

SOCIAL WORK IN ROMANIAN RURAL COMMUNITIES: AN INSIDE PERSPECTIVE FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Cristina FALUDI
Nicoleta NEAMȚU

Abstract

The social work profession was revived in Romania in 1994, when the first generation of university graduates went to the field. However, only in 2011, when the Law no. 292 of Social Work was issued, the framework for the activity of social workers in the rural communities was settled. Although the legislation provided a proper context for the unfolding of a meaningful social work in rural settings, the labor market was far from being able to absorb the great number of needed professionals. On the one hand, the paper intends to present the barriers that marked the beginning of social work in the Romanian rural space. On the other hand, the paper briefly describes the particularities and the opportunities for social work in the rural areas. Also, through the voice of professionals, the main social problems in the countryside are exposed and some possible interventions aiming at the improvement of the life conditions among the villagers are proposed. The study is based on 43 qualitative interviews carried out in 2016-2020 with professionals employed as social services workers by commune or village local councils. The collected data were explored and interpreted using thematic analysis. One conclusion is that the field is dynamic and in need of substantial improvement.

Keywords: social work, qualitative study, Romania, rural communities.

Cristina FALUDI

Assistant professor, Ph.D., M.S.W., B.S.W., Social Work Department, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Tel.: 004-0264-424.674
E-mail: cristina.faludi@ubbcluj.ro

Nicoleta NEAMȚU

Associate professor, Ph.D., M.S.W., B.S.W., Social Work Department, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Tel.: 004-0264-424.674
E-mail: nicoleta.neamtu@ubbcluj.ro

1. Background

1.1. Romanian rural areas and their particularities

In Romania, 46.3% of the population is living in rural areas (Romanian Statistical Yearbook, 2018). However, the rural communities are far behind the urban ones in terms of economic and social development. Constantly, the rural areas have faced multiple and interconnected challenges in the fields of education, health, social inclusion, basic infrastructure, diversification of employment, outward migration, and population ageing (European Commission [EC], 2016).

Romania has 2,861 communes including 12,957 villages. The majority of the communes and villages face the same challenges: they have a small size, have a low level of administrative authority, maintain weak cooperation across counties and are not capable of building projects to integrate rural and urban communities. Rural areas are heterogeneous, with great differences between villages located in the proximity of big urban areas and remote villages and between communes far from and close to European roads. The majority of communes rely heavily on central funding due to low levels of economic development. Only for 135 communes the local revenues represented more than 50% of the budget (EC, 2016).

Agriculture, the prevailing occupation in rural areas, represents 29% of total employment in Romania, but contributes with only 5% to the GDP. The rural workforce is predominantly involved in subsistence or semi-subsistence agriculture, involving informal or non-remunerated family work. On long term, employment in subsistence agriculture has been associated with low productivity and poverty (Chirică and Teșliuc, 1999; EC, 2016). The prevalence of seasonal farming activities is maintaining the phenomenon of underemployment (Jigău *et al.*, 2002, p. 16). Consequently, 55% of rural residents were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared to 28% of city residents (EC, 2016).

In Romania, the population employed in agriculture is ageing¹. In 2011, the skilled workforce in agriculture consisted of 54.5% people aged 55 years and older, and only 30.6% were young people aged 15-24 years.

The percentage of young people not involved in employment, education or training, and of those dropping out of school is high among the rural population. Most of the secondary and higher education institutions are situated in urban areas, hampering the access of pupils from the rural areas because of distance, time and financial costs issues. In 2013, only 5% of the rural young people aged 14-24 graduated from high school compared with 20% of their urban counterparts (EC, 2016).

Pupils from rural areas have higher enrolment rates in vocational education and training (VET) compared to those from urban areas. On the one hand, the scarcity of specialized agricultural high schools limits the level of skills in the sector (EC, 2016).

¹ According to the National Strategic Framework for the Sustainable Development of the Agro-food Sector and the Rural Space 2014-2020.

On the other hand, there is a conflict between the new opportunities to get employed in industry versus the opportunity to use the vocational skills in the agricultural sector. Thus, a significant part of the young force work in rural areas do not want to return to their own farms and use their acquired skills, deciding rather on getting a job and a salary, and this mentality is unlikely to disappear in the near future (Jigău *et al.*, 2002, p. 18). The rural areas have provided few attractive employment alternatives to agriculture so far (Chirică and Teșliuc, 1999).

In 2014, 55.3% of children from families entitled to child rearing benefit or back-to-work bonus lived in rural areas. Furthermore, over 80% of children from families which qualified to benefit from family allowance were located in rural areas (Ministry of Labor, Family, Social Protection and Elderly, 2014).

In rural areas there is limited access to healthcare due to cost, distance or waiting times. In 2014, health insurance coverage was lower in rural areas compared to urban areas (76% versus 95%, respectively). There still exist large health inequalities between rural and urban areas in terms of infant mortality rate, life expectancy and vaccination rates for children (EC, 2016).

1.2. Rural social work as described in the literature

The basic aim of social workers is to assist, support and enable those affected by poverty, disadvantages and who suffer from the negative effects of social inequalities. They work effectively in a variety of multi-disciplinary contexts and for them, the core professional values, including human rights and social justice, are more important than organizational structures. The functions of social work include social integration and dealing with failures of policy in the areas of health, education or crime (Asquith, Clark and Waterhouse, 2005).

During the last three decades, there has been an active debate in the literature about the specific characteristics of rural social work (RSW). There is still not a widely accepted definition of RSW; however, there is a consensus that RSW is not a distinct field of practice (Daley, 2010); instead, it ‘encompasses a blended type of intervention’, as rurality implies a blended type of community (Mellow, 2005). RSW is based on ‘community-oriented practice’ (Riebschleger, 2007). At the same time, when addressing problems at all levels of human systems – individuals, families and groups, organizations and the community itself – RSW implements ‘a generalist model of practice’, embedded in the ‘person-in-environment perspective’ (Daley, 2010).

In the rural settings, social workers face a severe scarcity of human and financial resources (Turbett, 2004). Rural poverty is described by social workers as ‘common and extreme’ (Miller and Conway, 2002 *apud* Riebschleger, 2007). ‘Social exclusion, ill health and limited labor market opportunities’ are common issues for all European countries with a large proportion of population living in rural areas. ‘The activity of the rural social workers is made more difficult’ by the geographical distance of the remote villages from the big cities, by the weak development of the means of access

and communication in some villages (Asquith, Clark and Waterhouse, 2005), and by the lack of social services for the most vulnerable categories of inhabitants.

There are two valuable assets which supplement the scarcity of social services in rural areas. Firstly, when the social worker is a resident of the local community, he/she is 'known, trusted by the village, contactable, and possibly the only social welfare personnel the citizens usually see' (Halloran and Calderón, 2005, p. 5). Secondly, in a village, those in need still rely on relatives or neighbors. However, the quality of help these two types of resources provide could be jeopardized by the fact that the informal providers, mostly women, are not adequately protected, resourced and supported (Pillinger, 2001), and by the fact that, as a community member, the social worker is exposed to dual relations and faces difficulties to maintain confidentiality (Daley and Hickman, 2011).

Regarding Romania, many communes have not organized yet their social work compartments, the specialized structures which are supposed to manage and provide the social work benefits and the social services to the local rural communities are under the authority of public administration (Teșliuc, Grigoraș and Stănculescu, 2015). Furthermore, in a large number of communes, where a social work department exists, it is not accredited as a public provider of social services and it does not have a valid license for the social services offered. One of the criteria to receive accreditation as a social service provider is to prove the employment of at least one qualified social worker, who graduated with a Bachelor's degree in social work or an employee with graduate studies in social services management (Law no. 197/2012 regarding Quality Assurance in the Domain of Social Services). The main priority of all rural communities from Romania is to employ a professional social worker, but in many cases they employ only a civil servant with social work duties or a social caretaker, and not a qualified social worker.

1.3. Legal and organizational context of rural social work in Romania

The elimination of social work during the totalitarian regime period and the revival of this field only after the change of regime in 1989, gives social work the character of a relatively young profession in the democratic Romania (Lazăr, 2015).

The framework legislation for the actual social work system in Romania is provided mainly by the Social Work Law no. 292/2011 and by the O.G. no. 68/2003 regarding Social Services, which include the framework of the activity of social workers in the rural communities and the organization and functioning of different types of social services all over the country. These regulations include a requirement for local public administration to provide social work public services (SWPS). Until now, the villages' Local Councils, which work under the authority of the local public administration, were not able to absorb the great number of professionals much needed in the field of social work. Even though there were some national programs, funded by the central government, to encourage the development of SWPS in rural areas with qualified social workers, like the Program of National Interest called 'Capacity Development of

SWPS from Administrative Territorial Units', started in 2018, very few rural communities have applied for funding to use these opportunities. This program is covering the salary payment for a qualified social worker employed by the public administration in the rural communities until 2021 (as part of the minimum standard to offer community social work services). In Romania, social work is included as part of the minimum package of public services needed and it is required to be delivered at each administrative-territorial level/unit (ATU), in both urban and rural areas.

1.4. The objectives of the paper

The paper is based on a qualitative research study which had three main objectives – scientific, practical and educational – intertwined and achieved at the same time: (i) to identify the specific characteristics of the rural social work as reported by the professionals in the field; (ii) to build an extended database about the profile of the social workers employed in rural areas and about the socio-medical problems and needs of the most disadvantaged categories of the population; (iii) to inform educational staff about the process of improving the quality of education for the Master's students, to be able to address better the social problems and needs from the Romanian rural areas.

Based on the collected data, the paper explores the profile of the social services workers employed by rural local councils, and evaluates the most relevant aspects related to their main responsibilities, social problems of the rural localities they serve, the missing (public or private) social services, how the social worker is perceived by the rural community, and main opportunities and challenges of their job.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study design

This paper is based on a qualitative methodological design. The research was part of the evaluation working plan of Master's students enrolled in the Master's program 'Management of Social Services' of the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work at 'Babeş-Bolyai' University, who have enrolled in the elective course 'Development of communities and of rural social work'. The data were collected between 2016 and 2020. The data was collected with a face-to-face interview using a semi-structured interview guide.

The instrument for collecting data comprised open questions, covering 20 topics, among which the following are relevant for this article: main problems of the local community and the causes which generate and maintain them; the unmet needs of the social beneficiaries and of the people residing in the rural community; perceptions of the legislation used in everyday practice and suggestions for improvement; main types of services and social benefits offered to the beneficiaries; depiction of a regular working day of the social worker; how the professional is dealing with the large amount of work; the kind of help and resources the social workers need to improve

the quality of their work; how the social worker is perceived by the community; which are the opportunities and challenges in the social work field in the rural areas.

The interview guide ended with a section aiming to capture the profile of the study participant. It included questions about: gender, age, place of residence and if the employee resided in the community in which he/she worked, highest level of education, specialization in social work, number of years of work in the field of social work, position at the institution, and who supervised his/her work.

2.2. Participants and data collection

The research focused on countryside social work, including social services workers employed by the local councils of the rural communities. The rural ATUs were selected based on the principle of accessibility and, in most of the cases, reflected the home region of the Master's students who conducted the interviews. During the research study, 43 interviews with practitioners providing social work in the countryside were performed. The study covered 5 development regions of the country and included 13 Romanian counties.

2.3. Ethical considerations

The students who served as interviewers followed the same procedure. First, they identified a particular rural community, where they conducted one interview with the person employed as social worker. After that, the students established an agreement with the local commune/village hall, through which the mayor allowed them access to the commune hall and agreed to interview the social worker about his/her work in that community.

Informed written consent was obtained from each social worker before the beginning of the interview. The document included details about the interviewer, the purpose of research, the rules of the interview, a short presentation of the types of questions from the interview guide, the request to record the interview, and the commitment to respect the anonymity of the interviewed person.

Since it is known that, in most cases, there is only one social worker employed by the local council of a rural community, knowing the name of the commune would allow identification of the social services worker. In order to respect the anonymity of the study participants, the name of the commune was not recorded. Instead, only some basic socio-demographic information about the involved communes were collected.

Each interview lasted between 15 and 50 minutes and was digitally recorded. The study participants were informed that the recording will be destroyed after the transcription of the interview and that the content of the recording will be used only for the evaluation project and to achieve the specified research objectives.

2.4. Data analysis

The technique of thematic analysis was used for data analysis and the interpretation of results. The thematic units which guided the data analysis were based on the

interview guide, as follows: (a) the socio-demographic and professional profile of employees in rural social work; (b) main activities and responsibilities of social workers in rural communities; (c) a diagnosis of the social problems and unmet needs in the rural areas; (d) an inventory of missing social services and forms of interventions; (e) opportunities and challenges of social work in the rural areas.

3. Results

3.1. A short description of the rural communities included in the research

Data from Table 1 (see the Appendix) present the communes included in the study by development region and by county. The North-West development region was the best represented region, by including 5 counties (BN – Bistrița-Năsăud, CJ – Cluj, MM – Maramureș, SM – Satu Mare, SJ – Sălaj) and 28 communes, most of them from Cluj and Sălaj counties (16, and 5, respectively). The North-East and Center development regions included 3 counties each (BT – Botoșani, NT – Neamț, SV – Suceava, and AB – Alba, MS – Mureș, SB – Sibiu, respectively), and a total of 10 communes. The West and South-West development regions included one county each (HD – Hunedoara and GJ – Gorj, respectively), with 3 communes. Altogether, a total of 42 communes were included in the research study. In one of the communes from Cluj county, two social workers were interviewed. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the 13 counties included in the research study on the map of Romania.



Figure 1: Romanian counties included in the research study

Table 1 (see the Annex) also provides information about four socio-demographic indicators of the studied rural communities², namely: the SIRUTA³ unit for each commune; the total size of population⁴; the percentage of the Roma population⁵; and the marginalization rate⁶. The investigated communes varied with regard to the selected indicators. Regarding the population size, the communes from Cluj county were the most heterogeneous, including two extreme cases: a very small village (1,412 inhabitants) with a high percentage of Roma population (18.34%), but with a null marginalization rate⁷, and an extremely large and economically developed commune (22,813 inhabitants, of whom 4.89% are Roma), in the proximity of a big city.⁸ In the North-East region, the commune from Neamț county, although with a population higher than 2,000 inhabitants, due to higher fertility rates, is disadvantaged due to its spatial isolation⁹, as it is located more than 25-30 km from the nearest cities. Seven communes (from SM, SJ, SV, AB and MS counties) had marginalization rates above the national level. Three communes from CJ county recorded high percentages of Roma (over 15%), but were not marginalized. Only in two communes with more than 2,000 inhabitants (from SM and SJ counties), the high percentage of Roma was accompanied by a high marginalization rate.

3.2. The socio-demographic and professional profile of employees in rural social work

The professional profile of the practitioners providing social work in the countryside is quite diverse, and therefore the reference will be made to employees of the social services from the local council, in order to include all types of framing related to their position/ occupation within the institution.

In Romania, to become social worker a person must receive a Bachelor's degree in social work, certified by an accredited university, specialized in the field of social

2 These four indicators are selected and defined according to The Atlas of Rural Marginalized Areas and of Local Human Development in Romania, 2016.

3 SIRUTA represents the unit attributed to each commune, to indicate the level of local human development for each commune.

4 The small communes – with less than 2,000 inhabitants – are the most disadvantaged with regard to the economic, human and social development (Teșliuc, Grigoraș and Stănculescu, 2015).

5 A rural community is called a Roma community if more than 20% of the population identify themselves as Roma. If the percentage varies between 0.01 and 19.99 then there is a mixed community. Where the percentage is 0%, the rural community is considered non-Roma.

6 The marginalization rate at the national level is 6.2, according to the data from the 2011 Census.

7 A rural community with a high percentage of Roma people or a Roma community are not always disadvantaged or marginalized communities, even though the two characteristics are frequently associated (Teșliuc, Grigoraș and Stănculescu, 2015).

8 Mihalache (2019) explained that this type of rural community has known a recent accelerated socio-economic development and benefited from an important flux of migration from the urban area to the rural area.

9 A commune is considered spatially isolated from the administrative perspective when the distance from the nearest city is larger than 25 km (Stan *et al.*, 2015).

work. The academic studies in social work can be of long duration/ form (4 years) or of short duration/ form (3 years) (art.1, para. (2), Law no. 466/2004 Regarding the Status of Social Worker).

Regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, 41 out of 43 were women, and 75% of them were up to 45 years old (the youngest was 27 years old and the oldest was 63 years old). Among the interviewed professionals, 31 out of the 37 who originated from rural areas resided within the commune in which they worked. In the study population, the length of service had an average of 10 years, with 75% of them having up to 15 years of experience in social services delivery in rural areas (with a minimum experience of 9 months and a maximum of 24 years).

Figure 2 describes the level of education of the study participants. The most common level of education among the social workers in the rural ATUs included in the research study was: Bachelor's degree' (65%), followed by a Master's degree' (28%). Only a minority of them had only a high school or post-high school diploma (about 5%). Having postgraduate training was also a rarity among participants.

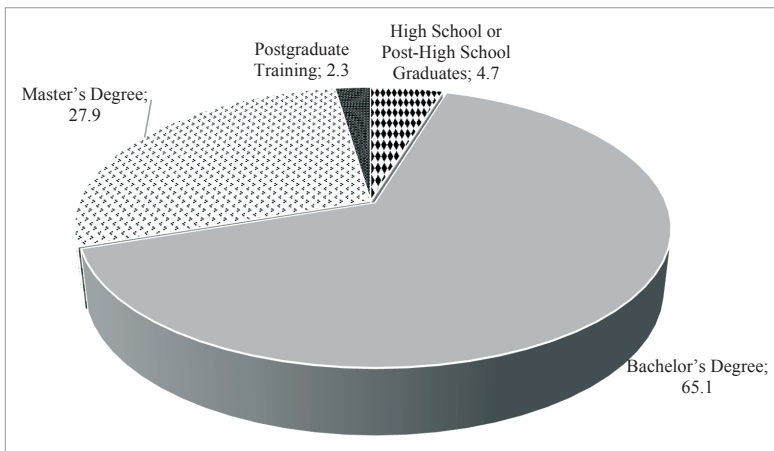


Figure 2: The distribution of level of education (%) among study participants

Source: Generated by the authors

Regarding the field of undergraduate and graduate studies, Table 2 shows that the majority of respondents had a graduate diploma in the field of Social Work (44.3%) and the combination of a Bachelor's degree with Master's degree either in the same field of Social Work or Social Work combined with Theology (14%).

It is important to mention that, with only two exceptions (those with high school diplomas), the fields of Bachelor's and of Master's degrees of the study respondents were more or less related to social work: Public Administration, Psychology, Economics or Law, in different combinations, as indicated by the distribution presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of the field of undergraduate and graduate studies for the study participants

Field of undergraduate and graduate studies	N	%
Social Work/ Theology-Social Work	18+1	44.3
Psychology	2	4.7
Public Administration	4	9.3
Law	1	2.3
Economics	2	4.7
Social Work + MS in Social Work	4	9.3
Social Work/ Social Work-Theology + MS in Theology	1+1	4.7
Social Work + MS in Psychology	1	2.3
Social Work + MS in Public Administration	1	2.3
Social Work + MS in European Studies	1	2.3
Social Work & Social Pedagogy + MS in Law	1	2.3
Psychology + MS in Social Work	1	2.3
Public Administration + MS in Public Administration	1	2.3
Social Work + Postgraduate training in Public Administration	1	2.3
Medical High School	1	2.3
Generalist High School	1	2.3
Total	43	100

Source: Generated by the authors

Romania is not unique with regard to the diversity of educational backgrounds of those employed in social work. For instance, among those who were identified as social workers in USA in 2015, only 25% mentioned Social Work as their major field of study, followed by those who had Psychology (18%), and Sociology (8%) as their fields of study.

In the Social Work compartment of the Local Council from the rural ATU, the respondents held different positions and titles for their job, as illustrated in Figure 3. Almost half of the participants (46.5%) declared they were employed as social workers, and almost a third (30.2%) that they were employed as civil servants with social work duties. The civil servants specialized in social work represented a minority among the participants, with a percentage of 16.3%. The proportions of those employed as social care workers (with a medium level of study, and who completed a short training course in the social-work or socio-medical field) or manager of social services were very small.

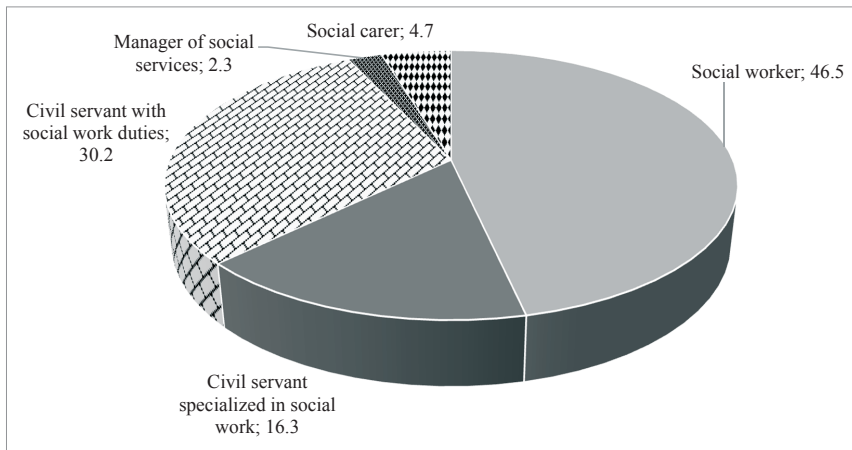


Figure 3: Distribution of occupation/ title of the job/ position held in the local council of the commune for the study participants

Source: Generated by the authors

3.3. Main activities and responsibilities of social workers in rural communities

Speaking about their professional life, the social services workers emphasized that their main activities and duties concern the primary counseling, providing social benefits and office activities, with limited opportunities for field work.

‘The social work service within our local council offers only *primary services*, namely *primary counseling and guidance for specialized counseling* when appropriate. Our commune does not offer accredited social services to the community, but only *social benefits* (I5, 3,065 inhabitants, Cluj).’

They complained that their responsibilities involved a multitude of tasks, and the lack of enough human resources in the social work department makes these duties burdensome.

‘I would like *to have someone to coordinate my work*. Sometimes I feel *powerless with a thousand problems*. I would need to know the laws better, to be able to help more people (who) are so powerless and ignorant. ... It is not enough to just give a person a social aid or a bag of food from the European Union. There is so much more to do: *dependent people* due to *chronic diseases* would need support; then the *alcohol addicts* for whom we could do something; *Roma community*; *isolated elderly* ... These are just some of the categories that come to my mind’ (I15, 1,846 inhabitants, Sălaj).

3.4. A diagnosis of the social problems and unmet needs in the rural areas

The interviewed local social services employees identified several structural factors that negatively affect the wellbeing of rural inhabitants. Poverty acts both as a

cause and as an effect of the precarious situation faced by the villagers. In the disadvantaged families, children's quality of life is most affected.

'Poverty is one of the causes of rural problems... We have families with a very poor financial situation, parents who work day to day to support their family. In the homes of these families I saw children who didn't know what a toy was. They were playing with the tins received from the aids' (I18, 1,428 inhabitants, Alba).

The limited financial resources of the local authorities and the lack of entrepreneurial initiatives at the community level hamper the opportunities for career development of the workforce and for the connection of the community with external resources.

'In the community, it is necessary to create jobs for the villagers and to initiate actions regarding the insufficient means of travel to the city' (I5, 3,065 inhabitants, Cluj).

The vulnerable categories of rural inhabitants more frequently mentioned during the interviews were – apart from the children from poor families and the unemployed young people – the dependent elderly, the marginalized Roma communities, and the chronically ill adults, including those addicted to alcohol.

'We have two aged villages, most of the inhabitants need assistance and care, which is quite complicated, because there are not many people to do this work' (I16, 2,321 inhabitants, Cluj).

'It is a Roma community (at the edge of one village of the commune) ... where six families live with their children. The living conditions are difficult, without electricity, without running water, and none of the adults is employed. Unfortunately, most of them are also abusing alcohol' (I15, 1,846 inhabitants, Sălaj).

3.5. An inventory of missing social services and forms of interventions

The type of individual and family support and services which are not available in the rural communities, included: child day-care, services for teenage pregnancy, support and home-based services for senior citizens, assistance required to preserve, and where possible, to restore the family unit, meet the needs of adults affected by a disability or a chronic illness or develop the proper social functioning of rural inhabitants.

'People with disabilities would need a community center for recovery ... There is a need for a support group for those with serious illnesses, moved' (in the commune) (I3, 22,813 inhabitants, Cluj).

'There is no day center in the community for children from vulnerable families or for the elderly and other disadvantaged categories' (I5, 3,065 inhabitants, Cluj).

'At the local level *we do not have social services. The most needed, in my opinion, is the establishment of a home care service for the elderly*' (I6, 2,021 inhabitants, Cluj).

3.6. The perceptions of the social worker in the rural communities

Given that academic social work training in Romania was reinvented after 1990, and the first framework law regarding the social work system was promulgated in Romania in 2001, it was not a surprise to find out that the professional competencies of social workers are not clearly understood by the general population.

'In general, people's *mentality about social work was that they only deal with Roma people or with those who must benefit from social assistance ... who have poor conditions. But it is not so, it benefits absolutely all categories of people, from the poor to the super rich*' (I3, 22,813 inhabitants, Cluj).

For multiple reasons the professional identity of social workers among the inhabitants of villages and even among their colleagues is still not clearly outlined and it does not reflect the truth about the profession.

'*The mentality towards the job of social worker is somewhere unreal, because it is considered unimportant, although it may be more important than many activities, many jobs ... And the most serious problems can be solved by social work*' (I14, 1,197 inhabitants, Alba).

Although there are still misunderstandings about the complexity of social work in the rural communities, the other professionals from the local authority, who can observe the number and the variety of cases, appreciate the huge amount of work involved in the delivery of social assistance.

'*Unfortunately, in our country the profession of social worker is not promoted and appreciated at its true value*' (I8, 2,857 inhabitants, Maramureş).

'*Many (colleagues) tell me that they can't do what I do here, that you do a lot*' (I4, 7,028 inhabitants, Sibiu).

3.7. Challenges and opportunities of social work in the rural areas

The main challenges at their workplace are: too many responsibilities, bureaucracy, risk of getting ill by working face to face with sick people, the poor collaboration with the local or regional public authorities, and the lack of a professional team.

'There is ... even *the risk of illness*, because (the social worker) *comes into contact with all sorts of people who ... (live in) poverty ...; where there is poverty, there are also diseases*' (I14, 1,197 inhabitants, Alba).

A great challenge is the caseload or the quantity of work. The study participants mentioned the burden of paperwork, heavy caseloads, and the hardship of working with difficult clients.

'The beneficiaries are people without an elementary education, and sometimes there are communication barriers and you have to explain them many times until they understand something Most of the social assistance applicants are always dissatisfied ... and consider that they are given less than what they think they deserve ... I had situations when I was verbally abused by some social beneficiaries' (I17, 4,451 inhabitants, Neamț).

Social work is a demanding profession that is usually generating a lot of stress. Working within statutory institutions implies frequent changes of social politics and practices and severe lack of resources. There is a high level of dissatisfaction due to the combination of the emotional wear involved in providing social assistance and the low level of remuneration.

'There are social workers who face stress and exhaustion due to the large number of cases allocated and the insufficiency of the staff' (I8, 2,857 inhabitants, Maramureș).

'The legislation does not protect the social worker on the labor market and does not guarantee quality services for the disadvantaged categories. We face many problems, especially regarding remuneration ... but I better not comment about it' (I18, 1,428 inhabitants, Alba).

4. Discussions

4.1. Lessons learned about the contemporary social work in rural areas

Having its function associated with the traditional female nurturing role, similar with nursing and teaching, social work is practiced mostly by women, as also indicated by this study and by another recent report on the social work workforce in the US (Salsberg *et al.*, 2017). However, social work is not a female-dominated profession, as women prevail only numerically. Women are the foot soldiers, while the power and control positions in social work are still held by men (O'Neill, 1994, and Rauch, 1975 *apud* McPhail, 2004).

Most of the recent studies have showed that the employees in rural social work did not hold a 'solid specialized background' and have followed different training paths (Csesznek and Șimon, 2019, p. 23). Although the number of social work graduates in Romania is increasing every year, there is still a great need for professionals in the rural areas.

Despite its noble aims, there is not too much recognition of the value of the social worker's profession among the beneficiaries and also among other professionals. It is still perceived as a profession with a low prestige and small income, at the local, regional, national and international level (Asquith, Clark and Waterhouse, 2005). The villagers are inclined to appreciate the social workers based on the kind of help received or problems solved, rather than on their degrees, years of education or areas of specialization (Davenport and Davenport, 1995).

Regarding the problems present in rural communities, similarly to the findings from another recent study carried out in the underprivileged communities of Braşov county (Bódi, 2019), the major areas of unmet needs in the rural communities mentioned by our study participants were:

1. *Basic material needs*: problems associated with substandard housing and overcrowded housing (perceived as having a greater occurrence among Roma low-income groups), food and nutrition, and inadequate public transportation for the inhabitants to travel to the urban areas.
2. *Health-related needs*: problems with general health care, deficit of qualified medical and social care personnel, need for home health care and health education, and alcoholism problems.
3. *Economic security*: dramatic changes in employment opportunities, changes in the labor force and in the structure of population (increasing rates of older people), lack of suitable jobs, problems due to unemployment, severe poverty and risks of social exclusion for some groups of rural inhabitants.

Similar to a recent report from Hungary (Halloran and Calderón, 2005), in Romania, despite a major policy change which empowers local authorities, the essential social services, such as home-based care, child welfare and family support, are still concentrated in the county seat municipality and, therefore, difficult to access by people residing in remote rural areas. Csesznek and Şimon (2019) also have shown that the diversity of rural vulnerable groups requires the development of good quality and accessible services, able to respond efficiently to their complex and diverse social problems.

Primary and community social work services, which are using the generalist social work methods and strategies of intervention, are dominant in Romanian rural areas while the specialized social interventions provided by professionals are not available in the majority of the communes. Social workers employed by the local public administration in communes and villages are usually in the situation of doing all things for all people from that community. The main types of missing professional social services are the following: residential centers for children, adults with disabilities and older people, services for personal social care, recovery and rehabilitation services, social integration and reintegration services, and home-based social services. The integration of social services with health, educational, and occupational services must be improved at the level of the rural administrative units.

The data generated by the present research study about the human resources in the social work field and about the socio-medical problems and needs at the countryside may enable reciprocal interactions and cooperation in order to increase the potential of the local resources to better serve the most disadvantaged categories of beneficiaries.

4.2. Suggestions for improvement of rural social work in Romania

This section will provide suggestions for improvement, motivated by this paper and also by the literature in the field. An important observation is that the study has provided a better picture of the main social problems and unmet needs of the rural communities from the perspective of the social services workers employed by local councils. This is a bottom-up approach that may inform the social policy makers and the political decision-makers when future legislation regarding the field of social protection and the settlement of social services will be under consideration. The changes they would implement to their profession to make their job as social workers more efficient are related mainly to legislation and to the direction of ‘creating and consolidating the work teams’ (Csesznek and Şimon, 2019, p. 23).

One of the major legislative changes which can help the social workers become more efficient in their work is to provide standards for maximum active caseloads, and workloads in general, that could be allocated per social worker either weekly or monthly, based on realistic professional judgements. Clear procedures and protocols for different professionals to cooperate within multidisciplinary teams, in order to implement effective case management for children and families, adults with disabilities, older people and homeless persons, are also much needed and will have the potential to significantly improve the results of social interventions.

Practicing social work is ‘very complex and very demanding’ (Csesznek and Şimon, 2019, p. 23). A high level of stress is often encountered in the activity of a social worker, which is negatively affecting the degree of professional satisfaction. Staff shortages and lack of adequate supervision (Kim and Stoner, 2008) increase the level of professional stress. Stress management is important in order to avoid the professional exhaustion (Neamţu and Huzum, 2018). Therefore, there is a great need ‘of various forms of support from within the work setting, especially mutual group support, accompanied by individual differences linked to good self-esteem, personal hardiness and resilience’ to increase the satisfaction social workers feel about their work (Collins, 2008, p. 1173).

5. Conclusions

The paper provides a useful addition to the already existing data from the Romanian literature regarding the profile of the social workers and the specific characteristics of social work in rural areas.

First of all, our research has implications for practice. Data from the interviews has emphasized the need for qualified social workers in rural areas, the need for stress management skills, burnout prevention and self-care activities for personnel, the need for professional supervision in social work and the need for supplementary professionals in social work in each commune.

Secondly, our research has implications for social policies. A new public policy designed to introduce required professional and managerial supervision in social services in all ATUs and the development of SWPS is clearly needed. The effects of profes-

sional supervision and support, received by social workers from their line-managers and peer colleagues, will be a well-worth investment for the organization/employer. An emergency investment in the social work national system from Romania must include professional supervision done by qualified and experienced social workers, and the supervision function of social services management being made a requirement in all social work settings, from both the public and private sector. These solutions will improve the quality of work life for qualified social workers, will prevent burnout and turnover of the professional staff, will increase the quality of services, and will raise the effectiveness of the public institutions and organizations which provide social services. Without supportive and educational functions of supervision applied to social work practice, the administrative supervision, done by line managers who are not social work professionals, is not enough and it is even inadequate in a profession where the workers must use their personal self as a tool for needs assessment and interventions in the social work processes.

Thirdly, we conducted a small research study, not based on a probabilistic sample, and of an exploratory nature. However, our results indicate the need to extend the research in the field. Further and deeper investigations are needed about: job analysis and job design, work satisfaction, performance evaluation of social workers and civil servants, and risk of burnout for professional staff in rural social work.

Romanian legislation also needs another major change that will be of help for professional social services, to make illegal the employment of non-professionals and paraprofessionals in civil servant jobs which require social work duties. If this measure is not taken immediately the social work system will function even worse, and it will be a waste of valuable human and financial resources, a lose-lose situation for the clients of social services, for the providers of SWPS, and for the Romanian society at large.

We recommend the design of new social policies, to satisfy the real social needs identified in the local rural communities by the social workers during their field work, together with the design and development of social services which can offer innovative responses to the unmet needs found in different communes and villages, as a result of participation of services users in the decision making processes.

In the process of planning and implementing social services it is necessary to acquire a better understanding of population's needs, adding to the socio-economic indicators the voices of citizens regarding to what they wish. Local networking and co-operation are indispensable in order to deliver high quality and accessible services, based on an integrated approach including health, housing, employment, social services and community (Halloran and Calderón, 2005).

The major professional organizations in the social work field, like the National College of Social Workers from Romania, together with the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection and with the accredited universities, specialized in the field of social work, which train the force work of the future, are responsible for the development and improvement of the social work practice in rural communities.

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ANNEX 1.

Main characteristics of the communes included in the research study

Id. no.	Region of Romania	County		No. of villages	Code SIRUTA	Population	% of Roma	Marginalization rate ¹⁰
		Name	Abbreviation					
1	North-West	Bistrița-Năsăud	BN	1	179720	1,407	0.00	0
		Cluj	CJ	16	55687	10,685	3.86	0
					55838	10,317	6.39	0
					56210	4,856	19.81	0
					56425	2,021	0.40	0
					56773	1,993	4.01	0
					56988	3,065	0.59	0
					57644	2,564	16.15	0
					57706	22,813	4.89	0
					58008	3,889	7.33	0
					58142	4,263	2.21	0
					58259	4,270	0.84	0
					55277	5,423	1.49	0
					60169	2,321	2.33	0
					59130	1,412	18.34	0
		55311	1,798	0.22	0			
		59826	1,947	3.24	0			
		Maramureș	MM	3	106368	2,857	0.07	0
					108348	9,264	0.03	0
					106648	2,659	0.00	0
		Satu Mare	SM	3	137443	2,215	15.4	24+%
					138618	2,182	5.87	0
					139287	2,067	4.40	0
		Sălaj	SJ	5	140379	2,586	15.93	12≤24%
					140823	2,641	4.24	0
					140869	1,864	8.37	0.1≤6.1%
141786	1,846				1.95	0		
142337	2,405				6.61	12≤24%		
2	North-East	Botoșani	BT	1	39694	3,420	0.00	0
		Neamț	NT	1	123790	4,451	0.00	0
		Suceava	SV	2	146860	6,719	0.70	12≤24%
					151479	5,136	6.54	12≤24%

10 The methodology used to identify marginalized rural areas is based on data from the 2011 Census. Six key indicators were selected for each of the three criteria used to define marginalized rural areas, namely (a) human capital, (b) declared jobs and (c) living conditions.

Id. no.	Region of Romania	County		No. of villages	Code SIRUTA	Population	% of Roma	Marginalization rate ¹⁰
		Name	Abbreviation					
3	Center	Alba	AB	3	4008	1,197	0.17	0
					6976	1,428	0.00	0
					7348	2,411	5.02	6.1≤12%
		Mureş	MS	2	118995	3,748	7.55	12≤24%
					119466	4,233	3.09	0
Sibiu	SB	1	143557	7,028	1.37	0		
4	West	Hunedoara	HD	2	86883	1,983	0.25	0
					90431	1,207	0.00	0
5	South-West	Gorj	GJ	1	79834	5,133	0.06	0

Source: Atlasul Zonelor Rurale Marginalizate și al Dezvoltării Umane Locale din România [The Atlase of Rural Marginalised Areas and of Local Human Development in Romania], 2016.