricultural disciplines), while many of them have no special education but high school. [...] *Let us say that four out of thirty social workers hold the diploma in social work. It is not like that in the town. On the whole, I think maybe ten out of fifty social workers has received adequate training, not only as regards higher education but also training just in the field of social work. [...] Studies were carried out during the latest refresher courses at the Tallinn Administration Institute, and it emerged that about 60% of course participants had a background in agriculture. They are probably taking conversion courses and complementary courses right now, but the level of these courses depends entirely on the budgets of their local authorities. For authorities which are in a position to invest more money, their investments are of higher quality. However, money is a problem for many local authorities.*

When returning social work as a profession to the country, a number of high schools and institutes of higher education started in the early 1990s to train social workers and offer complementary and refresher courses to people working in the field of social work. At

present, the proportion of trained social workers is increasing in number. [...] ... *Over the last few years, we have taken on young people who are qualified for higher education or who have come to work at an earlier stage so that the higher education can be obtained in a year or two. And as we have Tartu University College in Pärnu, there are people with a secondary or vocational education and who have started their two or four-year courses either at Pärnu College or at the University of Educational Sciences in Tallinn.*

Municipalities differ when it comes to their options for covering complementary and refresher courses for social workers. [...] ... I have to say, regretfully, that I have only a secondary education, and I have had no complementary training either on account of a lack of funds from my municipality. If there were any opportunities for free study I would definitely take them: I have taken all the smaller free courses on offer, but the money is the problem ... Maybe in a way it is easier for me as I made my son study, if I can put it like that, and I can follow his course material; and to be honest, I do not feel as though he knows a lot more than me.

One focus group member expressed a radical attitude concerning the people working as social workers who do not have training in social work: [...] ... *Everybody working in this field should receive complementary training in their specialist areas. I do not think that the people without the special preparation should lose their jobs straight away, though: the employer should find the resources to train these people if they have done a good job and managed to cope with the system, as it is really impossible for them to fund that training and support their families at the same time. The employer should find the money for the conversion training and complementary training and definitely pay for these studies.*

Trained social workers constitute competition and sometimes even put people without this training in fear of losing their jobs. By way of a solution, they combine the knowledge of the young, trained staff with the great experience of the 'older' staff who have no training in social work. [...] ... *Young people with valid knowledge could easily work with older people with plenty of experience ... That would be the best thing to do as regards choosing staff, not just kicking these older staff out without so much as a by-your-leave and bringing in just these very young ones. Not everyone is able to communicate with applicants, no matter how extensive their education: I am sure of that.*

The workload of social workers is ever increasing. The social workers interviewed pointed out several different roles when describing their everyday working lives: as bookkeepers, lawyers, advisers, inspectors, teachers, friends, mothers, etc. The role of social worker has taken on greater scope, and they deal with all kinds of everyday problems; from birth to death. The focus group pointed out the need to rethink the role of the social worker. Social workers currently do too much accounting work, so leaving not as much time for professional social work. [...] ... *A completely different person should be dealing with money, someone that would not only allocate the assistance benefit but also give unemployment assistance, someone that would handle money issues, someone like a bookkeeper or keeper of social accounts.*

As the legislation is still changing, the perceived lack of legal skills becomes evident. Social workers spend lot of time searching the Internet for new regulations and studying new laws concerning not only social policy, but also entrepreneurship, land and property restitution, labour market regulations, etc. "We should be real lawyers, but we do not have enough time or knowledge for that", the participants agreed.

The increase in counselling among everyday tasks is evident. Providing applicants with information on new regulations and requirements for applicants has become one of the main duties of the social worker. Visitors to welfare agencies are more open and not as timid any more, so they ask for consultations more frequently.

The increasing workload means more risk of burnout among social workers. Unresolved applicant problems, the increase in unfinished work remaining to be done and the low status of social work result in psychological tensions and increasing distress, group participants agreed. They also found that social workers need supervisors who listen to them and with whom they can discuss more complicated cases.

The feeling of solidarity among social workers is low. Social workers do not have a professional union, and the representation of the interests of social workers in society is low. The focus group participants listed a number of benefits that professional unity could bring: a pressure group for protecting their interests, an organisation for exchanging information and experiences, etc.

The knowledge that social workers lack the most includes how to work with applicants, communication and listening skills, counselling, preventive work techniques, a knowledge of social analysis, and – last but not least – the art of taking care of themselves so as not to burn out. In the opinion of the focus group, social workers are quite good at interpreting laws.

How to deal with unregulated situations?

In a transitional society, where on the one hand the landscape of social assistance is changing, and on the other hand the regulation of social assistance provision is being formulated and improved, there are still several unregulated areas of social practice highlighted by the social workers from their own everyday practice.

Emergency intervention. The group discussions revealed the lack of support mechanisms for anyone with special needs in an emergency (e.g. following a fire, the accidental death of several household members, etc.). This would need extra resources to be allocated to social workers that they used to have to pay out as additional subsistence benefits. Unfortunately, the existing criteria for social assistance provision are currently too strict, thus making intervention in emergencies impossible. Social assistance involves only the means testing procedure and does not take special needs into account. *This problem is caused mainly by the removal of additional subsistence benefits*, one of the group members concluded.

Non-residents. In Estonia, we still have quite a lot of non-residents who are not registered in any municipality. At the same time, social assistance provision is very specifically allocated to a municipality and forecast for the people registered there. The social assistance provision regulations do not allow for social assistance to be provided to people who are not registered there, and social workers are obliged only to provide assistance to residents of the municipality. [...] *Moreover, the amount of resources supplied to municipalities depends on the number of residents registered. Providing social assistance for non-residents is against the interests of the local government.*

Registers and the availability of information. The register system is currently undergoing development in Estonia. The main databases used by social workers are the population register, social insurance register, tax register, labour market register, family census register,

and a few others. The problem is that these registers are missing information in many cases, and/or they contain errors. These problems are caused by the fact that people are not obliged to register their home addresses, whether they are married, etc. Inadequate registers mean that social workers face problems in their work caused by a lack of information.

Definition of households. The regulations laid down do not include an adequate method for defining households. In practice, applicants themselves define their households. So they can include spouses who have moved out, independent children or retired parents in the household structure or exclude them if this so proves to be beneficial, complained focus group participants. [...] *Social workers have the right to express doubt, to discuss the matter and ask for formal registration documents ... but registration of the residence is not compulsory*

...

As far as the lack of clear household definition is concerned, another problem is that social workers and representatives of controlling bodies (county, Ministry) may have differing opinions on household structure. One of the focus group participants recalled the recent debate between the Ministry and local government representatives which focused on students as potential recipients of social assistance: do students form a separate household, or an independent one? If they form an independent household, they are also entitled to apply for subsistence benefits due to their absence of income. If they are part of their parents' households, they should live on their parents' income.

Social work in rural areas

The focus groups cited a number of special considerations as regards social work in rural areas. Rural social workers face both positive and negative challenges. The first positive challenge involves the adequacy of information on the local need for social assistance. As rural municipalities are small in terms of population and geographical size, there are also improved options for both administrative and informal social control, and applicants are much less likely to cheat social workers compared with the urban situation.

The negative challenges of social work in rural areas surely include lower standards of living and employment rates compared to average for Estonia on the one hand, as well as limited options for providing (specialised, additional) services. In Estonia, rural areas accumulate social problems (unemployment, poverty, deviant behaviour, drug abuse, family breakdown, etc.) that make social work more intensive there.

Concluding focus: the powers of social workers

Focus group participants widely discussed various levels of governance and the role of the state in creating conditions for the population to cope with their everyday lives. The interviewees were of the opinion that the state should create conditions which would allow everyone to get by, either on their own or with the help of the government. [...] ... *The very same laws that should be the task of the state should work in such a way as to allow people to cope, either by implementing the same tax policy, the same employment policy, or by means of health care and insurance, so that there would be less need and scope for traditional social assistance.* [...] ... *The state should make sure that people could insure their own lives so that social benefits would be allocated to people who for some reason cannot afford it for themselves.*

Even so, state provisions are not always enough. [...] The social worker in the municipality should be able to help when people have temporary difficulties or health problems. Social work, with its services and prevention measures, could be of assistance to bring people back from the brink. But at present, people fall down and cannot get up again. People are generally ready to cope, but some people are stronger, some are weaker: for some people, one setback is enough to render them unable to cope, while others can handle several setbacks and still bounce back. In many cases, a social worker is the last resort for people in need. [...] ... Municipalities have to reach every individual that needs assistance and social welfare: the social worker is the one who really has to know his or her region. I am talking about myself, as I work with a small population in our town – 2500 people – and having lived there since I was little I know everyone. And the social worker should be the person who provides the assistance and sees beyond the problems, who really knows how to push the right buttons with the local council and government so that certain things are forecast in the budget or done ...

The group participants also pointed out the growing role of NGOs for co-operation in the field of social work, but they did not deal with this in any depth.

To conclude, social workers from the group were of the opinion that they have a lot of opportunities to exert an influence: the question is, how many of these opportunities are used? [...] ... *The problems of society end up in the hands of the social worker, ... if we bring them to the attention of society and phrase them in such a way that people will understand, maybe then they would receive more attention at higher levels as well. The social counsellor in a municipality is expected to make suggestions, as well as preparing the data for the budget that the municipal council either approves or rejects, and if this counsellor really only works on preparing the budget, this budget may well not be accepted. But if these problems have been highlighted in the press, it is more likely that what the social worker has prepared will be approved by the council.*

Social workers are expanding their area of influence by creating co-operation between different agencies and by means of co-operation at different levels of governance. They are also gathering influence on account of their increasing professionalism and growing professional awareness.

The expert view of social protection and social assistance provision

Three expert interviews were carried out within the scope of this study. The current analysis follows the transcribed text of the full interviews. The following depicts the main outcomes of the analysis, along with small explanations (*in italics*). The expert interviews are of similar focus to the focus group interviews.

Development of the social assistance system

All the experts agreed that social assistance is necessary in every society, and the government on all levels should take responsibility and support the people who are not able to support themselves. [...] ... *Our laws oblige local authorities to help and support such people, and as a*

whole this is state policy. No matter how rich or poor we were, this is still our little state. The experts did not focus as much on the development of social assistance, but instead concentrated on ideas and revealing problems with assistance ideology. The experts expressed rather critical opinions in this respect.

The representative of the Ministry is of the opinion that social policy and social assistance in particular have been mostly reactive in Estonia, making attempts to alleviate problems and crises which have already occurred, and almost entirely lacking preventive aspects. The Ministry has taken steps to switch from reactive to preventive measures, or at least to strike a balance between the two. [...] *We are using not only crisis solutions but also a little bit of something else that I have perceived from the Ministry and also from what people say. Discussions are all about risk groups, and I regret this as the only thing we talk about is risk groups. This is where the most difficult issues lie, where we have found a long-term solution instead of a temporary one, but we have no strategies in place to prevent problems. The latter has more to do with social assistance, and not that much to do with social welfare.*

The aim of social assistance is to make the lives of people who cannot cope with their own situations worth living so as to enhance their ability to cope. [...] *... Everyone should be able to live a normal, full life no matter what, whether they are antisocial or millionaires. It is natural for the state and society to draw certain lines, and not everyone is equal, everyone being exactly where they are at that point in time. The state is also acting according to its options, depending on how rich it is and how much money it has to allocate and donate. Sometimes it is not the money that is important, but the recognition of people as individuals.*

The strategy of paying social assistance benefit was implemented in the early 1990s as a short-term support measure for people who were having problems coping in the face of rapid societal changes. The benefit payment ideology should be reconsidered and reworked. [...] *... At that time it was just a temporary solution which allowed people to survive the situation. ... This all stems from the time when people did not live on these benefits for years. So we will actually have to design new strategies for people who are going to need long-term assistance.*

Social assistance benefit vs. guaranteed income? The Ministry representative points out that income and expenditure are two different sides of the same coin. Everybody has the freedom to choose their spending strategies, and this has nothing to do with social assistance. Guaranteed income means partial contribution by the government towards enhancing the coping abilities of individuals in need. [...] *We have been discussing whether the issue relating to expenses should be applicants' own responsibility, no matter what kind of housing they live in (cheap or more expensive). We also expect people to receive assistance from other quarters as well and do not rely solely on the income guaranteed by the state: they may have a piece of land of their own, or their relatives may offer help. This kind of responsibility is likewise not regulated by law.*

The local government expert pointed out the significant role of humanitarian aid that came from other neighbouring countries in the early part of the 1990s and provided alternative social assistance. Now, however, the flow and significance of foreign humanitarian aid have tailed off and we can no longer consider it as an alternative to social assistance.

The social insurance system is still underdeveloped and cannot be applied to its full potential for enhancing people's ability to cope. [...] *... Income should be guaranteed through social insurance schemes. Better for us to increase pension and child benefit entitlements than to let the number of people receiving social assistance grow.*

Governmental changes in priorities

As regards the lack of resources, the government should be intelligent enough to set the most functional priorities when it comes to social policy. Priorities have changed over the years in Estonia, but emphasis has mostly been placed on labour policies throughout the period. [...] ... *It is known that the Labour Act is old, and this really does have the special attention of ministers. ... But as for measures in the active labour market, and the fact that most of the money is paid out as unemployment benefit, that is completely wrong. ... If an employer hires someone who is in a risk group [e.g. someone with disabilities], there are only three people a year that they can pay that money to [one case from the county of Lääne]. So they cannot help risk groups by finding them jobs, by paying those employers, as they do not have enough money for that. There would be more people wanting it, people waiting in queues for vacant positions, and this money would be in use all the time. ... I would be happy to see those recipients of assistance benefit and social assistance who are able to work being included more on account of these active labour market measures.*

Changing target groups

Social assistance is targeted at people and households in need. At the same time, resolving unemployment problems would reduce the need for social assistance benefit. [...] ... *Actually, this is a local problem. These are people who could actually work and have had to do so at various times and not receive benefits.*

According to statistics, certain traditional recipients of social assistance have been receiving assistance benefit for a year or more. At the same time, there has been a structural shift in the actual situation – at first there were more pensioners, but now there are more and more unemployed people and children. [...] *Pensions have gone up in comparison with other types of benefit. The whole allowances system has improved, people's living conditions are a lot better, and all other kinds of benefits are lagging far behind. If we take child benefit, for example, this was set to 90 kroons: now it is 150 kroons; the national pension was 410 kroons, but now we are discussing bringing in payments of 800 kroons. There is a difference between 400 and 800 kroons already.*

Targeting social assistance follows the inner logic of coping financially. Therefore, the increase in different types of benefit has been unequal. [...] *Pensioners have to live on the money they receive, while child benefits, for example, are not supposed to cover all expenses, just some of them. ... As far as child benefits are concerned, certain target groups have also started to receive more, and the amount has been increased by 20 kroons at a time, but these many millions do not have all that great an effect when we look at target group level.*

The experts were asked to consider an imaginary situation. We “gave” the experts a small sum of money to allocate and asked who their target would be. The answer was traditional: children, parents in need with dependent children – even if they themselves are “not so good” – pensioners and people with disabilities. The local government expert also named people of pre-retirement age: when they lose their jobs, they will most probably fall below the minimum level of subsistence and also constitute a risk group as regards social assistance.

Attitudes concerning social assistance vs. social justice

People differ in attitudes as regards social assistance. Some people are entitled to support and live with a great lack of resources and yet would never apply for support, while others abuse the opportunities offered to them. The local government expert has experience of meeting different types of applicant. [...] *There are people who really need this assistance but will not ask for it: their personal pride would not allow such a thing to happen, so they try to get by with what they have so as not to be a burden to anyone. They are ashamed of asking and think that they have to get by on their own. At the same time, there are people who come and ask for assistance – which is perfectly normal – and they will get as much assistance as we can offer. But there are also people who do not need that assistance but come here and demand it. From one extreme to the other – and we see the entire range here.*

Diverse attitudes towards social assistance recipients are seen in the everyday work of people working in local government. [...] ... People who think normally have a positive outlook on social assistance and see it as a normal process, and, in fact, a normal phenomenon. But of course, there are people who do not really approve and think that some people are too lazy to work, too bone idle, and that they literally go begging to their social worker. Sometimes ‘the man on the street’ comes complaining about the social injustice of having to support people who have not deserved that support. [...] ... Some people come and criticise, complain that some people are nothing and yet receive a pension, go out and earn money too, and yet go to the day care centre for lunch. These extreme situations do exist, but they are few and far between and it is not possible to reach conclusions or make generalisations on this basis.

In small settlements, people have high ideals when it comes to social justice. In addition to local social control, people who find casual work stop visiting their social workers in order to apply for social assistance. [...] *In the case of Sindi, for example, the kinds of people who attend the day care centre change during the summer months. Elderly people visiting the centre for most of the year find extra sources of income in summer (collecting berries, doing gardening, etc.) and do not visit the centre at that time. Instead, neglected children and children from poor families who receive free school meals on schooldays can have one meal a day here at this time.*

Short-term social assistance benefits have become synonymous with poverty alleviation measures in the eyes of the populace. [...] ... People still think that this is practically the same as helping out with poverty, and that it is disgraceful. People do not feel that having some kind of income is a human right, a normal right. ... Let us say that a guaranteed income – whether or not it should exist – is just that if you accept the money when you are in trouble or cannot cope. Actually, the whole thing should be more about enhancing general standards of living or equivalent to a general income.

On the other hand, the government does not always acknowledge the human dignity aspect of the guaranteed income and strives to redistribute these funds to meet other social targets. [...] ... *Social assistance benefits are not as dependent on local authority as they are on the state, and one idea I have is that what is stipulated in by law is wrong; it is not sufficient. So far the funds allocated to help people cope are squared with the negative budget, and from time to time there is a need to cover other things with this money. But this should be regulated accurately: being awarded this assistance is a basic right, not a political game.*

Work vs. living on benefits? Yes, but ... The living on benefits is the only option in some regions due to the lack of jobs. [...] ... Some people are not active enough because they tot up their incomes and cannot see why they should work if they can get by on the money from these allowances. But in theory? We cannot tell them “look, these are the jobs available, just go and work”: in actual fact, we tell them that they have to work: we would like to give them jobs but we have none. I know that people have wondered whether they should consult someone else, like farmers, and ask them for certificates or something so that they can claim assistance benefits.

For many recipients of social assistance, this is a no-choice situation. The minimum wage is still too low, which provides people with no incentive to work. [...] ... *European Social Charter experts have made a new offer. This used to consider the income per family member, but now it fails to take all family members into account. However, the minimum wage should be 60% of the average wage, whereas we are applying a figure of around 40%. This was something like 39 or 41% at the end of the year. ... The minimum wage should be around two thousand and something: we will not get as far as three thousand yet. ... So the issue of the minimum wage must be dealt with as a matter of urgency, and everything is interconnected. So simply increasing allowances will not help if wages stay low. ... We have so many people who are officially receiving the minimum wage.*

Losing jobs and living with no options is the reality of life in a monofunctional settlement. For example, Sindi in the county of Pärnu was mooted as a disaster area due to the collapse of the only main employer in the town in 1992. [...] *The fact is that if there is only one employer in the town and this place of work closes down, of course this is a disaster for the entire town and a major problem for people who received an income and made a living there. At the last minute, somewhere in the region of 500-600 people were made redundant at a stroke.*

Today, Sindi is a good example of the best practice of several owners of foreign investments. The need for social assistance has become less acute. [...] *So the residents of Sindi have no problems finding work, even in government enterprises. Of course, some people are unemployed – there are 35 of them in our town – but this is less than 2% of the total population of the town. This is a rather low figure that may actually be larger in reality as not all of the unemployed have registered.*

Even when the labour situation in the region is favourable, there is still a group of ‘hopeless cases’ who remain unemployed in the long term. [...] *This may be a harsh thing to say, but people who call themselves unemployed have only themselves to blame a lot of the time. ... These days, employers look you in the eye and ask for qualifications, education, discipline, special training, and so on. It is not enough to be a physical entity, just turning up, spending time there and solving problems: those days are behind us now. Many unemployed people are exactly like that; they have problems with alcohol and discipline and everything that entails. ... Paradoxically, when we have no jobs to offer, there is also a lack labour force in the town.*

Social assistance provision strategies do in some cases exacerbate the problem of ‘learned helplessness’ and dependence on benefits. [...] ... *If we resolve all problems by means of social assistance and, instead of placing the children of people in receipt of social assistance in nursery schools, the local authority just pays out social assistance benefits, this prolongs the social continuity.*

Social assistance provision strategies can force development of the poverty culture among risk groups. [...] Children start to believe that this is what life and the world is all about,

and this is why we are more likely to exacerbate the problem than to resolve anything. Some people can find different ways to misuse social assistance benefit. Instead, greater emphasis on active and preventive measures could be highly valuable. [...] Let us look at students who are kicked out of their parents' homes, register with their grandparents and thus form different households, for example. This is really a problem that needs to be discussed, not disguised, and we have to find solutions to this. ... I think it is better to invest the money in educating the young people, giving them opportunities, so that we do not produce new groups of people who are "addicted" to social assistance.

Social assistance benefits cannot be applied as an educational measure if no other options are offered. [...] This education – I do not know whom it might influence, but it seems to me that as far as minimum amounts of money are concerned, the situation is such that if there are no jobs, no money needs to be set aside for the relevant education either. ... It is not that people do not want to work. There is no work for them to do.

In some cases, however, social assistance benefits can motivate people, persuading them to look for work more intensively. [...] ... If people are unable to cope with their situation, it mobilises their families, persuading them to help them find jobs: in this respect, I do not just mean the wife and kids but everybody – mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles – they all take part in the search for jobs.

Changing roles of social workers

Social workers spend too much time calculating benefits, the experts confirmed. This means some kind of misuse of social workers' professional competence. They are left little time for applying large-scale methods of social work, including preventive measures. The roles and functions of social workers should be revised. [...] ... *Many social workers spend a great proportion of their working day handing out assistance benefits. Social workers just make minor decisions; instead, people with training in social work should do preventive work. In many instances social workers make these calculations and essentially do the jobs of accountants. Maybe the local finance department could deal with the paperwork, so freeing up social workers.*

People in need should approach different agencies in order to apply for support. The Ministry expert regarded interlinking these tasks, and thereby also lightening the burden of work on social workers, as expedient. [...] ... *Unemployment benefit and assistance benefit are paid out in different places, and many people receive funding from both. Can we cut down the work somehow and have others deal with this? No special training in social work would be needed to do this job. I think the professionalism of social workers is affected as they are not doing what they would like [and are able] to do.*

Unregulated situations

Even if the government has not joined the conventions, in the opinion of the Ministry expert, it has taken steps to meet the European minimum. [...] ... *We could actually ratify the European Social Insurance Code as we are able to meet the minimum of these minimums. The basis here is the average wage of a male unskilled worker, and the pension entitlement has to be 40% of this. This is our big problem, as we are either 1% or 1.5% short. We calculate pension entitlements afterwards, and we have the option of not joining the convention to the fullest extent. It*

seems to me that we should for health care insurance benefits, as well as family allowances, where these standards have not been prescribed but we will stipulate just how many people will be entitled to these, etc. We would attain the European minimum as regards types of insurance, but as pension is such an important factor we have also tried to move pension issues towards the European minimum standards, but even an increase of 20 kroons per person would cost millions.

Minimum social assistance packages could alleviate the lack of resources for people who have no documents, are unregistered, illegally domiciled, homeless, etc. who are simply beyond social assistance. According to the Constitution, everybody has the right to receive support from the state. [...] ... *There is no problem with Estonian citizens and residents: they receive assistance and are entitled to social assistance if they are registered and linked with the local authority. But take tramps, for example: even if they were Estonian citizens, who would have to pay them? Payments are made through local authorities and they do not have the funds available. I cannot see the Ministry paying them directly. If we go beyond a certain minimum social package to which everyone is entitled, then this package becomes not so much a monetary donation but includes a place to stay, food, clothing – this is what people should get. And there should be some kind of cash cover: we cannot say in so many words that people have to do X, Y or Z for local authorities and organisations, but this should be financed in some way, or there should be support for the organisations that deal with these kinds of issue.*

Social assistance should be a last resort instead of a long-term support measure: all the experts agreed on this. [...] ... If we look at the law relating to social protection of the unemployed, different services are offered to the unemployed – people who are officially registered as unemployed – they receive more in the way of funding and unemployment benefit. Other people receive counselling, information on available jobs, etc. This is the active information given to them by the National Labour Market Board. ... Social assistance benefit should be the last resort: all other measures should be implemented before going to this extreme.

To conclude: subsistence benefits form a relevant proportion of social assistance measures within the scope of the Estonian social protection system and constitute the most important tool for guaranteeing minimum standards of living for local residents. Despite the universal criteria for the implementation of subsistence benefits for the republic as a whole, actual transfers to recipients vary in different regions and municipalities. No one factor impacting the amount of benefit awarded in the various municipalities can be seen.

Reconstruction of social assistance: an integrated model?

The current study evidences the changing nature of social assistance provision in Estonia. Over ten years of development, social assistance has become more decentralised, more targeted and more complex. All these changes relate to (1) a change in social reality and social problems which have emerged; (2) redefined principles of social security provision; and (3) relocation of the positions of central and local governmental structures in respect of the organisation of social protection.

Social problems have become more complex and multidimensional in nature. The accumulation of social deficits (low income, inadequate education, lack of work, insufficient social networks, etc.) requires an interdisciplinary approach and the regular co-operation of a variety of social agents on different levels.

Declining universalism as regards social protection and the expansion of insurance-based security schemes placed the redistributive function of social policy almost entirely on social assistance (Grønningsætter, 1999). This means that social assistance has taken on more importance as regards ensuring that households in need can cope.

The Social Welfare Act states that the main responsibility in social assistance provision rests with local governments. In 1995, the year when the Act came into force, local governments were responsible mainly for the issue of benefits to recipients entitled to them in accordance with central regulations. Today, after constant decentralisation, new functions (e.g. administration of welfare institutions, provision of social services, etc.) have additionally been delegated to local municipalities. Furthermore, the decentralisation of social security and the emergence of the private and third sectors in security schemes increase the flexibility of social assistance and at the same time make formal regulations less clear and specific.

As a result, the local government takes on a central role as regards the provision of social assistance. However, according to the Local Governments Act, the provision of social assistance is only one responsibility of the municipalities, and often a marginal one at that. Because of its secondary importance on municipalities lists of things to do, social assistance has become (or remained) the personal concern of social workers. This is especially true in the case of small municipalities, which are very much in the majority of all the local governments in Estonia.

Individualisation of the social – the decline of collective solidarity, devaluation of altruistic values, hegemony of individualistic pragmatism, weakened informal social control – forces social workers to take on the new function of ‘guard of morals’, ensuring social justice and moral order in the community. In particular, social workers now function as promoters of a new type of social capital.

In this altered situation, social workers can no longer work ‘individually’. The complexity of problems, uncertainty of regulations and need to co-operate and negotiate with other

social agents are leading to extensive reconstruction of social assistance provision. The hierarchical (fixed, bureaucratic and static) organisation model is turning into a linear, integrated and dynamic social network, where social workers co-ordinate the co-operation of various agents and lead the 'process of assistance' (Figure 7).

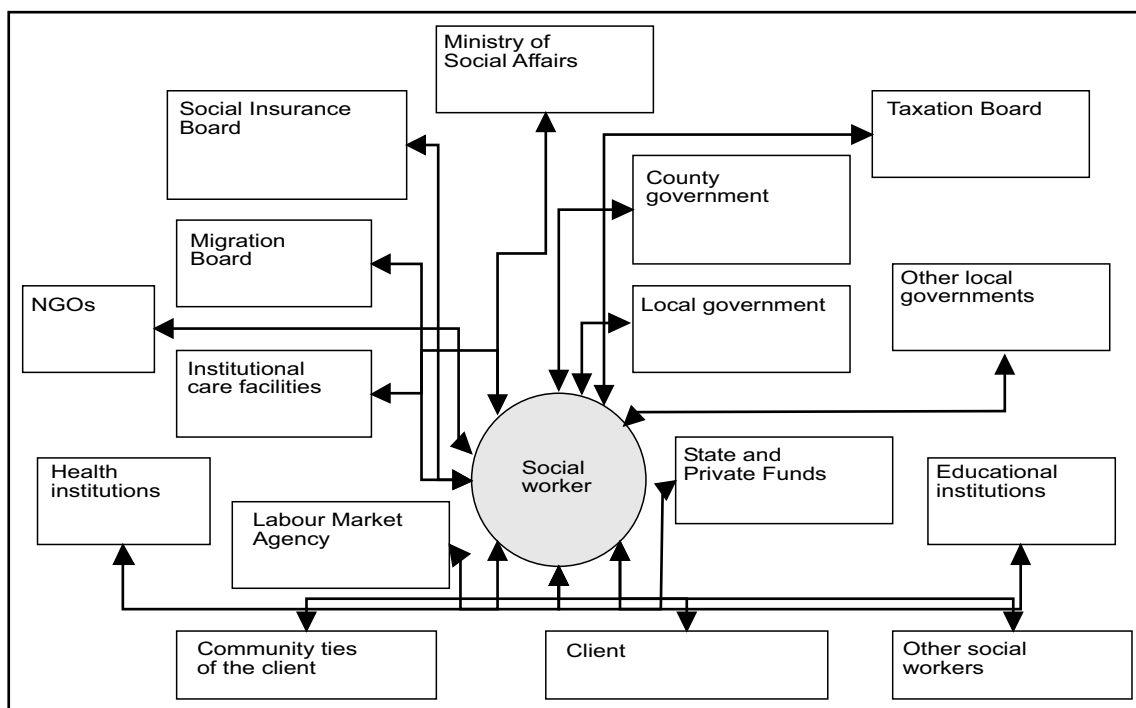
The social assistance networking model was established decades ago in western welfare states. However, in most of the post-communist countries this trend seems rather innovative.

The formal implementation of the networking model in the Estonian social security system should revise the aims, roles and implementation mechanisms and contribute towards the improved efficiency of the social assistance administration. Moreover, it may expand our understanding of the potential effects of co-operation between the state, the private sector and civil society.

At the current stage of development, more attention could be paid to the following:

- The increasing role of local government in social assistance provision should be taken into account in local budgets;
- The administrative capacity of the municipality should be increased. This could be achieved within the scope of the administrative territorial reform (unification of small municipalities), specialisation and communication;
- New organisational principles (forming a legal framework for the networking of social assistance) should be formulated and implemented;
- The infrastructure for the intensive and regular exchange of information should be improved (channels of communication, registers, databases, etc.);

Figure 7. The social worker's position in the social security network (concluded from the study)



- The position and respective roles of private and non-governmental structures could be defined;
- The emergence of the new type of formal and integrated social capital should become more relevant;
- Training in social work should be adapted to suit the changed situation and new requirements.

Conclusion

Since the restoration of Estonian independence, the social protection system has undergone relevant changes. Some of these changes are of a global and universal nature, while some have been caused by the transition and some are nation-specific (characteristic of Estonian society).

Estonia as an “opened” society is heavily impacted by global economic, social and political developments. In the field of social protection, a new global welfare paradigm – post-modernist social policy – has emerged. This new paradigm relates to the withdrawal from social commitments, the rejection of the importance of an integrated society or even of society *per se*, the *individualisation of the social* (Ferge, 1997). Estonia has – intentionally or unintentionally – followed the new ‘social fashion’, stressing individualised responsibility for social reproduction, rejecting explicitly collective responsibility, reforming social inequalities and giving individual freedom of choice, prioritising economic growth and entrepreneurial freedom. Consequently, market structures and supranational organisations, attempting to reduce the role of the state, are proposing new instruments of social protection: private insurance, means-tested assistance, private charity and business contracts. These thoughts are touched upon in particular in EU accession reports (Ferge, 2000).

One feature common to social protection systems in all post-communist countries is the imbalance between available resources and actual needs. One purpose *per se* is to make reductions in social costs, with no specific evaluation of the potential impact on the sustainability of society. As a result, the most distorted are universal benefits and services formerly designated ‘free of charge’. For EU accession countries, the obligation to demonstrate ‘high credits’ and ‘total and final end to the past’ leads to unconditional acceptance of any advice given.

Global and international pressures on national social security systems hinder opportunities for the formulation of the most rational national welfare mixes. The elements of ‘global and supranational welfare patterns’ will come to dominate more and more over national interests.

However, the question of nation-specific social security could play a relevant role in the future as well. While rearranging the social assistance system in Estonia, the following should be considered:

- Problems with coping among the Estonian population are still widespread and complex. Reorienting social security from a universal to a more targeted, assistance-based approach risks overloading and reducing the functionality of social assistance provisions;
- The low administrative capacity and insufficient resources of municipalities in Estonia may deepen social inequalities and reduce access to social care facilities;
- The decline of the role of the state in the provision of social assistance could be compensated by private structures and civil society. As a result, there is a greater need to develop a charity culture and civil participation.

The provision of social assistance still plays an important part in ensuring social inclusion and the overall sustainability of Estonian society. Recent developments in this particular field have positive as well as negative consequences for social security provisions for the vulnerable population. Reconstructing social assistance organisation increases the flexibility and complexity of provisions and creates good conditions for the professional growth of social workers. However, the fact that the changes that have taken place have not been supported by the requisite finances and institutional arrangements may result in burnouts, insecurity and other negative consequences for social workers.

To give any final evaluation of the social protection system in Estonia on the basis of the current study is too ambitious task. This would be possible if all the parts of the system (social insurance, assistance, services, etc.), its levels (central, local) and the players (state, market, civil society) could be systematically analysed as a whole and also placed within the framework of global developments, including matters relating to the extension of the EU.

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Appendix: Structure of the focus group interview

Introduction

I. Development of the Estonian social protection system

- Aims and tasks of social protection and social assistance in the past, the present and the future. (Aims by law and regulations relating to reality. What are the expectations of the general public? What is your opinion?)
- Changing situations, changing needs, changing resources, changing attitudes (viewed from different perspectives: society, community, individual and various agencies)

II. Evaluation of organisations, regulations and implementation agencies

Targeting and regional distribution of benefits

- Co-ordination and co-operation of social assistance provision between various levels and agencies
- Position and role of municipal welfare agency in relation to other institutions (e.g. labour market institutions)
- The decision-making process
- The gap between needs and resources
- Accountability and trust
- Division of responsibilities (e.g. public, private, NGO, family, community?)
- The balance between various resources (social security, benefits and services)

III. Vulnerable groups

- What are the most vulnerable groups?
- Who deserves social assistance?
- What should you do when you lack the resources to provide assistance to everyone meeting the criteria?
- What are the priorities?
- What do you think should be the priority areas? Who should pay?
- What should be expected from the recipients?
- How to reach the vulnerable groups?
- What are the good things about these priorities?

IV. Social work/social worker

- Professionalisation
- What kind of knowledge do you need in your work?
- The power of the social worker (in respect of clients)
- Independence of the social worker
- Networking
- Methods of social work
- The needy – how to reach them?
- Description of a working day (yesterday)
- Was yesterday a typical working day?

Provision of social assistance

The whole world is getting more and more complicated, uncovering new social problems and risks for survival for a mankind. As a response to these changes, the context of social work is also in a rapid change. But one fundamental element remains the same, namely that social work is located within some of the most complicated arenas of human experience, packed with social difficulties and impacting different individuals, households or social groups with different severity.

The current study is a part of the research project „Social policy and social exclusion in the Baltic countries“ which is carried out in co-operation between the University of Tartu and Fafo and evaluates administrative capacity of social assistance provision with special focus on a local municipality and social worker as the main implementation actors of social assistance . Empirical material of the study is collected from qualitative interviews with insiders of the system of social assistance – social workers and decision-markers from the local and central governments.

The authors conclude that decline of collective solidarity, devaluation of altruistic values, hegemony of individualistic pragmatism, weakened informal social control – forces social workers to take on new functions, ensuring social justice and moral order in the community, and being promoters of a new type social capital they contribute to social cohesion.

