



The “Integrated Package to fight poverty” of social services in Romania: a possible road to institutional effectiveness

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In January 2016, the new Romanian government made it a priority to implement an “Integrated Package” of social services for families at risk of poverty or social exclusion. While the high consensual support among stakeholders increases the odds of a successful implementation of the Package, whether this will work crucially depends on the way the government handles it.

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Description

The new Romanian government (entered into office in November 2015) made its mission to push forward the reforms initiated by the previous government and “put policies to work”. In this context, the Ministry of Labour, Social Protection, Family and the Elderly (MLSPFE) announced, in January 2016, that it considers the “Integrated Package to fight poverty” to be its priority.

This Package is one of the most important means to implement the National strategy on social inclusion and combating poverty for 2015-2020. It is aimed at families who find themselves at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with an emphasis on families living in rural (remote) communities, poverty pockets or Roma communities. A wide range of services are expected to be provided as part of the Package, from pre-natal health services to educational and health services for children and teenagers, employment programmes for young people and vulnerable adults, and care for dependent adults and frail elderly. Services will be facilitated by multidisciplinary teams (social workers, health workers, educational counsellors) that will collaborate with local authorities and other stakeholders.

An operational framework for the implementation of the Package is expected to be in place by September 2016. While the Package represents one

of the five strategic interventions of the MLSPFE foreseen for 2016, the chancellery of the prime-minister called for a broader Coalition for Social Inclusion, represented by various governmental actors (National Agency for Children’s Rights Protection, MLSPFE, National Authority for Disabled, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, National Agency for Roma) and non-governmental stakeholders, to monitor the implementation of the Package.

The Package will be accompanied by a number of methodological and institutional measures such as (a) objective-based and needs-driven funding; (b) poverty risks mapping; (c) increased administrative and monitoring capacity of local public social assistance services; and (d) integrated intervention teams/multifunctional community centres, especially for poor and marginalised communities.

UNICEF Romania is one of the most active stakeholders in pushing forward the Package. It successfully piloted the programme in Bacău county, focusing mainly on services addressing child violence and abuse, teenage pregnancies, prevention of transmissible and non-transmissible diseases, and school drop-outs. UNICEF calls for a mainstreaming of the services successfully developed through a number of their projects in the country

(e.g. setting up institutions and building up skills at local level), estimating that the implementation of the Package at national level will cost in its first year about 0.067% of GDP (around 0.11 billion Euros). The additional expenditure, associated with ensuring the operational framework in the first place could be supported from other sources - such as European funds and Norway grants. Finally, there is consensual support among major NGOs for the Package, its opportunity and multiple benefits.

The government's proposal builds on the already accumulated experience of both governmental and non-governmental agencies already involved in carrying out programmes and attempts to identify, in an operational manner, those programmes that can be (and are worth being) up-scaled.

Outlook & Commentary

The Integrated Package to fight poverty will build on 47 ongoing and piloted projects. Hence, it brings disparate programmes/projects (just launched or ongoing) and various stakeholders under a common framework. From an institutional/methodological perspective, the Package is a novelty for Romania as it marks the start of an effective capacity building effort.

Its content marks a shift in focus from a top-down approach, centred on social benefits, towards a community-based, needs-driven and integrated social services approach to social inclusion. It also points to an increased awareness in regard to prevention and social investment. Finally, it promises to revive a system of community mediators - initially put in place to address Roma integration issues and abandoned, later on, with high opportunity costs.

The dual challenge for the government will be: a) to balance out the current benefit-oriented approach to social inclusion, by focusing on community-integrated social services; and (b) to help build more efficient institutions, improve administrative capacity and create synergies between stakeholders. The main comparative advantages of the current government over previous governments are its relative political neutrality, its technocratic character and its focus on accountability. These advantages should contribute to reducing political frictions and increasing the probability that the required institutional and administrative reforms will indeed take place. Finally, for the Package to become truly effective, it will require the consistency of the government in putting policies at work and its openness to initiating an effective dialogue with all the relevant stakeholders.

Further reading

Ministerul Muncii, Protectiei Sociale, Familiei si Persoanelor Varstnice (2016): Planul General de Actiuni Sectoriale pentru 2016:

http://www.mmuncii.ro/j33/images/Documente/DASiDI/2015/Plan_general_actiuni_MMuncii_2016.pdf

Guvernul Romaniei, 2016: Pachetul national anti-saracie:

<http://gov.ro/ro/obiective/teme-majore/pachetul-national-anti-saracie1456320785>

UNICEF (2016) Pachetul Minim de Servicii Sociale [ENG translation]:

<http://www.unicef.ro/wp-content/uploads/Brosura-pachet-minim-de-servicii.pdf>

Agerpress News (March 22, 2016): Pachetul Minim de servicii sociale:

<http://www.agerpres.ro/politica/2016/03/22/ana-costea-pachetul-minim-de-servicii-sociale-o-prioritate-a-mandatului-meu-19-09-13>

Fondul ONG in Romania, (April, 2016): ONGurile au modele de interventie pentru jumatate dintre masurile anti-saracie lansate de guvern:

<http://fondong.fdsc.ro/ong-urile-au-modele-de-interventie-pentru-jumatate-dintre-masurile-anti-saracie-lansate-de-guvern>

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