

# Social Needs and Problems in the Rural Area of Brașov County, Romania. The Social Workers' Perspective on Causes and Solutions

Diana-Cristina Bódi\*

**Abstract.** *This article presents the results of an exploratory study regarding the social problems that rural and small urban communities face in Brașov County, as well the solutions suggested by the social workers from the communities targeted. Between June and August 2018, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 social workers who are employed in town halls in Brașov County. The categories of data collected and presented in the article are built on the following structures : the social problems in the rural and small urban communities, their causes and consequences, the solutions implemented in the community, but also the solutions envisioned from the point of view of the social workers of those communities, the access to social services and the funding resources of these services. The results of this research reveal the alarming school dropout rate at young ages, the dependency of the beneficiaries on the social welfare offered and the lack of social services in these communities.*

**Keywords :** school dropout, social welfare benefits, social services, education

## Introduction

Even though efforts are being made in social policies to develop and improve the social support system in Romania as much as possible, poverty is a major problem and differences between the interventions and the types of social services can be noted between the urban and rural areas. At the level of the rural area, there is a diversity of problems of a socio-economic nature, family issues, professional, educational and medical related matters and other difficulties which are not always well identified in the public statistics.

This is the reason for establishing a project 'Map of social issues and the need for social services in Brașov County. Primary directions for the development of social services in Brașov County' (HPSBV). This is financed by *Transilvania* University of Brașov, working with Brașov County Council, and is aimed at highlighting the main social issues that rural and small and medium sized urban communities face, alongside the related causes and the

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\* Transilvania University of Brașov, 25 Eroilor Blvd. Telephone : +40268.474017. E-mail : diana.bodi@unitbv.ro.

consequences. Moreover, the project intends to identify how the problems have been addressed so far, as well as possible solutions suggested by the social workers from the communities under analysis. It is important to also consider an emic perspective, the point of view from people inside the communities facing these problems, since these are not always obvious to the scientific community or to a larger audience. Both emic and ethic perspectives are being explored in this project but this article focuses on the views of the social workers.

## Theoretical framework

The concept of poverty is multidimensional and can be approached from several perspectives. On the one hand, we can talk about absolute poverty where the minimum level of subsistence such as food, shelter or clothing cannot be satisfied. On the other hand, we can talk about relative poverty – the social minimum that ensures basic social functioning of a person in the socio-cultural framework of a given society. Poverty also means lack of access to various institutions (financial, education, health, nutrition, longevity) and lack of infrastructure facilities (Malik, Mohanty, 2009). In the case of Romania, we are talking about relative poverty, and in more prosperous societies, this social minimum may be higher than subsistence (Zamfir, 2000).

Our first step, before commencing field research, was to consider the definitions of the concepts we would be using. Thus, if we talk about the concept of *social problems*, it can be noted that, even though there is no general universal definition of 'social problem', we can identify some main characteristics around which we could build our approach. Consequently, in this article, we understand 'social problem' is an undesirable situation, which is considered by an important segment of the society as being serious enough to require collective action to obtain a significant improvement and a raised degree of desirability (Lauer, 1976, *apud* Lazăr, 2016). In accordance with the same line of thought, Farley (1992) defines a social problem as a situation which is 'seen to a large extent as being undesirable or a source of difficulty, triggered by the action or inaction of the individuals and which affects or is supposed that will affect a great number of persons' (*apud* Lazăr, 2016, 704). Subsequently, it can be observed that, in the first place, a social problem affects in a negative way a large part of a community or of a society, and elicits an answer in the form of a collective action or a social policy.

One of these 'answers' to social problems can be the social assistance system, as a subsidiary component of the social protective system (Bocancea, 1999) which 'by its specific measures and actions, has as its aim the development of the individual, group or collective skills to ensure the social needs, the increase of the quality of life and the promotion of the principles of cohesion and social inclusion' (art. 3, The Social Assistance Law, No. 292/2011).

Mention should be made here that the social assistance system in Romania is just one of the components of a larger system of social protection, which comprises: the system of the universal social benefits (non-contributory) and the social security system. The last one is composed of, in its turn, two subsystems: the social insurance system and the social work system. (Buzducea, 2017; Buzducea, 2009). It becomes apparent that the social work system is, in fact, the last resort which should be activated when the other providers of social welfare cannot meet the basic needs of the persons at social risk.

To continue, the social work system represents 'the assembly of institutions, measures and actions through which the state, represented by authorities of the central and local government administration, as well as the civil society, intervene to prevent, limit or eliminate

the temporary or permanent effects of the situations which can generate the social marginalisation or exclusion of a person, family, groups or communities” (art. 2, The Social Assistance Law, No. 292/2011).

The social assistance system presupposes the allocation of social non-contributory benefits, from the state budget, to people who could find themselves in diverse situations of social risk (Buzducea, 2017). These benefits can be in the form of social welfare benefits (monetary transfers such as the guaranteed minimum income, emergency aid etc.) or social services (social counselling services, community centres, foster care centres, day-care centres etc.)

Whether primary or specialised, the social services can represent a specific/local answer to social problems, as long as they are based on the identification and assessment of the individual, family or group related social needs in a particular administrative area. Social services as part of the local government administration have the responsibility for organising, managing and providing services at the community level (art. 40, The Social Assistance Law, No. 292/2011). Social services represent ‘the activity or the assembly of activities performed to meet social needs, as well as special ones, individual, family or group-related, in order to overcome difficult situations, to prevent and to combat social exclusion risk, to promote social inclusion and to improve life quality’ (art. 27, The Social Assistance Law, No. 292/2011).

If, at the level of the urban area, some positive results can be seen as far as the social protection system is concerned, the same cannot be said about the rural areas – and there are very few studies in Romania to tackle the social needs and problems of the people living in such areas.

Specialised studies have demonstrated that the rural areas are underprivileged, both regarding already existing resources (at the level of family, community), and also in relation to education (school attendance) (Arnăutu, Nabăr, 2017). Many studies about rural areas identify problems of absenteeism and school dropout. The phenomena of reduced school attendance and high dropout rates are also found in urban areas. However, due to the underdevelopment of rural areas, and low educational attainment of parents who cannot support their children’s education, the percentage of the school dropouts in the rural areas is at a peak. The last study dealing with this phenomenon, carried out by the World Vision Romania Foundation (February-July 2017, shows that high school dropout rates affect 40% in schools in rural areas. (Arnăutu, Nabăr, 2017). Globally, the UN identifies 265 million children as not attending school, of whom 22% are of primary school age (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>).

Unfortunately, school dropout is related to a cultural pattern described by Oscar Lewis in 1959, who emphasised that there is a culture of poverty (Sharma, 2018) which has its own values and rules, as well as its own types of behaviour adapted to the identified level of poverty, and attitudes which are passed down inter-generationally.

We could say, then, that the poverty cycle starts with school dropout, behaviour learnt in the family, which leads, in its turn, to lack of qualifications and unemployment. However, it doesn’t follow that people with a low level of education will inevitably end up in poverty (Etim, Udoh, 2013).

## Research design and methodology

The study reported here is part of a wider project which could be described as a case study using mainly qualitative methods. As mentioned above, the results are based on data collected and analysed within the framework of the research project ‘Map of social issues and the

need for social services in Braşov County. Primary directions for the development of social services in Braşov County' (HPSBV). The aim of the project was to identify the main social problems of the local communities, from the point of view of the social workers employed in town halls, but also possible ways to improve the conditions of social life in these communities as seen by the people living in them.

Within this project, besides the secondary analysis of some quantitative data at county level and of two focus groups with social workers in Braşov county, semi-structured interviews were also conducted. In this article, we will present the results of the interviews held during May and September, 2018. We coordinated 21 semi-structured interviews with social workers (SW) employed in town halls, in 4 (small) urban (UA) and 17 rural communities (RA). The participants were 19 women and 2 men. In order to select the communities which would be the focus of interviews, we used the following sampling (Swinkels *et al.*, 2014): the number of persons living in marginalised areas of Braşov county and the percentage of Roma population in those communities. The interviews were analysed using the NVivo11 software, by means of open, axial and selective coding.

The ethical principles of scientific research have been observed and the data were analysed and interpreted observing the principle of objectivity and avoiding possible biases and prejudices. As for carrying out the data collection, the purpose of the research was explained to the respondents in advance in order to gain informed consent and to ensure them of anonymity and confidentiality.

## Findings and discussion

In this part of the article, we will focus on the social needs and problems, as described in the interviews with the social workers from the rural county of Braşov. Moreover, we will emphasise the opinion of the social workers regarding the causes of these social problems, and also the solutions suggested by them.

### *Social problems in vulnerable communities*

For a better understanding of the problems that communities face, their causes, as well as the consequences they generate, we divided the concept of 'communities' problems' into four categories:

- The most serious problems;
- Other social problems;
- Causes of the social problems;
- Consequences of the social problems.

When we talk about the most serious problems in communities, there is a wide range of problems to be considered, among which, the most important are: *absenteeism and school dropout*; *lack of workplaces*; *disinterest towards education*; *a high number of beneficiaries of social welfare*; *low educational background of adults*; *disinterest in employment*; *lack of social care centres*.

*School dropout* is a problem identified by 19 out of 21 interviewees, which led us to consider this as the most serious problem at the level of rural and small urban communities, in Braşov county.

School dropout and the lack of education in general, these would be, according to my point of view, the biggest issue it faces. (SW7RA)

The social workers interviewed mentioned that *school dropout is a phenomenon mainly related to the age group between 8 and 12*, most of the pupils dropping out of school after primary education.

I participated in a social inquiry regarding child protection and I visited some parents, just like that. And one, the eldest of the girls was 8 years old, school dropout, 8 years old. It was shocking, 8 years old, school dropout. Why isn't she attending school anymore? She doesn't want to. (SW7RA)

This means that the children who drop out of school do not graduate from 8 classes, which is a condition for them to be registered on the official lists of The National Employment Agency. Also, the fact that they do not have a graduation diploma from elementary education can negatively influence their career path through not having access to the training and re-training classes organised by The Agency. Having no qualification, as adults they are very vulnerable on the labour market, being forced to accept socially unrecognised work, daily work, or undeclared work.

It can be noted that these problems are all closely linked to each other, each problem generating, in its turn, another problem.

Thus, absenteeism and school dropout lead to the impossibility of obtaining a study diploma, which would help accessing training and re-training courses for an occupation. The lack of qualification leads to the likelihood of unemployment, which further leads to the increase in the number of beneficiaries of social welfare.

Directly related to school dropout is a *disinterest in education*, both of the children and of their parents. This can be seen as an inherited cultural pattern, imprinted in the attitudes of the family and of the community. Beneficiaries tend to be satisfied with the social services they access: social support, child allowance, statutory maternity pay, and, in quite a few cases, personal assistant salary for children or disabled persons.

They don't want to study. Even though kindergarten tickets are granted, the children are not taken to kindergarten. There are days when attendance is stipulated, according to the law, and out of 75 eligible children, I have only two or three children with a kindergarten teacher. (SW5RA)

Before they (beneficiaries) turn 18, the majority of them already have three children. Thus, starting from 14, they receive the 600 Ron, as an incentive, and 200 Ron per child, as allowance, and from 14 they have their salary ensured until they turn 18, when they get automatically hired as the personal assistant of a disabled child. In this way, they don't have to either be able to read, or work, or do anything else. (SW5RA)

Besides this main problem, other problems facing the communities in Braşov were also identified: *lack of social services; critical social cases; both internal and external migration; lack of financial education; alcohol consumption; poor living conditions*.

In rural and small urban communities, social assistance can be seen only at the level of social benefits, especially the payment of the guaranteed minimum income and of the child allowance.

We don't provide social services as such, we don't have a centre for seniors, we don't have a day-care centre, no... for example, as far as the elderly are concerned, we have a contract with a private association which offers home services for older and sick persons and we pay for a lot of specialised personnel... this would presuppose a new unit to run and to... and that's why we said that there should be more beneficiaries... (SW11UA)

The community social workers signal the fact that these benefits contribute to nothing else but the dependency of the beneficiaries on these monetary transfers, demotivating them and not teaching them how to earn their own living. Social services should have the role of 'teaching the beneficiary to fish and not of giving them the fish' (Chinese proverb adapted).

Social services which could be implemented at the level of the communities in Braşov county could address the item 'critical social cases' and activities could be implemented in community centres, such as after-school activities, day-care centres for the seniors, day-care centres for disabled people, but also home-care services for different types of beneficiaries.

The other items, lack of financial education, migration, alcohol consumption, can be correlated with the lack of education and employment, as previously described.

The most frequent answers regarding the *causes* of social problems, as identified by the community social workers are: *poor education; parental role model; attitudes towards work; and lack of participation (involvement) on the part of beneficiaries.*

The education, the education, this is what would be, because this is how they are raised. If this is what they saw in their parents, this is what they become, beneficiaries of social welfare. (SW2RA)

It seems that all social problems are rooted in the poor education of both children and parents. We described above the theory of the culture of poverty which explains how these problems and their causes are passed down inter-generationally.

The *consequences* of the social problems, as described by the community social workers interviewed are: *the preference for social welfare, living in poverty, pressure on the social protection system, obtaining illegal supplementary income, avoiding labour market employment, high birth rate, social imbalances.*

The preference for social welfare has several benefits, on the one hand, being a permanent, stable income, and, on the other hand, including the benefit of medical insurance, which brings them a certain degree of security regarding health care.

[The beneficiaries] remain anchored in social welfare, but remain more anchored in social welfare not because they don't do occasional work, because one can't live on the 140-200 RON social welfare, but because they can benefit from medical insurance, which... I repeated this over and over again, they benefit from it because they receive social welfare and then, being afraid of hospitalisation, that's why they do occasional work, thus supplementing somehow their income and because the law allows them to do so. (SW2RA)

Also, these attitudes and types of behaviour put pressure on the social protection system, more specifically on the social welfare system, which has become the first option to obtain income, for these beneficiaries. This is despite the fact that the social welfare system should operate according to the subsidiarity principle, intervening only when other institutions, groups or people cannot solve a problem,

They, who don't think too much and don't know, this is the way they think, interpret the law of social assistance: 'if I don't work, I am helped by the state!' that's all they know, but if I worked, I wouldn't be helped by the state anymore. (SW5RA)

According to the foregoing, the fact that the inhabitants of these rural and small urban areas, in their majority, do not have a qualification and do not work makes them dependant

on – and even willing to favour – the idea of living from one day to another, relying on the income offered by the social welfare system.

The dependency that the social benefits offer is way too big, I mean I understand that for half a year, even for a year, until you recover, until you are back on your feet. But not ten years. Don't give them ten years, because it's not good. (SW7RA)

This means there is high pressure on the social assistance system, which has to support, from a financial point of view, a lot of beneficiaries. Besides this income, many beneficiaries also work illegally, doing casual work to supplement their benefits.

### ***Measures to address social issues***

The concept of 'measures to address social issues' was further subdivided into four categories :

- Measures implemented in the community ;
- Measures suggested by the social workers ;
- Access to social protection services ;
- Ways of financing social protection services.

Regarding the measures already implemented to address the above-mentioned social problems, the majority of the social workers talked about the following activities : *social counselling, the intervention of a social mediator, training and qualification courses, after-school clubs, 'soup kitchens'*.

What can be noted is that the social counselling activities are the only ones that take place permanently in all the communities that the social workers who were interviewed serve.

When they come, we offer counselling to them, we give them examples. For instance, because they also come with their children, I ask them : Why do you have the child with you and he/she is not at school ? We literally ask them ; shouldn't he/she be at school now ? Well, you see, you can't write or read, or sing, you have to have someone with you to fill in the request form, is this the way you want your child to be ? Just like that, you know you brought him/her with you now, why didn't you take him/her to the kindergarten ? You won't receive that ticket anymore, that 5, 10 Ron was good enough, as it was. So, (there's) a great deal of counselling on our part. (SW14RA)

The other activities take place intermittently, depending on the local budget or the projects accessed.

I opened an after-school club, but only one village benefits from it, 'R', because the headquarters is there, there we had the space, it was funded by a European project, and we received 50.000 Euros. It is equipped with computers ; we hired a lady teacher, retired. Those children are... blessed, I can say, because they have extraordinary results at school, because they come from 'S', they do their homework and all go home with their homework done, they are all ok, the priest goes and has painting classes with them, music, therapy, together with their parents, they do different activities at church, different games, championships, but this is just one village. This is what we could do at a social level, because we have to pay the salaries at this centre for five years, to support it... and we will support it, I think it will work if it is... We would have liked more people to have benefited from it, but the villages are spread, you need a driver, you need a means of transportation and you can't afford it, because you don't have job vacancies, you don't have funds. (SW2RA)

According to the social workers who are in touch with the beneficiaries and who know what the causes of the social problems encountered in those communities are, the main measures that could address them are as follows : *legislative changes, increasing the degree of involvement, social centres, collaborations and partnerships.*

When they referred to legislative changes, the social workers meant, in the first place, a change in the way the guaranteed minimum income is granted.

I think that if legislation in this field is changed, if they limited the period of granting, they would then have the conditions, if they made them aware, if they made them responsible somehow, because it has too many lacunae and that is why they can rely on this and sit back. (SW2RA)

Mention should be made that the interviews were conducted during May and August 2018, right before the amendment of the legislation regarding the granting of social welfare was adopted, this bringing about some modifications suggested directly by the social workers.

Also, the participants in the interviews considered that the Education Acts should be amended as well, to address the high school dropout rates.

I am thinking about a legislation which doesn't offer benefits at all, meaning one which somehow constraints them, so that children attend compulsory education, meaning he/she would go to school, to kindergarten ; you can't go only if you have health problems, and otherwise not go at all, it's not normal. (SW14RA)

In terms of involvement, the social workers refer to the level of involvement on the part of both the authorities and the community.

The town hall, in the first place, the town hall would be the main point of reference, or the person, or the institution which should do things, the mayor, the local counsellors, clearly, the people's representatives in our town hall, the counsellors should get involved. (SW12RA)  
I think we should make them aware somehow, they don't realize, they think this is normal. Err, it's that father-son model, so to say, if father benefited from social welfare, why shouldn't I benefit as well, if my father attended only three classes and was a shepherd until he turned 18, why should I go to school? Because things can be like this as well, and in the first phase I think we should make them aware, make them somehow realise the situation they live in and that it is only up to them to change their lifestyle, eventually... (SW7RA)

*One of the positive aspects of the social protection system in the communities under analysis is the degree to which services were accessed. We identified accessibility, transparency and availability of the social workers regarding the granting of social benefits that the local populations can enjoy. Thus, we found that the social workers employed in town halls are generally available and involved in the relationship with the beneficiaries, resulting in no problems regarding access to the social protection services in Braşov County.*

The funds to finance the social protection services in the communities selected for the interview are : *town hall funds (national) ; external (international) funding (European Union or UNICEF).*

Unfortunately, in the majority of the communities targeted, the social workers declared that there are no social projects in progress, mainly due to lack of funding.

We don't have any projects and we don't envision any for the future. The lack of funds, the lack of money has always been the reason. (SW4UA)

In some isolated cases, the town hall subsidises some local projects :

The priest has a project. The project is for the Roma children, a kind of after-school. Besides homework, other activities take place as well. The town hall pays for the food and the volunteer teachers. (SW6RA)

Only three communities out of 21 have projects subsidised by European Union or UNICEF funds.

European funds for classes, for everything... Now, at the after-school, there's also us, with our part, so we have to pay the salaries, the town hall, but everything that happened there happened with European funds. (SW2RA)

## Conclusions

Our research highlights a number of important issues regarding the social problems that the communities in Braşov face : school dropout ; disinterest in education ; dependency on social welfare ; pressure upon the social protection system ; lack of social (community based) services.

We conclude that some changes are needed as far as the granting of social welfare benefits is concerned with a focus on :

- Local support and collaboration among the local, regional, national and international organisations ;
- Partnership and close collaboration between the formal and informal local leaders ;
- Co-operation between the local specialists who can offer network services (education-health-social assistance).

Investments in social centres, such as after-school or community centres, where various people, including, but not only, local specialists, could develop a range of activities.

The main problem identified, school dropout, represent an alarm bell for those designing social policies. We have been describing a culture and a cycle of poverty within which school dropout is a major factor. It seems as if there is no escape from this cycle of poverty without there being external intervention. Researchers (Lewis, 1966, *apud* Small, Harding, Lamont, 2010) consider that the main element that can help break the cycle of poverty is education.

We consider that it is necessary to radically revise the present system of granting social assistance in the rural area which lays stress on granting social welfare. We suggest that what is needed is an increase in the number of social services and a decrease in the number of beneficiaries of social welfare. It is probable that provision of a wider/different range of social services would have better results over time and decrease the levels of dependency seen in relation to provision of social welfare.

As to the limits of this research, as it is a case study, we cannot say that these results can be generalised to other communities. Following the lack of research of this type which we identified at the start of the project, we consider that local and regional research needs to be extended, in order to have a realistic map of the social problems faced by vulnerable rural communities across Romania. Identifying the specificity of the social problems in a certain area and assessing social needs at a local level allows a clearer identification of the social services needed, and could lead to more appropriate use of the existing resources or their more efficient distribution. This issue is identified in the National Strategy on Social

Inclusion and Poverty Reduction (2015-2020), citing the lack of local and regional assessment as a problem leading to poor monitoring and adequacy of the social services relative to the needs of the community. This project has identified problems and possibilities for one rural county with implications for changes in, and the development of, policies and services more appropriate to rural community needs.

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