

Quality Social Services: a key to Ensure Social Rights

Report

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Transforma Brxl, Brussels, Belgium

On November 20th, EPR held a mini-conference in Brussels, Belgium with the goals of discussing success factors and addressing challenges in providing quality services with a focus on the European Pillar of Social Rights. The conference included presentations and panel discussion between experts as well as workshops which gave opportunities to learn about ways to improve the quality of services.

The event was kicked off by Laura Jones, EPR Secretary General, who welcomed all the participants and introduced EPR. Laura Jones' presentation then covered trends and developments in quality service provision. She gave an overview of the European Semester, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the contents of the conference. She explained that quality has been important to EPR since its beginning and expressed a desire to engage with the European Commission and service providers on these European initiatives.

She started with a reference to three principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights: equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. Social services are essential for a successful implementation of the Pillar. She explained that there have been many important and positive changes in service provision across Europe, but many challenges remain. Public procurement is often not carried out in a way that ensures quality service provision is contracted, and EPR with partners are raising awareness of this topic. EU rules from 2014 put greater emphasis on the quality of social services. However, some contracts are still awarded based on cost. Thus there remains a lack of understanding of the social sector, particularly on quality and among service providers there is sometimes a low capacity to compete for contracts.

The event was organised to bring together stakeholders to discuss the future of quality in social services. The reasons behind why participants were attending is as follows: to discuss quality, learn more about EQUASS, learn more about quality social services, good practices, share experiences and learn from good practices from other organisations.



The EQUASS perspective on quality Michael Crowley, EQUASS Business Management and Quality Expert, noted that while it is apparent that the European Pillar on Social Rights is well-known in Brussels, it is not as well known outside. He then presented the EQUASS system to the audience. EQUASS shares principles with the Pillar including; leadership, Rights, Ethics, Partnership, Participation, Person Centred Approach and Continuous Improvement. As such, it can be used to help organisations provide services that are compatible with the principles in the pillar, and particularly help them ensure quality services, by going through a certification

process. EQUASS offers two comprehensive recognition programmes from quality assurance to excellence in social services, provides consultancy, training and awareness-raising.

In the principle of rights, one element is to ensure that all users are aware of their rights. He noted that organisations struggle with resources which is why partnerships and efficient resource allocation (doing more with less) may be needed, in addition to stable government support. To achieve efficient resource allocation, it is imperative to identify needs and focus resources on those needs. Users and staff should engage with and be involved in the development and delivery of services – co-production is an approach to ensure this. EQUASS introduced a result orientation to ensure that service providers measure their results and ensure they create positive benefits/outcomes/impact for the users.

A key component of EQUASS is its scoring system which helps organisations improve and strive for better scores, and two progress reports provided between certifications encourage organisations to keep improving and getting feedback. Services need be able to adjust to the needs and wishes of users and their funding must allow it. This was followed by a definition of quality: something should be fit for purpose, deliver what it is expected to deliver.

Group discussions/feedback:

Questions were posed about recognising the trends that had been presented. Representatives from Portugal and Slovenia agreed that there had been increased discussions about social rights in their home countries. When asked about what main challenges in providing services that support social rights, the Greek representative referenced the needs of the elderly not being met, the Portuguese one talked about the sustainability of funding and the Slovenian one identified issues with entering the open market,



Recommendations:

- A network of public authorities to increase employment levels for PWD.
- Including PWD in decision making in companies.
- Governments should support organisations to go through processes, such as certification, that helps them improve their services and support users' rights
- Public authorities must invest in quality services, not just services
- Services need be able to adjust to the needs and wishes of users and their funding must allow it.

EU activities addressing quality in social services and impact on service providers Monika Chaba, European Commission, DG Employment and Social Affairs, addressed poverty, social exclusion and the key role services for PWD have on these in her presentation. She updated the audience on key latest EU policy updates, pointing out the decision of the new European Commission to continue to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. To do so, Chaba confirmed the Commission will put in place an action plan in the next year to ensure Member States have guidance but also deliver in the twenty principles of the Pillar.

She stressed Member States and organisations are calling for more flexibility and support from the EU institutions. And emphasized an ongoing initiative to establish a task force on equality and mainstream employability together with concrete actions to improve childcare.

It was stated that the “Juncker plan” – the European Fund for Strategic Investments programme designed to bring in private investment to boost EU economies was not inclusive enough, didn’t address social infrastructure sufficiently, and that there will be a new plan, InvestEU which will address this deficit. This is all being done with the help of NGOs as that is where such expertise can be found. The European Semester Country-specific Recommendations to Member States will keep focusing on what can be improved in the social services sector and will remain focused on the sustainability of funding and empowerment. She called for a focus on a person centred approach as opposed to mainstreaming.

Panel discussion:

Speakers: Gunta Anca (European Disability Forum), Alfonso Montero (European Social Network), Laura Jones (EPR, EQUASS), Heather Roy (Eurodiaconia).

The discussion was started by Laura Jones who asked the speakers about their views on the main challenges for social rights. Alfonso Montero of the ESN gave a brief outline of his organisation followed by an emphasis on the need for workplace diversity in confronting issues surrounding discrimination against people with disabilities. He noted that quality is often seen only from a technical perspective, especially in long-term care, such as the size of a room, not from an outcome or quality of life perspective. Inspection is a challenge for public authorities. How can we ensure that quality regulation isn’t a tick box exercise?

Staff need more support as they transition to user-oriented, personalised co-produced services; different skills are needed. Recruitment and retention remain key challenges which impact on quality services.

Heather Roy of Eurodiaconia stated the quality is important in ensuring the dignity and empowerment of the services user. Luk Zelderloo from the audience commented on the “Uberisation” of social services where users can order a service to be delivered promptly via a platform. Is this true personalisation? It is definitely facilitating choice in some way. How can quality be ensured of such services? Heather Roy criticised this trend. The lack of service coordination or integration is also a challenge to quality service provision and social rights.

Meanwhile Gunta Anca of the EDF referenced the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and how it emphasises that social services should be more personalised; and the importance of transitioning from institutionalised care to community-based services and the that the user remains in control of their rehabilitation. Unfortunately, sometimes funding doesn’t finance personal assistance. She stressed the need to involve service user organisations in policy developments for social services, that co-production should be applied in policy, not just service provision.

There is a need to identify measures that have a proven track record of success, such as supported employment, and to find the funding to cover this. The European Commission should initiate actions to support the implementation of the European Voluntary Quality Framework for Social Services.

The panel concluded that quality is a journey for a service provider, a journey of continuous improvement. Laura Jones remarked that this is the approach of the EQUASS system.

Summary of recommendations:

- Quality regulation must go beyond compliance and look at quality beyond technical requirements
- Staff need more support as they transition to user-oriented, personalised co-produced services; different skills are needed.
- Funding should be available for personal assistance

- co-production should be applied in policy, not just service provision.
- identify measures that have a proven track record of success and to ensure the funding to cover them
- The European Commission should initiate actions to support the implementation of the European Voluntary Quality Framework for Social Services and support a non-technical understanding of quality
- Investigate the impact of digitalisation, uberisation, A.I on quality social services
- Legislation needs to support flexible services that can adapt to meet new or changed needs and expectations

Workshop – A human rights-based approach for quality service provision

Amets Schwend, Andalusian School of Public Health, began with a discussion of the Be Right project. The objectives of the project are to reduce stigma of mental illnesses and generate knowledge among service providers and users on the human rights of people with mental health issues. As such, Be RIGHT aimed at shifting the medical model still in use regarding people with mental health issues towards a rights-based approach. This approach would allow to empower users as right holders and would help professionals in the mental health sector to deliver services taking into account the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).



The project uses a co-production methodology in which mental health patients participated in all steps of the project. This helps deconstruct power asymmetries between the patient and service provider. The workshop covered case scenarios in which attendants were encouraged to find whether human rights were being violated. The project is comprised of three modules: Stigma, discrimination and human rights in mental health (Module 1), Rights violations in mental health (Module 2), Measures and mechanisms for rights protection in the mental health sector (Module 3). These modules are grounded in co-production and human rights.

The impact the project had was to help its users in identifying when social rights are being violated and gave the opportunity for them to re-think situations and present solutions from a rights based perspective. The audience members were given a trial of this project by being presented with fictional case scenarios where they had to identify where social rights have been infringed upon.

The training developed under the Be RIGHT project and a board game addressing rights is publicly available and accessible through the website project. Making such complex information from a theoretical background to a practical level so as to ensure professionals are knowledgeable of the CRPD and how they can better put it in practice was certainly challenging for all project partners. However, the project proved a successful experience with a greatly valued outcome. Success factors included a fulfilment of online activities and completion of questionnaires for self-assessment, teaching quality and co-production.

For more information on the project, see [here](#).



Telma Canário and Sonia Laginhas, Irmãs Hospitaleiras, introduced the LETITBE project which is aimed at improving learning and autonomy for PWD. It makes use of the Mefacityta digital program on phones and tablets to help users learn how to perform tasks. The app is distinct for giving its users a large amount of freedom in customising various parts of it including voice input and changing the interface. For example, the app allows users to customise instructions such as it being read in their own voices. Thus following

instructions such as baking a cake or arranging one's own medication becomes a game.

A major impact of the app is following the trend of digitalisation by giving users the means to gain transferable skills while engaging in enjoyable mechanics. Although there is a significant challenge surrounding translating the app into different languages and marketing the app outside Portugal, a video introducing the project in Ireland showed LETITBE's growing presence across Europe.

For more information on the app, see [here](#).

Workshop – Impact of services on rights, participation, social inclusion, quality of life.

Valentina Breclj, University Rehabilitation Institute, Republic of Slovenia, introduced her Institute's services to PWD in training and employment. An important system supporting their services is called Service Impacts on Quality of Life (QoL), developed by EPR and its members to measure the impact of services on perceived QoL and outcomes for people with disabilities. It includes a logical modelling procedure, a questionnaire for service users and benchmarking process for participating organisations to measure the data. The system is based the Shalock model which measures QoL through social inclusion, personal development and wellbeing.

To measure the quality of vocational rehabilitation services (VR) on the national level in Slovenia, the Quality of Life Impact of Services Questionnaire (QOLIS) was given to participants in their respective programmes. Benchmarking took place between the services provided in URI's Ljubljana and Maribor centres. A total of 309 service users participated in this questionnaire in 2018.

In terms of results, it was found that QoL improved among people who were employed after receiving VR while those with long-term unemployment had a lower QoL compared to other groups. It was also noted that PWD who became disabled in adulthood and those with less work experience in general had better QoL overall. This means that the biggest danger to QoL of PWD was long-term unemployment as this demotivated them from developing transferable skills to attain employment in the future. She emphasised that the principle of accessibility must be taken into account in order to improve the quality of social services.

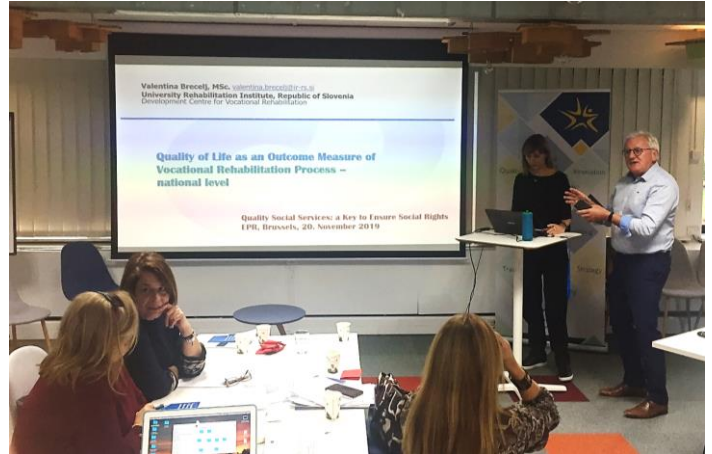
A major force behind QOLIS is to find dangers such as these and thus measures must be taken to ensure that no one is out of work for long periods of time. The presentation concluded with a call to expand the reach of VR treatments by digitalising QOLIS so that it reaches a greater amount of people outside Slovenia. EPR will apply for project funding to develop the model

For more information on QOLIS, please see [here](#).

Michael Crowley further explained the EQUASS concept of quality of life.

Criteria 32 states “The social service provider has a clear concept of Quality of Life for Person Served and implements activities, which are based on a needs assessment of the person served, with the aim of improving their quality of life.”

Indicators for this are: The social service provider has defined and implemented the concept of Quality of Life for persons served. The social service provider has tangible results of the activities that improve the quality of life of person served. Using the QOLIS model can support the achievement of this criteria.



Closing remarks:

In the closing plenary, Laura Jones concluded the mini-conference by mentioning some of the key themes: Real co-production and empowerment, flexible services and funding, quality regulation moving beyond compliance, implementation of the EVAF, raising awareness of rights, digitalisation/uberisation.

She closed by thanking the presenters and audience members for their participation.



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