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Social work and social policy in Südtirol – Alto Adige, Italy
The socio-political dimension of social work in the public social services sector in Südtirol – Alto Adige

The presentation will give a brief overview of the results of a research project in the local context of the public social services sector, which was undertaken in the context of a master thesis in social work at the University of Trento (in June 2008).

The central hypothesis of the thesis is that in the present stage of reforms with paradigmatic significance (with quite uncertain outcomes) in all welfare systems, social work has to remind itself of its socio-political dimension and to analyze critically its own involvement with social policy development. This is necessary for two main reasons, on the one hand to ensure the development of an up-to-date professional identity of social work and on the other one to enable social work to participate actively in the local definition and implementation of social policy reforms.

The work is based on a broad theoretical discussion, which shows that social work has always been intertwined with the sphere of social policy and that neglecting this dimension means a misrepresentation of professional autonomy. According to such a position, the socio-historical analysis of the development of social work as a profession and discipline offers a solid basis for understanding current challenges and for dealing with them in concrete practice.

Even if the outcomes of social policy reforms in the different welfare systems are still quite uncertain, it is possible to identify a few main phenomena which characterize reform processes in their different contexts. The variety of measures resulting from reform policies show the fundamental ambivalence of these social policy reforms which therefore depend in their effects on the precise direction achieved in the implementation which can then result in positive or negative outcomes.

On the basis of these theoretical considerations a small scale research project was realized in two public social service agencies in two localities (called “Bezirksgemeinschaften”) in Südtirol – Alto Adige. Starting from the premise that social work can and has a specific contribution to make to the development and implementation of social policy measures, the aim of the research project was to identify the position taken by social workers, who are working at the service frontline and are in immediate contact with service users. For this aim all the social workers of the two public agencies

were interviewed. The interviews dealt with concrete changes in the daily work reality as well as with the chances and risks resulting from the main tendencies in social policy development and their challenges for professional social work. The discussion of the different aspects in the interviews pointed out the central importance of the socio-political dimension of social work and the opportunities for realizing this dimension of social work's professional mandate in the practice reality of public social services.