Mapping of the Social Service Workforce Across South East Europe: Education Context, Needs and Opportunities for Professional Development

WEBINAR SUMMARY
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I. Expert
Bree Akeeson, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

II. Background:
Mrs. Akeeson commenced by stressing that there is a movement toward improving the child protection through strengthening the existing system, rather than engaging with micro-level child protection concerns or international organizations to provide aid. Social workers are placed in a prime position to tackle these issues, but face many challenges and opportunities.

She mentioned that several recent efforts have strived to map the social service workforce in various regions, including in Southeastern Europe, a mapping on child protection was recently put together.

Mrs. Akeeson’s own research focused an overview of the social service workforce in the child protection field in Southeast Europe, the legislative and infrastructure system existent, education, training and professional development opportunities and their alignment or lack thereof with social service practices.

She used the definition of the Global Social Service Alliance 2015 regarding the social service system, as intervention by state and non-state actors to ensure the welfare and protection of socially and economically disadvantaged individuals and families. Social service workers represents anyone engaged in social service system, whether paid or unpaid.

III. Methodology
The methodology used by her team included a literature review in different countries (curriculum, research, policy and practices), followed by the creation of reviews based on existing documents. A common workshop was held in Belgrade to share the national findings and provide a common training in research methods, ensuring that data collection is similar.

Subsequently, the team collected data, conducted analyses and developed country-level reports. The overarching, common report focused on presenting the common aspects as well as differences that existed. Semi-structured interviews with over 150 academics, managers and practitioners were conducted, involving a total of 451 participants in all the countries involved.
In terms of limitations, the research over-represented paid, governmental social service workers in the data and contained less on care professional and other types of social service workers. At the same time there is no service users, so the voice of beneficiaries is not heard.

IV. Findings:

Regarding the overview of the social service workforce, the data revealed that there is little understanding of the child protection workers, who are negatively perceived as taking children away from families, not supporting families, or as individuals who do not really work.

In terms of the social work education and human resource management, the team found substantial diversity, with no consistency in requirements to become a social work, which vary from organization to organization. While there are considerable numbers of masters degree in social work, there are fewer doctoral opportunities.

The working conditions are difficult across the board, with heavy workloads, low remuneration, poor infrastructure and low individual motivation. Many practitioners acknowledge the importance professional supervision to decrease stress, increase motivation and develop their skills. Still, supervision is often missing in practice.

As far as recruitment is concerned, some countries have a number, many, however, are under the needed numbers. Bosnia has one social worker for 4000 people, in Serbia, the social service population is aging and exhausted, while, in Romania, 50 percent of child protection workers quit or terminated their work in 2010 alone.

Regarding the curriculum, social service work is taught and practiced differently, with some existing similarities, including the integration of social science content, from fields as sociology and psychology, and life course studies, on topics such as trauma. However, the curricula have not been updating, reflecting often an American or British perspective, thus knowledge is not relevant for the practice. There is also a lack of effort to educate the practitioner to learn how to influence policy. At the same time, many programs still struggle when striving to connect classroom theory with practice and integrate research into social workers’ daily practices.

The expert concluded with several recommendations, including:

1. Developing national frameworks;
2. Reviewing existing curricula;
3. Carrying out more research on the social service system in the region;
4. Improving working conditions;
5. Ensuring supervisory relations to support the workers.