

Social Community Teams against Poverty (The Netherlands, 19-20 January 2016)

Society against poverty¹

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In the host country report it is mentioned that the need to revive an ambition to find sustainable solutions to poverty and stimulate social inclusion is obvious. The ambition of the Dutch government is to obtain a participatory, inclusive and self-sufficient society and it aims to ensure this by stimulating people's individual and communal responsibility, strength and self-reliance to find and create solutions. In line with this ambition, fighting poverty, social exclusion and debt is a priority for the Dutch government.

Fighting poverty and social exclusion is one of the main goals of Lithuanian social policy as well. Seeking to promote social inclusion and reduce poverty, none of the following areas should be ignored: ensuring minimum income, integration of vulnerable social groups in the labour market, services targeted at families and children and at facilitating reconciliation of family and work responsibilities for parents as well as at healthy and all-round development for children, consolidation of communities, non-governmental organisations, etc.

The country's most socially vulnerable groups face the greatest risk of poverty and social exclusion; this includes the disabled, families with many children, people living in rural areas, unemployed people, people suffering from addictive disorders, Roma individuals, and former prisoners or homeless people who lack relevant social or labour market skills, thus becoming marginalised as a result of their physical/mental condition or sustained economic inactivity.

Lithuania has been successfully pursuing the aim to reduce the number of persons suffering from poverty and social exclusion in the period from 2010 to 2020 (up to 814,000 in 2020). In 2010, 1,068,000 residents (34 %) experienced the risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared to 816,000 residents (27.7 %) in 2014, i.e. their number fell by 252,000 persons (23.6 %).

However, the number of people living in risk-of-poverty and social exclusion has remained still high in our country. Some measures were taken to reduce poverty, but they seemed to be insufficient to reduce poverty and social exclusion.

Cash social assistance is one of the measures which affects the reduction of poverty and social exclusion as well as strengthens the institution of families. Having regard to the financial and economic resources of the state, provision of state-guaranteed cash social assistance has been consistently implemented.

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The changes in economic and social life determine the changes in the legal regulation of social assistance; therefore, while the economic situation in the country stabilises, efficient measures are searched in order to ensure payment of social benefits, and there are efforts to improve the cash-based social assistance system, reduce social exclusion of poor residents and the risk of poverty trap while ensuring motivation of residents to work and realise their social purpose.

Having evaluated the social and economic changes in the country and seeking to improve the accurateness and efficiency of cash social assistances for poor residents as well as more rational use of state budget funds, reorganisation of the cash social assistance system commenced on 1 January 2012.

Its purpose was to seek greater accuracy and efficiency of provided cash social assistance, ensuring the targeting of the neediest persons, to boost motivation of people of working age to integrate into the labour market, to reduce long-term dependency on social assistance, as well as the risk of poverty trap and possibilities of abuse of cash social assistance.

The Law on Cash Social Assistance for Poor Residents established a legal basis to provide cash social assistance to poor residents through two models: as a state function (assigned by the state to municipalities) and as an independent municipal function in five pilot municipalities. With a view to enhancing the powers of municipalities and involving communities in the process of provision of cash social assistance, more rights and responsibility have been assigned to municipalities with regard to granting cash social assistance.

In 2015, the implementation of cash social assistance (payment of social benefits and compensations for heating and hot and drinking water expenses) as an independent municipal function was transferred to all municipalities.

All municipalities provide cash social assistance for poor residents under equal conditions established in the Law on Cash Social Assistance for Poor Residents, renouncing the grounds to grant, not to grant, reduce, etc. social benefits and compensations in accordance with the procedure established by municipal councils. This discretion has been given to municipalities only in those situations when social assistance is granted in cases other than those established in the Law (a lump-sum benefit is granted, the housing debt is paid, etc.).

Seeking to create the conditions for receiving assistance when a person is in great need and to reduce social exclusion, municipal administrations have been granted even more rights in the process of providing cash social assistance for poor residents.

Despite the fact that we do not have Social Community Teams (SCTs), there are other similar local instruments to tackle poverty in our country.

One of the principles of cash social assistance for poor residents is the principle of cooperation and participation which provides that direct payment social assistance is based on cooperation and mutual aid of the community of people who apply for cash social assistance, non-governmental organisations, municipalities, public authorities and institutions.

During the legal monitoring of implementation of cash social assistance for poor residents, it was found that the members of local community were actively engaging to provide information for municipality social departments about the necessity of helping people with financial problems and also about cases of social assistance abuse.

Similar to the SCTs set up in many municipalities in the Netherlands, there are effectively functioning Social Assistance Provision Commissions (Councils) whose



members are social workers, elders, representatives of communities, members of non-governmental organisations or other active members of society in all Lithuanian municipalities. These people visit beneficiaries at home, and after checking living conditions submit an inspection report under which social aid can be granted or suspended. Beneficiaries are also invited to the commissions meetings. Representatives of territorial Labour Exchanges participate in the activities of Social Assistance Provision Commissions (Councils) as well. This allows to evaluate the individual family situation and the need for cash social support objectively and comprehensively.

With the view of reducing possibilities of abuse of cash social assistance, cooperation with bodies carrying out the control and prevention of illegal employment, i.e. the State Labour Inspectorate, the State Tax Inspectorate, The State Social Insurance Fund Board, the Financial Crime Investigation Service and other institutions, has been strengthened.

One of the main forms of cooperation between the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, municipalities, Labour Exchange and other institutions is the data exchange.

It should be noted, that there is inter-institutional cooperation between municipalities and Labour Exchange. Seeking to integrate social benefit recipients into the labour market, possibilities of information systems were expanded to ensure exchange and cooperation between territorial Labour Exchanges and municipalities: using access to social support information system, Labour Exchange receives data about social benefit recipients registered in local Labour Exchanges. Labour Exchange gives priority for integration of the social benefit recipients into labour market.

The data exchange between municipalities and Labour Exchange has been the most important achievement of the cooperation. There are Tripartite Commissions consisting of employers' and employees' organisations and representatives of municipalities in all territorial Labour Exchanges. Formed under the principle of tripartism, those commissions analyse the situation in the labour market area, provide suggestions on employment support, consider active labour market policy measures and make suggestions how to increase the efficiency of those measures.

Publicity is the most important achievement of the reorganisation of cash social assistance system. Residents of municipalities are informed about the new procedure – possibilities to receive cash social assistance and intolerance to abuse – through mass media, meetings of municipality leaders and specialists with residents in elderships, consideration of complicated cases in Social Assistance Provision Commissions (Councils) formed in elderships, etc.

For instance, the municipality of Vilnius city has implemented a confidential telephone line for the purpose of appropriate provision of cash social support, and encouraged residents of Vilnius to use this line to report about cases when people need social cash support, but also about beneficiaries who gain support illegally (e.g. illegal employers or recipients of illegal incomes) or who use financial social assistance not for intended purposes such as use of alcohol, drugs, psychotropic substances, etc. People are also encouraged to report about other issues, which may have impact on legality of cash social assistance appointment.

The main advantage of the Social Assistance Provision Commissions (Councils) is that municipalities, in cooperation with communities, non-governmental organisations, sub-elders and other stakeholders, are able to provide cash social assistance more efficiently: more accurately and justly grant it to those in need.



For the near future, the most important challenges remains the protection of residents, in particular socially vulnerable groups, seeking to avoid, eliminate or mitigate deprivation and to find new measures which affect the reduction of poverty and social exclusion as well as strengthen the family institution. What is also very important is the reduction of the differences of availability of social services among different municipalities, the improvement of quality and individualisation of social services, promotion of social innovations, the development of services for the most vulnerable individuals seeking their integration and return to the labour market. An important systemic change is the transition from institutional care to family and community-based services for disabled people and children deprived of parental care, the development of social services in communities.

Our task is to continue monitoring the implementation of legal regulations and further strengthen the links to activation measures in order to ensure the provision of assistance for persons who need it the most, to stimulate people's individual and communal responsibility. The role of society is very important in this process.

SCTs in the Netherlands are one of the best ways of cooperation and inter-support between community's members. The main advantages of the SCTs activity are: problems are being signalled earlier as questions arising from different life-domains are discussed by a diverse team of professionals; problems are more often prevented and waiting times can be reduced; cooperation with civil society organisations enables broader and faster outreach to previously "invisible poor"; the target group finds SCTs more approachable than "official governmental institutions"; cooperation with local partners enables a broader and less bureaucratic supply of services and solutions; because of one case manager clients do not have to repeat their situation multiple times to various professionals.

In addition, a draft plan of complex services for families for 2016–2020 years is currently being prepared in Lithuania. Complex services will be provided in the community family centre, which it is believed is going to be established in all municipalities. Families would have an opportunity to apply to that community family centre, where special needs of families/individuals would be identified and there would be complex services in the community family centre. Families or individuals would have an opportunity to solve crisis problems, related to physical, social, safety, child education, relationships, dignity, self-expression needs' satisfaction. Families will be able to use the whole range of complex services which include education about positive parenting, psycho-social and crisis management assistance, families will get social skills and support, child care and others. It is planned, that first community family centres would be opened in the next year (2016).

Because of that experience of the Netherlands' SCTs activities should be useful to consider in Lithuania as well.

Intensive work of state institutions and close cooperation with social partners, employers, educational establishments, communities will help to achieve the strategic goal of reduction of poverty and social exclusion.

Bibliography

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