

# The Challenges from Post-Soviet Social Work in the Small Rural Local Governments: Estonian Case in the Period 1995 - 2015

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**Abstract** Contemporary European social work is based on the principle of collective responsibility, human rights and social justice. The IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers) declared that social work was, and always will be, a human rights occupation. "The European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights" was approved by the European Parliament on November 29th, 2007 (2007/2218 (ACI), and sets out rights, freedoms, and principles. Sohlberg [1] has commented that the fundamental rights are individual rights, independent of the identity of the beneficiary. However, the ability of a person to cope with his/her life independently is, for Europe, very important. The utilized methodology has been the collective case study according to Mills [2]. I followed the information-oriented selection: the cases of maximum variation by size and location [3]. Triangulation has been used as a procedure for acquiring data. Further analysis was conducted by using the complementary configurations according to Ragin [4]. According to the research findings, there has been tension between the fundamental rights of citizenship and social work practice. Analysed the availability, there could find the several risk groups, who are legally excluded from the local social work (welfare) system (*long-term unemployed, person who cares for one's relatives*). The responsibility for the care of a person during his or her long-term care, illness, or profound disability lies solely on the family. In the dominant practice, the local government supports only

single (older) people, the decision-makers are according to "Estonian Family Law Act" [5], which gives the order of care to families first. This is the basis for giving and receiving social assistance and providing the social services such as home care services or institutional care services. Social work focuses on the needs of people, with a primary nature requiring that they be dealt with as part of mandatory laws. The actual challenge of Estonian public discussion should be how to ensure the fundamental right of every citizen to receive government support from a local government in the case of the need and in addition to the list of laws compulsory for all.

**Keywords** Local Government, Social Work, Practice, Post-Soviet, Estonia

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## 1. Introduction

Professional social work in Estonia was restarted in 1991. Therefore, social work has been a new adoption of the post-communist society after regaining its independence. The preparation and adoption of the Social Care (Welfare) Act of Estonia in 1995 followed the general principles of the corresponding law from 1925. According to this, local government was responsible for organizing social work. However, the process of development of social work in

Estonia has impacts from the first period of Estonian independence; from the experiences of the “Old Europe” and from the Soviet period [6].

Estonia is a very small country and can say, the micro local governments have restored like in 1924. In Estonia there are 226 local governments – 33 towns and 193 local governments (townships) – and 151 local governments to be considered as “small rural local governments”. Rural municipalities consist only of the centre, or village (often collective farms centre, and during the Soviet period, depending on the reforms carried out at the same time, a former village church). The rural local government sustainability is connected with the number of residents, where they are working, or they are unemployed, if a school and kindergarten exist, or not, how many kilometers to the Capital of the County, where are the public medical services located, and so on.

Since 1995, administratively, social work is organised in Tallinn and the county capitals, i.e. in the larger cities separate structural units exist, which deal directly with the clients. The research focuses on the small, rural municipalities where the practices of social work have become very independent due to the differences in the educational background, lack of harmonisation of standards and quality requirements. There are big differences, so one case is not enough to illustrate the situation.

Insufficient solidarity can be observed in the Estonian society. Since the restitution of independence, the percentage of those excluded from the State’s welfare schemes, has increased. Therefore, social work must find the marginalised people, the groups who are behind the barriers, which in its turn means - to look for people who are excluded from the social welfare system at the governmental level [7]. However, Estonia is in a unique situation since the historical, cultural, and professional development has been different in comparison to the old part of Europe, so in Estonia in particular, critical thinking is required in order to fulfill the accountable social work.

## 2. Theoretical Overview

The contemporary definitions of social work as a degree subject reflect its origins in a range of different academic and practice traditions’. These include: 1) North American traditions of social work [8-10]; 2) UK traditions of social work [11]; 3) European and international traditions of social work [12], [13]. However, social work practice is not limited to the European or American models; we are talking about African, Asian, and the Latin-American model too. Heater [14] (2008) has argued that the lack of an entirely satisfactory or agreed definition of social work makes it more logical to take a comparative critical view rather than argue a particular definition. According to Fook [15], it is important to recognize that both the nature and purposes of social work are constructed within diverse

social and political environments and take rather different forms in different societies.

The key elements of social work practice include values, ethics, foundational knowledge, and skills, and how these link to the processes of assessment and intervention. Today, there are big differences as far as the practice of social work in different parts of the world is concerned. It covers the wide range of activities starting from clinical social work, often being handed over to private service providers, to the community management, social policy and society development. Refer to Healy [16] and Payne [11] social worker focuses in his/her work on three main aspects: 1) definition of client’s needs, 2) contribution to the maintenance of social institutions and 3) contribution to the preservation of the community, while ensuring the protection of the client. In other words: social workers act on micro, meso and macro level pointed out Brueggemann [17]. Appreciation and respect are required for diversity in relation to race, culture, religion, ethnicity, linguistic origin, gender, sexual orientation and different abilities.

The local system and the territorial articulation of policies open up a field of tension between the enhancement of local resources, necessarily specific and diverse, and the (political) horizon of equal rights have argued Choi and Woo [18], Choi [19]. However, social work has always been a vehicle of social justice and sometimes social work is a means for raising political consciousness have argued Chu, Tsui, Yan [20]. Shaw [21] argues that expansion of the understanding of the relationship between research and policy is helpful to social work research in that social work research is not necessarily or perhaps more accurately not primarily about researching for policy or researching policy directly. Social work research is more often focused on the effects of policy, or on the interventions into the social contexts and problems that are, or should be, the subject of policy.

## 3. Materials and Methods

### 3.1. The Design of the Research

The strategy of research (methodology) has utilised case study. The scholars Gomm, Hammersley, Foster [22] and Bennett, Elman [23] have pointed out that a case study aims to understand the case in depth, and in its natural setting, recognising its complexity and its context. Verschuren [24] also has a holistic focus, aiming to preserve and understand the wholeness and unity of the case. Therefore, the case study is rather a strategy than a method. A case study is a detailed inquiry into the complex of the local government with a variety of data resources have argued Baxter and Jack [25].

Pointing out to Punch [26] the collective case study means that the instrumental case study is extended to cover several cases in order to learn more about the phenomenon.

Following Luck, Jackson and Usher [27] I have used the

collective case study, following the information-oriented selection: maximum variation of cases in terms of size and location

Preparing the cases:

- The cases are chosen from nine (9) rural municipalities (local governments in a rural area);
- They do not have boundaries with a county town;
- They show some differences, for example as to the title for a social work employer, the decision-making level and so on.
- The inhabitants are less than 2500

Local municipalities to be more closely analysed are: Vihula, Viru-Nigula, Rägavere, Laekvere in Lääne-Viru county and Avinurme, Lohusuu, Lügause, Maidla, Aseri in Ida-Viru county.

The data of the case study are based on a mix of evidence; triangulation has been used as a method of acquiring data:

1. Document analysis (public documents, law, strategies, minutes of social committee meetings, legal regulations of municipalities etc.)
2. Semi-structured interviews with the members of social committee.
3. Semi-structured interviews with social workers of the local governments.

The data in the social sciences are obtained in both formal and informal settings and involve oral and written data.

Ragin [4] has stated that organizational configurations may also be formed around sociocultural and political factors. A true understanding of organisational configurations must also go beyond merely technical interdependencies to include the interaction between these and socio-political and culturally-symbolic factors. The writing method of the case study has used the diagnostic case report. Van Blonk [28], used originated by Pettigrew, the report is produced in order to interact with the organisations where the research was conducted; besides analytical chronology, a diagnostic case contains a listing and analysis of current problems.

## 4. The Post-Soviet Social Work

### 4.1. The Financial Support and Social Services

Traditionally, about the social services, however, they have put the social benefits and social services together. In the current research, I am separating all the components and analysing them separately. Analysing the outcomes, I have found four standards of practice:

- (1) The target-based benefits; the applicant qualified, based on, for example, the status (pupil, single, or disabled); the age, the date (Christmas, the birthday) or the act (funeral);

- (2) The benefit is related to the level of income; the applicant qualified due to the situation of poverty or a crisis; support to bearspecial care expenses for elderly and disabled people who are registered residents of the respective municipality; the indicated types of benefits are part of the local budget; and
- (3) The subsistence benefit, the money comes from the State budget.

Thus, the main activity of the rural local governments is the distribution of financial aid, including the state-funded subsistence benefit. The distribution of social benefits does not require a professional, since the State set conditions in calculating benefits are based on mathematics: household income - expenses documented by accounting type documents (not proving the need according to the situation).

- (4) The social services, mostly the day centre for the elderly and the people with disabilities. Based on the empirical data, the majority of local governments provide social consultation as a form of service; social consultation is not viewed as a service. The obligations prescribed by law - ensuring of social services - are organised modestly in all locally governed areas.

The remaining spectrum of social services has not been sufficiently developed yet. At the same time, services cannot be "outsourced" because there are no private organisations which provide (sell) such services. Over the past 20 years, the understanding that public services can best be provided by both companies, as well as local people themselves, has dominated in Estonia. For historical reasons, there are no viable non-profit organizations in Estonia able to stably provide widespread social services. The only area of service, which is interesting to the business sector, of which there are many, is nursing homes, because they are profitable. On the one hand, there are a small number of residents who need the services, 1-2 people in the village. Inevitably, if the social services are only provided on the open market, the people who need the service, cannot afford it. It is a paradox.

Support services are offered to children in the county capitals and there are the associated queues, travel costs, parents cannot get to appointments to see specialists on workdays, etc. A few existing services, mostly home care or day centres, are located in the centres, the service is not accessible for single elderly and disabled people, living in isolated villages. Many of the people potentially needing help simply do not receive it.

The low number of social services is related to the question, how could the social worker follow the aim to change or support the situation of the client?

### 4.2. The Task of the Employer on the Social Work Field

In addition to the information previously collected, in order to obtain a better overview of the situation, I have

observed and analysed the social worker's activities in the small local governments. During the course of the interviews, starting questions were general, regarding local issues or changes. Social worker or the care worker uses two different ways to get information: 1) formal, including through office bureaucracy and networking, and 2) the Informal way.

The social worker in a small local government can be said to possess full information. A source of information is being a local resident himself or herself; everyone knows everyone. Neighbours, friends and the elders are an irreplaceable source of informal information. Official sources consist of all operating local agencies, particularly the school and kindergarten, the local nursing home and the police (constable). Information exchange with the county authorities, located at the County headquarters is slower and is often hindered by excessive references to the Data Protection Act. Social workers knew the problems affecting the local community: job losses in the country, lack of public transport (from year to year bus routes are shut down), and bank branch closures (people can not access cash), post office closures (where can you buy a birthday card and a postage stamp?) and the biggest problem, country store closures (daily food). Accorded to the fact that local government development plans have modestly identified social work target groups, the social worker does his daily work.

The direct intervention, where the social worker intervenes in situations, social worker knows that a child's life is in danger. Parents are counselled, the family is monitored, and the children are placed in a private or the alternate home of local government (Children's Home) if necessary, if a foster family cannot be found. As previously stated, social workers have sufficient information about their township, but in the case of a family of alcoholics, there is always the chance that they will arrive too late for the child. Tackling the problem of truancy on many levels of difficulty has always been one of the social workers' jobs. In the Primary and Secondary Schools Act, revised in 2010, it is regulated that in cases of chronic truancy, the student's home municipal government needs to be notified. The cause of the problem is investigated in co-operation with the school; if the reasons are related to financial difficulties, an attempt to alleviate the situation with social benefits is made.

In the small local governments, there is no interconnected network of services, with a link to impact: the social worker intervenes and influences, but activities are individual, there is lack of support functions and services, in other words, activities are at the level of individuals. The offered social services are not addressed in a systematic way resulting in a more individual approach to the client, which is a positive effect, but it also gives the social worker an opportunity to remain impassive or to focus on areas which seem to be more inspiring from his/her personal point of understanding. the social welfare practice does not follow the client-centred practice to

enable his/her independent action on society.

Describing the domain model in the rural local government, representing their own social policy, the small social benefits (the financial assistance) in the event of extreme poverty are the dominant practice. There is lack of support for other functions and services, however, the interconnected network of services in local government. The social worker intervenes and influences, but the social worker activities are individual. Analyses of the practice, summarily, there the two sides detected. For the positive view, the social worker is active, intervened in the crises or other problem's field. For the negative situation, there is a possibility that the employer of the social work is in a passive position or they act within their own interests.

#### **4.3. Utilized the Dual Practices in the Post-Soviet Model**

Exploring social work practice in the small local governments I found dual practices have been carried out, the types of state and local centered practices have been utilized.

The type of state-centered practice refers to the state's decentralized duties. The local government administers subsistence benefits, disabled children benefits, and since 2014, the need-based (income based) family benefit, whereby the control mechanism is based on the online-STAR program. The distribution of state benefits does not require a professional as the state sets conditions for calculating benefits based on mathematics: household income - expenses documented by accounting-type documents. The decentralized social services (the social services offered from the state's budget) do not exist in the small local government.

The units of control, the state jurisdiction over the activities of local authorities in the field of social welfare, have been assigned to the county governments. At the end of the Europeanisation process, this relates only to checking the legality of the allocation of benefits funded by the state budget. The Ministry of Social Affairs has gathered over the years statistical data from local governments and providers of social services. The "STAR" program launched in winter of 2010 demands from social workers the adding of client work reports to the statistical data and subsistence benefit calculations.

The local-centered practice refers to the local government's own established practice. With regards to the description of the client of the small local government, a lack of clarity persists: 1) at the state level, there is no agreement who is the client of local government; and 2) most importantly, this understanding and agreement is missing also at the municipal level. Therefore, it can be put forth that in situations where the tasks of social work are set on the national level only in general terms, the local government's client is not clearly defined.

Small local governments do not have enough resources to provide a wide range of public social services, and

notably, the services that are linked to social care services (*de jure*, the local budget is part of the state's budget). Unclear guidelines paired with the neoliberal state's welfare system impact both the planning and achieving of the goals outlined. However, the core characteristics of developed local social welfare are the following: a) social benefits from the local budget; b) local social care services; and c) face-to-face services offered by the local social worker.

With respect to the activities of the social worker, the three main methods they use are: a) personal counselling; b) networking; and c) crisis intervention. Another main task of social workers is to provide, if necessary, transportation services to clients for driving to the hospital or the medical centre along with applications for disability pensions, communication with doctors and medical personnel in hospitals, and obtaining prosthetics, orthopaedics, and other aids.

Regarding the interconnected network of services in local government, there is a lack of support for other functions and services. The social worker intervenes and influences, but activities are independent of that social worker. The offered social services are not addressed in a systematic way that would result in a more individual approach to the client, and it gives the social worker an opportunity to remain impassive or to focus on areas which seem to be more inspiring from his/her personal point of view.

Support services are offered to children in the county capitals and there are the associated queues, travel costs, parents cannot get to appointments to see specialists on workdays, etc. A few existing services, mostly home care or day centres, are located in the centres, the service is not accessible for single elderly and disabled people, living in isolated villages. Many of the people potentially needing help simply do not receive it. The medical services are separated from the system of social care. Therefore, it's a challenge to share resources between medical and social care, especially in social care for elderly and adult persons with disabilities, because Estonian Health Insurance Fund does not pay for the services of social care.

Still the unsettled field of social welfare is involved with the challenge of the most problematic situation: how to share the responsibility between Estonian state, the local government and the individual citizen. The public criteria have not been formulated and the question as to who the client of the social services in the local municipality is has not been agreed upon at the local government level. Financial assistance in the event of extreme poverty is the dominant practice, not the definition of target groups or the problems. There are issues about the inclusion and exclusion of different groups in society. The question concerns the extent to which local governments should be responsible for ensuring that citizens' needs are met and how they should achieve this objective.

## 5. Discussion

Healy [29] has confirmed, social work was, and always will be, a human rights occupation. Human rights are integral to social work theory and practice. Human rights have been the declarative power concerning the legal system. The situation has changed when the human rights and social services became legally binding in the European Union. Estonia is associated with the European legislation that aimed to protect human and fundamental rights.

Highlighting this research's findings, there has been tension between the fundamental rights of citizens and the practice of local social work. Public discussion is missing in Estonian society, and this impacts local government's obligations. Following the basic principle of the legal system where higher-level law is superior to lower-level law, the state's legal framework should be to conform to the European orders. The European laws regulate the rights of citizens. I argue that the rules form the framework of the EU, "The Charter of Fundamental Rights of European Union" should be followed by local authorities. Hence, I contend that there is a need for a new evaluation of the legislative base including the existing three levels of legal framework. The actual challenge of Estonian public discussion should be about how to ensure the constitutional right of every citizen to receive governmental support from a local government in case of need and in addition to the list of orders compulsory for all.

The legislative framework affects the functions of local government; however, the local policy is directly related to the ability of a person to cope with his or her life independently. Social work can be defined in relationship with social welfare where the administration of social work transforms into human services. The practice of social work in Europe relates to social policies, depending on practice on local history and traditions.

The European Parliament adopted a Framework Directive on Services of General Interest in January 2001 [30] aimed at removing barriers to free trade in a broad range of services within the EU, covering purely commercial services as well as social services as health care and household support services. According to Newman and Clarke [31], the public services are involved in the remaking of "community" and "civil society"; through strategies of partnership and capacity building, the public service can be based on norms of Universalism. Boin [32] has argued that the five different public services (health, police, water, education and social services), conclude that for accountability to be a reality, there must be a mix of political/community accountability supplemented with the use of managerial techniques that focus on the performance of those who actually deliver public services.

The public service can be based on the norms of universalism. Olesen [33] argues the public responsibility

is laid out to guarantee citizens they have the opportunity to use social services and, importantly, point out accountability at the local government level. In Estonia, there are different understandings of the goals of public social work. Falling into the shadows is explained by the focusing on social protection as the basis of system-building, and political ideology has been limited to assistance for the poor - guaranteeing minimum subsistence (subsistence benefit). My research has shown that re-thinking of the progress of the welfare strategy has continued over the years. A fundamental change took place in the period from 1999 to 2003 [34].

In the Estonian public sphere understanding of the minimum or maximum services is the main question. Mäntysalo [35] has noted that the ethical maximum is achieved with a combination of regulation and values. Regulation alone does not guarantee ethical conduct or the perception of ethical public service. In situations, where the tasks are set by general terms, the local government's clients should define them and the minimum standards of social welfare services should also be set. Most importantly, public duties are mandatory for all local governments.

According to the Estonian Social Welfare Act, target groups are children, people with disabilities, the elderly, prisoners freed, and people with emergency social needs. Their need for support is comprehensive; however, the public criteria have not been formulated and the question about who the client of social work in the local municipality has not been agreed upon at the local government level. The General Standards of Social Work is absent in Estonia; therefore, I argue that in the situations where the tasks are set by the general terms, the local government's responsibility is not defined. It is unclear how to share the responsibility between the family and local government. The lack of a base definition causes every individual to interpret by themselves the challenges and opportunities of local government.

In the 21st century, the 'Social Europe' debate represents an important milestone for envisioning European solidarity between welfare systems and the European social agenda' however, solidarity must be created by political accorded to Follesdal, Giorgi and Heuberger [36]. Borghi [37] shows that the two pillars of EU welfare capitalism – employability and activation – are related to the social services. According to Mohan [38], the idea of social work without borders should be a common goal of all social welfare organizations and institutions. That it is important to develop social inclusion policies, measures, and indicators that coincide with similar EU standards and practices.

## 6. Conclusion

Examining the practice of social work (services) I separated the four dominant practices: 1) the benefits from

the local budget, 2) the benefits from the State budget, 3) local social care services and 4) the everyday task of the employer at the social work field. There exist too many barriers and I have concerned about the problem with the insufficient amounts. However, the understanding of social services at the local level is limited to the distribution of social benefits, including the allocation of subsistence benefits funded by the State budget.

The social benefits are mostly target group based, and at the same time, even though we are dealing with small amounts, it does help to alleviate deep impoverishment. Generally, local government supports only single people, again according again to the Family Law by which family members have a mutual maintenance obligation. In practice this is the basis for the giving and receiving of social assistance. The Family Law does not meet the contemporary needs of people: for example, a case of a grown-up child of an elderly person living in Australia, person who caring for one's relatives). Sohlberg [1] has commented that the fundamental rights are individual rights, independent of the identity of the beneficiary.

Unfortunately, there is no interconnected network of services and the result is dual - from the positive point of view, the activities are at the level of individuals, the employer at the social work field is active. The negative side is that there is the possibility that the employer assumes the passive position or does what he himself is interested in.

Local practice of social work does not accept the rights of local residents generally, in other words, people receive social services depending on how the local authorities understand their obligations. The definition of clients and working methods, including direct face-to-face client work, which is one of the main methods of social work, is not reflected in public information. The cash benefits and social services are not available to all risk groups.

Alphonse, George and Moffatt have argued [39], social work must promote social justice, as the profession strives to reach out to and empower all people. A local government administration might provide functions and services defined by a central government, or a local government might enable action and management of functions and services that are provided by other political accountability mechanisms, Knippenberg [40] has argued.

The central government has decentralized the most part of all duties of social welfare to the local government. Thus, at the main public social welfare *organiser* in Estonia has been the local government, being a part of the European Union since 2004. The low state support combined with neoliberal ideology, the unclear duties, and the major contrast between regional economic environments have been important challenges surrounding the Europeanisation of social work in local governments.

According to the Social Welfare Act, the target groups are children, the elderly people and people with disabilities and other special needs. In addition to that, there is a list of social services that are compulsory for all. There is scant

support available to local governments from the state budget and all local services have to be financed through the local budget. Moreover, one must review the list of social services specified in the Act, because as previously stated, the citizen has the right to know what kind of service or other forms of support from the municipality they are able to apply for. The right to receive assistance comes from “The Charter of Fundamental Rights of European Union”, and the exercising of this right should not depend on the region and local authority where the individual or family lives.

The main question is - how the knowledge about the value and goals of social work transfers into daily practice through understanding contemporary rights of EU citizenry and how to ensure the constitutional right of every citizen to receive the public benefit from a local government in case of need.

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