Country Notes: The Impact of Western Social Workers in Romania - a Fine Line between Empowerment and Disempowerment[1]

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Introduction

Ideally the social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance their well-being (IFSW 2004). The social work practice, however, often proves to be different. Social workers are always in the danger to make decisions for their clients or define problems according to their own interpretation and world view. In quite a number of cases, the consequence of such a social work practice is that the clients feel disempowered rather than empowered.

This dilemma is multiplying when western social workers get involved in developing countries. The potential that intervention, with the intention to empower and liberate the people, turns into disempowerment is tremendously higher because of the differences in tradition, culture and society, on the one side and the power imbalance between the 'West' and the 'Rest' on the other side.

Especially in developing countries, where the vast majority of people live in poverty, many Western social workers come with a lot of sympathy and the idea to help the poor and to change the world. An example is Romania.

After the collapse of communism in 1989, Romania was an economically, politically and socially devastated country. The pictures of the orphanages shocked the western world. As a result many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), churches and individuals were bringing humanitarian goods to Romania in order to alleviate the misery of the Romanian[2] people and especially the children.

Since then, important changes in all areas of life have occurred, mostly with foreign financial aid and support. At the political level, democratic institutions were established, a liberal market economy was launched and laws were adapted to western standards regarding the accession into the European Union and the NATO. The western world has left its marks also at the grassroots level in form of NGOs or social service agencies established through western grants and individuals.

Above and beyond, the presence of western goods and investment in Romania is omnipresent. This reflects a newly-gained freedom and prosperity - Romania profits certainly from these changes. But this is only one side of the medal, as the effect of westernisation contradicts with the Romanian reality and overruns many deep-rooted traditions, thus the majority of people. Moreover, only a small percentage of the population has access to this western world.

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[1] This article is based on the author's research project and the Master's Thesis: "The Dilemma Posed by Democracy Promotion: Shifting the Focus from a Political to a Personal Perspective. Experiences of Romanian Staff in an International NGO".

[2] Within this article the term 'Romanian' does not refer only to ethnic Romanians but has to be understood as referring to the 'citizens of Romania', which includes Romanians, as well as Hungarians, Germans or Roma and the members of all other national minorities residing in Romania.

Western concepts, procedures or interpretations are often highly differing from the Romanian tradition, history and culture. Nevertheless, western ideas seem to dominate the transition in many areas of daily life in Romania. A closer look reveals that many changes take place due to pressure of western governments and are conditioned to financial support.

The dialectic relationship between the need for foreign aid and the implementation becomes very obvious in Romania and often leads, despite the substantial benefits, to unpredictable and rather negative side-effects, at a political, social, cultural, ecological and/or economic level. This reality is a huge dilemma for all those involved, as there is a fine line between empowering and disempowering action.

It is beyond the scope of this journal to discuss the dilemma posed by Western involvement at all levels; therefore this article focuses on the impact of Western social workers in Romania.

The first part consists of a short introduction to social work in Romania, followed by the discussion about the dilemma posed by the structure of project of international social work and the organisation of private social service agencies. Thirdly the experiences of Romanian staff with Western social workers are presented and then discussed with regard to turning disempowering tendencies of Western social workers into empowerment.

1. Social Work in Romania

There is not much written about formal social work tradition in Romania before communism. Charity activities existed certainly part of the Orthodox tradition, thus the Romanian Orthodox Christians were always willing to give the poor and the beggars. Among the ethnic groups there were also informal social networks. Especially the minority churches were taking care of the socially disadvantaged members of their congregations.

Under communism, Nicolae Ceaucescu attempted to lead his nation's people to believe that their social problems were under control with no need for formal social services or for the profession of social work (Patterson 2004:120). Every Romanian had the right and obligation to work. As the state supported full employment, there was no need for an unemployment insurance. Employment was also closely connected to the 'social security system'. Everyone who was working received benefits, such as housing, free health care, child allowances or holiday tickets. "Refusing to work was even defined as "social parasitism" and a delinquency that could give a prison sentence" (Haibach 2001:40).

The existing 'social problems' were eliminated from the public sphere. Examples are the orphans, disabled or unwanted children, who had been institutionalised. Another group, who was banished, were the Roma. Those not deported to forced labour camps or imprisoned were left on their own, removed from the public sphere and sank, to an even greater extent than the majority of people into misery (Wagner 1991:99).

Higher education was also highly politicised, consequently under communism university departments in social science were closed down. This policy was consistent with the idea that there did not exist any major social problems in society, which is the reason for the current lack of social policy experts and social workers in Romania (Haibach 2001:40).

As a consequence to the non-existence of any formal social welfare, the Romanians compartmentalised their lives into two types of social networks: Their close confidants (family members, members of the same ethnic group or true friends) and a 'provision network' encompassing acquaintances who helped on a mutual basis in coping with the difficulties of daily life (Uslaner/Badescu 2003:222). However, all the activities had to take place in the underground. Open social movements or action were oppressed and its leaders eliminated by the infamous secret service. Any form of self-organisation was seen as a danger for the communist regime that proclaimed to care for its people. Romanians had to be creative

in developing informal adaptive postures in order to maintain private zones unofficial (Jowitt 1992:80).

The dramatic political changes in 1989 gave hope for changes, also regarding social work and social policies, especially after the horrific extent of social problems gradually came to light.

However, the intention of the "new democratic elite" was not necessarily to build up a democracy for the benefits of the Romanian population, but to restore their privileges. They viewed democracy merely as a means to power, rather than an end (Hall 2002:181). The revolution was stolen from the people with their hope for change. From the very beginning, the Romanian democracy was undermined, the legitimacy of the ruling power questionable, all of which had an irreversible impact on the further development of Romanian democracy, economy and society, as well as the social welfare system.

Therefore the short period of euphoria was replaced with disappointment as the new government was unable or uninterested to implement necessary reforms. The already devastated economy shrank by more than 30% between 1987-1992 (Treptow 1997:569). Moreover, the transition from planned economy to market economy has meant high social costs for large sections of the population and increased inequality and poverty, mostly as result of the end of full-employment. The following governments were also not able to implement more thoroughgoing structural reforms (Haibach 2001:41).

Although the process of transition in Romania cannot be described as successful, there were few changes also regarding social welfare. An unemployment pay policy was introduced and the pension system reformed (for more details see ibid. 2001:42-44). However, these policies reflect again the already existing inequality among the Romanian people.

Despite these changes the Romanian social welfare system is far from meeting the needs of the population. Today still 44,5% Romanians live below the poverty line. Therefore, many young people emigrate to the West. This trend reflects the decay of the informal social networks towards a more individualised society; consequently especially the elderly people are isolated and are struggling to survive every day.

As the Romanian state is unable to provide sufficiently for its people, due to its disastrous economic and financial situation, a private social system, strongly depending on western money, was established throughout the years. Basic social services are offered by many NGOs, churches or individuals through grants awarded by the European Union, World Bank or other global and national organisations, as well as private donations. Thus many Western social workers came to Romania and strongly impacted the development of social work and social services in Romania.

Initially the western involvement mostly consisted of humanitarian aid, whereas currently western social workers are more and more involved in trainings, community development, and prevention as well as child care and child protection activities.

Comparing to the social and economic misery the majority of Romanians are living in, the western aid and involvement seems to be essential and beneficial for the people and the country. On the first glance this aid seems to be indeed a way to alleviate human misery. But a deeper insight shows a different picture encompassing dependencies and frustration. The fine line between empowerment and disempowerment was crossed many times and the urgently needed western support has turned into a dilemma, as it addresses often only the symptoms and does not effect social change in the entire Romanian society.

The fine line between empowerment and disempowerment is certainly varying from situation to situation and from individual to individual. However, two aspects can be defined, that are substantially contributing to the fact that the impact of international social work in Romania is perceived in quite a number of cases as disempowering. The first aspect is the organisation of Western social work in form of projects. This structural issue is closely connected with the

disempowering attitude and behaviour of western social workers. Within the next chapters the dilemma posed by the structure of project and of private social service agencies will be discussed, followed by the experiences of Romanian staff with Western social workers in an international NGO.

2. The Structure of Projects of International Social Work in Romania

The private sector of social work in Romania is mainly funded by western grants. These grants refer only to specific projects over a limited period of time. Such a 'world of projects' is artificially created and has its own international sphere, with its own language and etiquette and pool of Western experts. Only a privileged group of local people, who act according to this etiquette, have been granted access to this world. The privileges, such as high-paid jobs, power or prestige are guarded by both groups (Sampson 1996:128).

Behind this 'world of projects' lies a considerable amount of magic or mystical thinking and expectations (ibid. 124). Projects often have a running time of at the most two to three years. Projects should be sustainable and continue after the funding period, hence after the transferring resources, training the staff and setting up the office. However, as practice proves, activities often stop after the money runs out, due to lack of governmental support and/or private sponsorship.

In Romania, the overall NGO Sustainability score is only 3.8[3] and from 30 000 NGOs registered, less than 10% are active, moreover 90% are located in urban areas (USAID 2003). Through technical and social assistance an elite of people is created, who are able to play the 'world of projects' game, but are not mature enough to be able to respond to the changing social, political and economic environment (Borghoff 2002).

Most NGOs are dependent on foreign funds, which leads them frequently to orient and design their programmes according to grant guidelines and not in congruence with the needs and interest of the people or their mission statement.

In grant guidelines, the idea of how projects should look like, of how NGOs should operate and of who they are is deduced from Western models. However, the entire context of Romanian society differs, as problems which in the West are resolved by associations, are mainly resolved in families, informal networks and ethnic groups. But families and informal groups are not considered in the grant guidelines of Western donors (Sampson 1996:125). In this way, the participation of the majority of people is excluded, as the traditional structures are scarcely included in any programme (Sampson 2002).

Another dilemma of the 'world of projects' is that there a many projects spread here and there. Some have certainly a positive impact on the local communities and the destiny of individuals. However, they do not necessary promote social change considering the Romanian society as a whole. As the survival of NGOs depends on grants, there is strong competition among NGOs to receive money, which interferes and destroys networking and NGO collaboration. This trend is counterproductive for Romania as it is already a much divided country.

The structure of projects of international social work certainly helps to meet symptoms and alleviate in many cases the immediate human misery. However, such a structure hardly touches the root causes and existing inequalities. The projects do hardly start with the people themselves, but are conditioned by Western grant guidelines, as if economic and social change can be imported within two or three years. Moreover, these projects are mostly not

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[3] The NGO Sustainability evaluation uses a seven-point scale with 7 indicating a poor level of development and 1 indicating a very advanced NGO sector. The score of 3.8 means that the NGO sector's sustainability is minimally affected by practices/policies in this area. A stagnant economy, a passive government a disinterested media, or a community of good-willed but inexperienced activists may hamper progress (USAID 2003).

designed for a long-term, sustainable social change affecting the Romanian society as a whole.

3. The Experience of Romanian Staff Regarding Western Social Workers

The structural dilemma of how the private social service sector is organised and dependent on western aid is reinforced by the equivocal relations between Romanians and Western social workers.

The obvious feeling of disempowerment of Romanian staff in an international NGO with many Western social workers was the reason to undertake a research project in order to identify the problems and ways to create an atmosphere of empowerment. This research project encompassed different research steps, such as naturalistic observation, qualitative interviews and group discussion.

The NGO, which is taken as a case study, was founded by the current executive director, who is a British Social Worker. The NGO is mainly dependent on western financial support. Besides the American director of the social services and other Western volunteers, mainly social workers or nurses, approximately 23 full-time Romanians, who are in leadership for different departments, are employed. This NGO is a social service agency, but is also involved in community development, intercultural exchange and education.

The answers to the qualitative interviews indicate a common tendency: on the one hand the emphasis and appreciation of the Western involvement and on the other hand the frustration and negative feelings about being subject to Western imposition. It is a very sensitive issue and the results reveal that Western social workers are constantly in danger to cross the fine line between empowerment and disempowerment.

The interviewees experience the intercultural exchange with Western social workers as very enriching. They appreciate the mutual learning process and the possibility of widening one's own horizon. In many ways they perceive Western involvement as providing both an opportunity to change communist mentality and as a model for doing so. Romanian staff perceives the transfer of knowledge, training and education as very beneficial and much needed, as it creates self-confidence and awareness of, for example, human rights.

Despite this clearly positive illustration of the interaction between Western social workers and Romanian staff, the reverse side of this interaction, which poses the dilemma, is also apparent through the experiences of Romanian staff.

The dilemma of Western involvement was mentioned by some interviewees directly, that 'there is a need to maintain traditions to find our identity, but not if these traditions kill growth' or 'Western involvement takes away our responsibility to do it ourselves'.

Expressions like 'the Western social workers impose their values, culture, mentality and rules on Romanians', are frequently found. Many Romanians feel as though they are being subjected of Westernisation, as all things are done in Western fashion. Moreover, many attribute Western arrogance as well as superiority to the social workers. Some Romanians criticise the fact that Westerners come only for a short time, behave as if they know everything and take over. Another negative experience mentioned is that Western Social Workers tell Romanians what to do, despite their lack of local knowledge, as they do not understand that in Romania things work differently. As a result some projects are bound to fail, as they are too Western. In this context many claimed that Western opinions are seen as more important than Romanian views, which often results in decisions being made without consulting a Romanian opinion. They also object to a lack of communication. Moreover, some interviewees feel compared to western norms and measured by Western standards. They also feel that Westerners even attempt to explain Romanian identity, desires and mentality despite the fact that they are not Romanian and have not had the same historical experience. These issues are experienced as analogous to or as a result of cultural-insensitivity. In every

interview it was mentioned that Western social workers do not respect Romanian culture and values. Beyond that the stereotypes, such as 'Romanians are only after money', are poor or objects of pity, are experienced as hurtful and negative. The dependency on Western funds was also critically discussed.

The experience of Romanian staff indicates that in many situations the Romanians feel disempowered. The initial positive intention of Western Social Workers to promote social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance their well-being, turns into a dilemma. The negative consequences of such a dilemma can result in powerlessness, frustration but also in distrust in the 'experts', the withdrawal of local people and the failure of the project. Moreover it can shatter or even destroy confidence in traditional practices (Reusse 1999:94).

However the interviews show that the feeling of frustration and negativity do not necessarily refer to what the Western social workers objectively do, most of that is seen as beneficial, but they refer to more intangible issues, such as attitudes and (non-verbal) behaviour. This cannot be attributed to a specific situation but accompanies the daily interaction. The dilemma is always present and disturbs the possibilities to make the most benefits of the Western technical knowledge and the insight of the Romanian staff. In the next chapter the experiences of Romanian staff are addressed with regard to turning disempowering tendencies of Western social workers into empowerment.

4. From Disempowerment to Empowerment

This research project clearly illustrates that in practice Western social workers constantly cross the fine line between empowerment and disempowerment. But how can this situation be addressed? How can the interaction between the Romanian staff and the Western social workers be improved and be empowering for the Romanian staff?

The following discussion does not aim to provide a ready-made solution to the above-described situation, but does aim to raise some questions and challenge Western social workers in developing countries.

The first issue to discuss is Western leadership and decision-making power. Strong Western leadership in the first place might be welcome, because it is what Romanians are used to. At first glance it is easier, for them, as they do not have to take on responsibility. For Western social workers it is also more efficient, because it is guaranteed that the work will be done, as anticipated. But on the background of history and past experience, a strong and determined leadership can have unintended side effects. Throughout history for Romanians it was a survival strategy to agree officially with authorities and unofficially develop one's own agenda. Leadership has been a very sensitive issue in the Romanian past and has to be dealt with special care, particularly as Westerners are often glorified and the West is seen as something to strive for.

Additionally, not only do past experiences play an important role but also the culture in itself, in particular the internal culture[4], the unconscious beliefs, thought patterns, values, and myths that affect everything which is done and seen (Law 1993:4-5). Culture cannot be entirely explained, nor is there a need to understand it; the challenge is to accept culture without necessarily agreeing with or explaining it with our thinking patterns. According to Romanians' experience exactly this is done by some Western social workers.

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[4] Eric Law has divided culture in two parts: external and internal culture. "External culture is the conscious part of culture. It is the part that we can see, taste, and hear. It consists of acknowledged beliefs and values. It is explicitly learned and can be easily changed. However, this constitutes only a small part of our culture. The major part is the internal part, which consists of the unconscious beliefs, thought patterns, values, and myths that affect everything we do and see. It is implicitly learned and hard to change" (Law 1993:4-5)

Living and working in Romania, Western social workers should be aware of the possibility that the same event may be perceived very differently by two culturally different individuals because the two different internal cultures highlight different parts of the same incident (ibid. 7). Another aspect concerning leadership is the way in which people perceive power. 'Western culture' has many dominating attributes; Hofstede's (1984) study relating to international differences in work-related values has revealed that most Western countries have a low power distance, whereas Romania is more likely to be a country with a high power distance[5]. As a result, Westerners 'naturally' take over wherever they are, feeling they have the power and right to change things. This phenomenon presents many challenges in the attempt to empower Romanians as leaders, because a person who perceives himself or herself to be powerless, which most Romanians do, would accept this injustice as a part of life that a powerless person endures.

The repeating comments by Romanians, that their opinions are not taken seriously, that they are not consulted or that they have discussed issues many times and nothing has changed, suggests, that the relationship to Western leadership is impacted by the dilemma, where the fine line between empowerment and disempowerment is crossed.

In order to deal with this dilemma Westerner should not ask, at the first place, whether these comments are caused by subjective or objective perception, the fact is that it is experienced as such. This does not imply that everything the Romanian staff demands should be implemented or that Westerners should resign from leadership and watch a NGO sink into chaos. However, the opportunity and responsibility Western social workers have, is to take the Romanian perception seriously and to create total transparency in the process of decision-making, no matter how time-consuming this may be. The staff needs to feel that their voice is heard and considered. They have to identify the problems of their country and the starting points of any intervention.

Accountability and transparency to ordinary people is widely lacking in Romanian economic, political and religious leadership. As there are not many role models in Romanian history, Western social workers have to be aware of their responsibility, as the Romanian staff critically observes them.

This leads directly to the second issue to discuss, the issue of empathy. The fact that the Romanian staff often cannot attribute Western imposition to any specific action, but repeatedly mention Western arrogance, superiority, intolerance or cultural insensitivity, point to the conclusion that one of the crucial causes for the dilemma experienced by the Romanian staff, is the lack of empathy: empathy in the sense of laying "aside the views and values you hold for yourself in order to enter another world without prejudice" (Rogers in Wispé 1987:29). Empathy, as in the attempt to interpret daily life and decisions through the eyes of Romanian staff, independently of any agreement with or approval of these perspectives. Moreover, empathy is directly connected with other skills such as intercultural competence and the tolerance of ambiguity, which are not strongly enough developed by many Western social workers.

There is generally a deep appreciation of the Western social workers, but reading between the lines, one becomes aware of a silent request: the request that the Western social workers be interested in them, as people, in their country and culture, in who they are without prejudice and without comparison with the West.

Moreover, it seems that Westerners do not know what Romanians need. However, it also seems that Romanians do not completely know what they need either. But Western social workers are not imprisoned by past experiences, thus can help Romanians identifying their

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[5] For full description of High Power and Low Power Distance culture, see in Hofstede (1984), pp. 65-109.

needs and implement their aspirations. Furthermore, they can be an encouragement and give Romanians hope for their own future. All this, however, is far removed from telling Romanian staff what to do and what to change. Therefore empathy can be empowering, as a change of perspective takes place. Empathic leadership or teamwork is more likely to develop sensitivity to what can be expected and to lessen the discrepancy and frustration of being compared to Western standards and expectations.

In conclusion, Western social workers have to be become more aware that their ideas and attitude might be incompatible with the Romanian culture and that their well-intended involvement might be disempowering for the Romanians.

5. Conclusion

The governments of many developing countries can or do not sufficiently provide social services for its people. This leads to the fact, that many Western social workers get involved in these countries. Romania is one example. Although this research was undertaken in one specific NGO and refers to the Romanian context, the results reflect a very common picture of Western social workers in developing countries.

The reality proves that the well-intended action of Western social workers has disempowering side effects, as the ideas and attitude of Westerners often reflect a western, academic and rationalistic education, which are applied on very unwestern environment, thus cause many conflicts.

The structure of projects and its special conditions add to frustration and powerlessness on parts of the Romanians. Social work organised in projects does not necessarily meet the needs of Romania that is in need for social change affecting the entire society. Empowerment can only take place, when the Romanian people and their culture are taken as a starting point for any Western involvement and not the concepts imported from the West. This requires that a Western social worker shows to a high degree empathy and intercultural competence.

Once Western social workers have realised that not Western approaches change the situation of Romania, but only empowered Romanians themselves, the danger to cross the fine line between empowerment and disempowerment decreases.

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