

Determinants of Vulnerable Groups Employment. A Perspective of Social Services Providers

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Abstract:

In the context of social welfare paradigm changes, the problem of vulnerable groups remains one of maximum attention. The social service providers for the Romanian vulnerable groups operate in a complex environment rattled by re-organizations, value adjustments and theoretical and practical revisions. A series of studies have revealed a labour market that is struggling with economic cuts, demographic ageing and educational deficit (CE, 2010; Buțiu, 2011).

The regulations, the national statistics reports and the European occupational program financing database show concern for this issue at all levels: European, national, regional and local. The target of the Europe 2020 strategy of gaining an average occupational rate of 75% of the 20 to 64 years old population demands serious efforts. The first condition – that of instrument development – is approached by scheduled document elaboration, rules and regulation drafting and financing projects foundation. However, visible results are still pending.

The aim of this study is to identify both the commonalities and the variations of the social service providers' viewpoints from the development regions (Centre, West and North-West) on four groups of vulnerabilities as defined in relation to determinant factors, namely, personal, structural, institutional and political ones.

The authors decided for a qualitative approach and used an Interview Guide as research instrument. 41 social service suppliers have been interviewed, belonging to the cities of Alba-Iulia, Ocna Mureș, Abrud, Sebeș, Blaj, Cluj-Napoca, Turda, Sibiu, Baia Mare, Satu Mare and Bistrița, out of which 23 (56%) are private suppliers and 18 (44%) are public ones. The respondents' experience ranges between 1 and 44 years and their positions range from executive to top management.

The interview analysis results permitted the mapping of vulnerabilities for only those dominant and specific vulnerable groups which provided answers and sufficient information.

While the respondents' own subject pegging into labour market vulnerability groups seem diversified, most of them fit into the generic category of economically excluded/marginalized. One should mention the constant referral to current economic crisis as the reason behind mass marginalization and a factor of generalized vulnerability (a systemic determinant which is independent of individual will and capabilities), and the referral to state and social service dependency which Goodin and Schmidt (1998) named critical *dependency*, as well. Each group also has specific characteristics and particular types of vulnerability.

The *Roma people* are at the top of the labour market vulnerability list. Employers, although willing to hire them for short-term tasks, are reluctant to enter long-term contracts, due in part to stereotypes and misperceptions as to their reliability as workers. Advanced education increases Roma's chances of employment, but few have the benefit of it.

The *Disabled persons*, although limited in their functionality, do not meet significant barriers as long as they can perform as expected in those functions where their handicap is not a limiting factor. The type of work and the transportation facilities are conditions for accessibility. The worker's adaptability to the specific working conditions is a key to employability.

The *young graduates* frequently show up as a large vulnerable group in interviewees' concerns, due to the vicious circle of rejection for lacking the very experience that can only be attained by being employed. Nevertheless, the *sub-group of those that abandoned employment centres' services* is of more acute concern.

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For the *middle-aged women* group family obligations seem to appear as a frequent employment opportunity limiting factor.

It is the authors' hope that the conclusions and recommendations emerging from the study will help an effective policy drafting for those vulnerable groups in question. The issues are quite diverse and, at individual level, they often diverge from a normative applicability. This is why the classic approach – that of dealing with the problems through the statist instruments of regulation, public servicing and public company propping - has failed to attain effective results.

The non-governmental and voluntary sector is starting to consolidate its image as an alternative social-service provider and its partnership with the classic state institutions is proving helpful in filling some of its gaps and limitations. The family, the local community and the private sector can also be effective instruments, but traditionally they have been neglected, even though they respond very well to some social needs and they have not been big consumers of state resources. The recommendation in vulnerable group labour markets problem solving is therefore, the shifting of focus away from public regulatory instruments and towards private and semi-private, community and family-oriented solutions.

Keywords: determinants, vulnerable persons, labour market, social services providers.