

SOCIAL WORK AS THE SAFETY NET OF THE ALBANIAN SOCIETY IN TRANSITION



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Abstract

Social work has little tradition as an academic discipline or as a profession in Albania despite the high need for well-trained social workers. Social work in Albania had practically not existed in the past, neither before the WWII nor during socialist regime. It was the deep political and economic changes of the post socialist phase and the support of government and non-government stakeholders, like the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Emigration and Ex- Persecuted People as well as the Grand Valley University, Michigan, which paved the way for the establishment from scratch of the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Tirana in 1992. Two other schools of Social Work were also established in two public universities, one at the University of Shkodra (2005) and another at the Elbasan University (2004). The Albania's adherence to the Bologna Declaration brought a new reform, initiated in 2005, in which the Departments of Social Work were actively involved and played a critical role to adjust the curricula according to the EU standards.

However, social work is neither a straight forward academic discipline nor a clear-cut profession. Social work is both, above all it is the safety net of society. The concept of social work derives from the needs of society, which in the end turns towards social mobilization, participation and inclusion. The global definition of social work, set out by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and approved by its general assembly in 2014, defines Social Work as follows:

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing”. (<http://www.communitycare.co.uk/what-is-the-role-of-social-workers>).

Besides the overall social structure of the society and the legacy from the past, Social Work can't be developed outside the context of education system in one side and social protection and care system on the other. Hence, this paper brings in some information, which by describing the status of Social Work Education in Albania, tries to further explore its multi-faceted dependency on system of policies and social legacy from the past, alike.

1. An Overview on the history of Social Work in Albania

The first School of Social Work (later transformed into the faculty of Social Work) in Albania was established from scratch in Autumn 1992, based on the decision of the Council of Ministers, Nr. 348 dates 10.08.1992, at the University of Tirana, former Faculty of Philosophy, thanks to the support of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Emigration and Ex- Persecuted People as well as the Grand Valley University, Michigan. The school was named Faculty of Social Work.

The newly established school of social work faced many challenges, namely:

- the lack of qualified professionals and practitioners,
- the lack of a clear approach with respect to social work profession,
- the lack of appropriate legislation to ensure the institutional support to lay the foundation for the development of the profession.

To strengthen academic capacities, one-year qualification in the US of the professors with psychology and similar backgrounds was organized. Cooperation with well-known academic institutions in the US and in Europe was and remains essential to the development of social work in Albania. That is why, “Social Safety Net Development, 1992-1997” project financed by the World Bank, covered also “Social Work Education” (NCSS, 2013).

In the meantime, to prepare the ground vis-à-vis the legal adoption of the Social Work, the institution provided a one-year course of Social Work, tailored to emergency needs of the country. During 1992 -1996, while the school gradually transformed into the Faculty, the first social work program was developed, in 1996 the first generation of Albanian social workers was graduated, while in 2001 the Department of Social Work of the Faculty launched the Post-Graduation Course in Social Work (today Master of Science). After three years, in 2004, the doctoral studies in Social Work were initiated (ISOP, 2017, p.9).

Thanks to the attention of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Emigration and Ex- Persecuted People to social work education as well as the promotion of social work studies, 90% of the newly graduated social workers were

employed by public and government institutions.

Today Social Work is taught only in three public universities out of 6 (only those which have Social Sciences in their curricula, namely Tirana, Shkodra, Gjirokastra, Elbasani, Durrës and Vlora), respectively in Faculty of Social Sciences of Tirana, of Elbasani and of Shkodra. Although all private universities cover social sciences, none of them has developed a curriculum of Social Work. Despite the lack of research, it is likely to believe that the number of social workers graduated every year from the three above mentioned public universities satisfies the demand of the Albanian labour market. However, quality of education and the relevance of the knowledge vis-à-vis the needs of the society and the institutions are of concern.

As a matter of fact, the history of Social Work in Albania is strongly connected to the development of Social Protection Mechanism in Albania, which was also developed from scratch, alongside the implementation of transition reforms that transformed the centrally planned economy into a market one.

2. Albanian Social Protection System

The social protection system in Albania was initiated to alleviate the shock of transition from a central to a market economy, but gradually its scope changed from an initial focus on helping people to cope with massive unemployment due to the closing of large state enterprises, to a focus on development and poverty alleviation, and recently, to implement policies that help people be socially integrated by protecting and realizing their rights.

The social protection system in Albania is comprised of four components: poverty alleviation, social insurance, labour market development and social care programs. The poverty alleviation component focuses on providing cash assistance to persons to guarantee a minimum standard of living. The program has three components: subsidiary, maintenance of living standards, and provision of non-contribution benefits. The Social Insurance scheme for economically active persons, provides benefits for protection against loss of income due to old age, disability, loss of life of the primary earner, unemployment, general sickness, occupation injury and work-related illnesses, and maternity leave. Labour market development provides unemployment

benefits, vocational and professional training, counselling, market research and job placement services. Social care services for people in need like those with disabilities, children out of parental care, women in need of protection, elderly etc. are provided through the Social Care program. Most services are provided through residential institutions as well as daily centres or home-based services.

While Social Insurance and Social care programs are totally reformed compared to the past, the two other components are established from scratch. Despite continuous improvements on the functioning of social protection system, guided mainly by the criteria of macroeconomic balance maintenance and the limited budget, the social protection mechanism while providing benefits fails in promoting people to be socially integrated.

The policy of social protection, defined as the policy of ‘alleviation of social inequalities’ is not sufficient to promote the social development of Albanian society, while the recipients of social assistance are the most vulnerable to social exclusion. They suffer from multiple social disadvantages because they lack access to basic standards of housing, education, health, human relationships and protection. Beyond straight forward economic poverty, the use of term social exclusion recognizes that the human rights of the individuals can be further threatened by the forced passivity of welfare, the inability to fulfil their basic potential and to build the kind of human relationships that lead to active citizenship (Ymeraj, 2016).

Social Work is crucial to boost the development of social protection and ensure the provision of quality social care services to citizens in need.

3. The development of Social Work Education in Albania

In addition to the School of Social Work in Tirana, two other schools of Social Work were established in two public universities, one at the University of Shkodra (2005) and another at the Elbasan University (2004). The Albania’s adherence to the Bologna Declaration brought about a new reform, initiated in 2005, in which

the Departments of Social Work were strongly involved to adapt the curricula according to the European standards. Currently, Social Work education in Albania covers the three levels of education, including doctoral studies and is organized as follows (Table 1):

Table 1: Diplomas of Social Work in Albania- Public Universities

DIPLOMAS OF SOCIAL WORK IN ALBANIA		
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL POLICY, FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA	DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK, FACULTY OF EDUCATION SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF SHKODRA	DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, FACULTY OF EDUCATION SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF ELBASAN
Bachelor’s degree		
Social Work/180 ECTS	Social Work/180ECTS	Social Work/180ECTS
Bachelor’s in Administration and Social Policy	Bachelor’s in Psychology	Bachelor’s in Sociology
Master of Arts (Professional Master)		
Advanced Social Work specialization in Health and Education/60 ECTS	NA	Social Worker for children and families (90 ECTS)
Social Policies Analysis/90ECTS		Probation/90ECTS
Master of Science		
Advanced social work with three specializations, respectively clinical, social policy and community organizations.		Social Services/120ECTS
Social Services Administration		
Gender and Development		
Children and Family Issues		
Penal Justice		
Social and Behavioural Change Communications		

Source of information: www.fshs-ut.edu.al/rreth-fakultetit

Albania has initiated the Bologna process in 2003 and still is running it. Based on Bologna process standards and requirements, Faculty of Social Sciences, like other universities in Albania, is obliged to:

- ✓ To implement ECTS system.
- ✓ To adopt “Quality Assurance” standards at the institution, national and the European levels.
- ✓ To encourage students’ and academic staff’ mobility as well as to enhance the collaboration between the universities at a national, regional and European level.

Department of Social Work in cooperation with Institute of Studies of Public Opinion as well as UNICEF Albania has analysed the curricula of Social Work to assess the level of compatibility with international standards and formulate pertinent recommendations, valuable for the future development of social work in Albania. According to this analysis (ISOP, 2017, p.25), it is recognized that:

From a theoretical point of view, school curricula vis-à-vis Social Work profession differs in Tirana faculty of Social Sciences compared to two other faculties. Courses already offered in Tirana have a strong focus on human behaviour and the social environment, and together with “Introduction to social work and social problems” comprise the core courses. Although Human Development is a core course at the Elbasan School, it is not seen in closed connection with Social Environment, as needed for the social work profession. In the contrary, it is tailored to a more clinical/deviance approach of human behaviour rather than of human development orientation. While in Shkodra, the curricula of social work lacks social focus as well as “life cycle” approach.

From a practical point of view, relevant courses to prepare a self – reflective practitioner, within a holistic framework are offered. Still the curricula of Tirana Faculty of Social Sciences are adjusted to the needs of the profession, especially by courses of Social problems and Social Work, Human rights (by choice), Individual and Group Processes, Ethics in Social Work Practice and Gender and Social Work.

Regarding Teaching and Learning methodology, comprehensive practical skills are enhanced in the three faculties. Methods and Skills in Social Work Practice, Interviewing and Counselling and Research methods, comprise the core courses.

A series of courses, related to “paradigm of social work

profession “like” Social Work Practice” with Children, Families, Individuals at risk of exclusion and with Groups and Communities, are delivered. Social Work Administration is another course which complements practical knowledge of social work profession.

An important component of Social Work Education is “Practice in the field”. According to international standards, a social worker should work in the field from 170 up to 200 days, which is not the case in any of the Albanian faculties. It varies from 80 to 90 days of practice work and mainly during the third year of studies (1 day of practice equals 5 hours).

Subjects of general culture and formation are also part of curricula. In Tirana Faculty, there are offered five such courses with a total of 24 ECTS, namely: Introduction to Economics, Introduction to Psychology, Introduction to Sociology, Introduction to Legislation and Social Work Practice with Individuals. The suggested number of credits for these courses is 18 ECTS, therefore there is space to change/reduce one of the courses. However, based on the students’ opinion, there is the need to include “Legal and clinical knowledge” courses.

4. Social Work as a profession in Albania

In 1993 some provisions that regarded the profession of social work were included in the law on Social Assistance, while in 2015, the legislation was completed, and the social work profession became part of the regulated professions of the Republic of Albania, according to Law Nr. 163/20149. Despite that, to exercise the profession, social workers must compete in the labour market.

Where can Social Workers work in Albania?

There is a high need for the profession of social workers in public, private and not-for-profit sectors. They can and should provide quality services in health care, legal and judiciary, education and social protection. Table 2 illustrates the number of students in different subjects from 2013.

Table 2: Number of students enrolled in Tertiary Education, 2013 - 2018					
Academic Year/Field of Study	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Education	15.426	13.654	11.236	11.779	10.689
In % to total	8,9	8,5	7,7	8,4	8,3
Art and Humanities	20.801	17.588	17.095	17.278	15.441
In % to total	12,0	11,0	11,6	12,4	11,9
Social sciences, journalism and information	15.898	10.462	12.727	10.004	12.259
In % to total	9,1	6,5	8,7	7,2	9,5
Business, Administration and law	50.219	42.089	41.033	36.471	30.233
In % to total	28,9	26,2	28,0	26,1	23,4
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	7.100	10.473	6.719	7.816	6.325
In % to total	4,1	6,5	4,6	5,6	4,9
Information and communication technologies	8.033	9.560	7.911	7.487	8.228
In % to total	4,6	6,0	5,4	5,4	6,4
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	18.391	18.728	18.005	18.480	18.730
In % to total	10,6	11,7	12,3	13,2	14,5
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	9.039	10.171	8.383	7.086	4.564

In % to total	5,2	6,3	5,7	5,1	3,5
Health and welfare	25.667	22.780	21.387	20.900	19.837
In % to total	14,8	14,2	14,6	15,0	15,3
Services	3.245	5.022	2.260	2.306	3.088
In % to total	1,9	3,1	1,5	1,7	2,4
Total	173.819	160.527	146.756	139.607	129.394
Change in %		-7,6	-8,6	-4,9	-7,3

Source of information: <http://www.instat.gov.al>

As we can observe from table 2, while the overall number of students has decreased over years, the proportion of students enrolled in Social Sciences has increased in 2017-2018. There are many reasons which explain the higher interest vis-a-vis Social Sciences. By all means, the increased number and typology of social problems stands out as crucial.

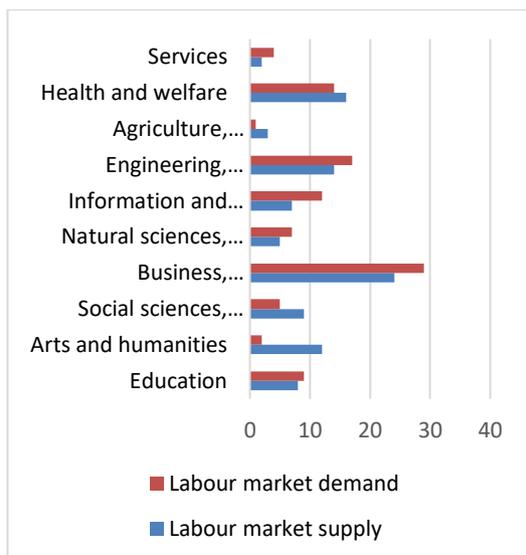
Over the past almost three decades, dramatic political and socio-economic changes in Albania, have increased the vulnerability of people to poverty, access to basic services, violence, exploitation, discrimination, abuse and neglect. Increased poverty, decreased access to and quality of basic social services, and weakened community support mechanisms have limited the capacity of families and networks to provide a nurturing and protective environment for people in need of protection.

The existing national social protection system in Albania is weak, and national mechanisms for identification, registration, referral and provision of appropriate support to people at-risk and their families are limited if at all existent. As a result, human rights are denied for some groups of populations like Single – parent household women, pensioners living alone, people with disabilities, social assistance recipients, unemployed youth, children in poor families, unemployed single women, Roma and Egyptians etc. While they lack basic services, social care centres are not sufficient to provide all the support needed by vulnerable groups, thus they remain trapped in the vicious circle of exclusion.

Exclusion in Albania is a result of socio-economic transformation, but it also stems from the lack of professional capacities to deal with it. Among professionals, the lack of qualified social work is the key. Research of UNICEF in Albania identified that there are not enough social work providers and services for poor rural families (not only rural, even urban families in small towns) who have children with disabilities, meaning that these families have no access to services (more often these services are non-existent), which increases the likelihood of institutionalization or re-institutionalization (UNICEF, 2015).

Despite the high need, social workers face difficulties to find a job. Figure 1 shows the demand versus the supply for certain professions.

Figure 1: Labour market demand and supply according to professions, year 2017



Source of information: INSTAT and Labour Market Bulletin of National Employment Service, 2017

As we can observe from Figure 1, there are less jobs in “Social Sciences” in general compared to the requirements. However, it is more a question of attitudes rather than of lack of jobs. Thinking carefully about the “needs for social work” in one side and “the jobs of social work” in the other, we would emphasize the following issues:

Issue 1: Attitude of Government Institutions in charge of social policy

Social policy in countries in transition, including Albania is dominated by cash support instead of support in kind. As a matter of fact, Social reform still remains a challenge in EEC including Albania. While the major purpose of the Social Policy during the early transition phase was to address emerging poverty, the earliest approach is no longer relevant, most importantly because, even in Eastern European countries, the real definition of poverty has changed. The new strategy of poverty reduction is based on the new concept of the multi-dimensionality of poverty. This implies the necessity to provide social care services which protect people from exclusion and help people to be integrated, therefore a crucial role for social workers.

Issue 2: The attitudes of people in need of protection and reintegration

As a result of communist heritage which influenced weaknesses of social capital and the lack of tradition of social work, socially excluded people face difficulties to approach social workers, even if they actively try to engage with communities. In the Albanian case, apart from social work channelled through government institutions and networks, independent organization of social work are concentrated only in big cities, leaving alone population in rural and remote areas, which exacerbate their connection with people in need of support.

Issue 3: Social Workers ‘attitude

Social work is the safety net of society. Social work is also about motivation and willingness to help people, without conditioning support with personal benefits. Very often, social workers in Albania choose to work for policy making institutions rather than to directly contribute to people’s relief. While social work should be used to encourage local communities to develop, to participate in the decision-making process and to join local initiatives, in the Albanian experience, such role is rarely played due to the disconnection.

5. Result

That the curricula of social work per se have to improve and unify across the three institutions that provide social work education, is of utmost importance. However, this is a necessary condition, although not sufficient. Social Work Education has to better adjust to the needs of the market, notably public services systems that adopt social work as well as Not-for-profit and Private sectors. By all means, Social Work Education has to pay more attention to Social Work Practice, not only in terms of hours, but most importantly to typology and variety of services. As such, a stronger connection and cooperation among school and institutions would help social workers to practice their knowledge in health care, education, justice and social services. In addition, social workers have to accustom to the needs of groups at high risk of exclusion such as children in special need of protection, people with disabilities, elderly, abused and neglected people, gender issues etc.

However, we can't ignore the role that policies play. Having mentioned that, special provisions on the role of social worker in health care, education, justice and social services, have to be adopted, while monitoring capacities on law enforcement have to be strengthened. The social protection mechanism should be used to encourage local communities to develop and participate in the decision-making process, to leverage community participation, speeding up the process of democratization.

Nevertheless, the new role of social worker should go hand in hand with the reformed social protection mechanism, to enhance desired outcomes. It necessarily should be a tool in strengthening collaboration among government and non-government institutions and community, promoting self-responsibility of local communities, encouraging a feeling of social responsibility for integrating vulnerable groups and reducing social exclusion.

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