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Financial Crisis and Social Work

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2. The impact of crisis and austerity on social services and social workers in Portugal⁸.

Pedro Hespanha

2.1 Welfare state, crisis and austerity

The sovereign debt crisis and its origins

In Portugal, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, public and private investment had been stimulated to grow through low-interest rates. As creditor institutions lost confidence in the ability of state, banks, and households to pay off their debts, sovereign debt was devalued in the rankings of international financial agencies parallel to a raising concern about the solvency of those banks that had significant amounts of sovereign debt.

Today, it seems clear that the severity of the financial crisis is associated with the EU single currency system and with the commitment assumed by the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 that the eurozone states⁹ should limit their deficit levels in spending and debt.

It was already known that the European model of monetary integration entailed risks, the main ones manifesting themselves through the tendency to reduce social rights, the difficulty in dealing with shocks that affect member states unequally, and the occurrence of financial crisis (Mamede, 2015). The 'reduction of social rights' results from the fact that harmonization of labour, tax and environmental standards tends to be low as a result of competitive pressures (*ibid.*). At the same time, the liberalization of commercial and financial transactions implies a fall in the volume of collected taxes and, therefore, a greater difficulty in financing the social functions of the state (*ibid.*).

The risks pointed out were widely confirmed once Portugal proved unable to follow the budgetary discipline necessary to contain the deficit and began to feel the effects of the punitive reactions of the financial markets. Thanks to a structural adjustment program managed by the Troika institutions - a consortium of creditors consisting of the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB) - the Portuguese government has applied, since 2011, the creditors preferred recipe - the austerity rule - as a counterpart of the granted financing.

The austerity rule has poorly defined outlines and is subject to rather disparate interpretations. Put simply, it focuses on a set of economic and social policy options

⁸ This paper benefited much from the contribution of Rosana Mirales who supplied me with fruitful suggestions and valuable comments.

⁹ The Euro Zone currently comprises 19 EU Member States: Belgium, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Finland.

through which governments aim to contain or reduce public spending. It must be underlined that these options allow “to change the state's redistributive policy and the expenses associated with the functioning of the economy and social reproduction” (Ferreira, 2014, p. 117).

The notion of austerity is linked to a strong ideological component that, under the auspices of austerity, constitutes an inevitable response to the crisis, consisting of expenditure containment, deficit reduction or adjustment between what is produced and what is spent (Nóvoa, 2014). It conceals a neoliberal state political reform project aimed at promoting weak, ineffective and disqualified political institutions, dependent, poor and deprived citizens, and rights of exception that do not respect the most basic principles of the rule of law and of democracy (Ferreira, 2014).

The damage caused by austerity to the Portuguese economy and society has manifested itself in many ways and, namely, triggering a deep recession, with serious implications for the future, not only due to the fall in investment and the increase in sovereign debt but above all by means of the social consequences they produce: job destruction and rising unemployment; precariousness, especially of the younger segments of the working force; emigration of skilled workers; and worsening of poverty, social exclusion and income inequalities (Reis, 2014:119).

Several studies on the impact of the crisis and austerity on people shows that anti-crisis policies based primarily on austerity make the weakest members of society vulnerable and therefore can not succeed (Caritas Europa, 2013:51). We now know that the social impact of austerity on families and individuals is quite unequal. According to a study published by the European Commission (Avram et al., 2013), among the nine EU countries¹⁰ that had large budget deficits after the financial crisis of the late 2000s, Portugal, Lithuania and Estonia are the only ones where austerity measures have imposed a greater financial burden on the poor than on the rich. In the period between 2009 and June 2012, Portugal experienced a regressive distribution, mainly as a result of the freezing of means-tested benefits, in a country that was already one of the most unequal in the EU.

The impact of crisis and austerity on social services

The Economic Adjustment Programme for Portugal (2011-2014) and their following reviews included a set of provisions that would have a very negative impact on the

¹⁰ Estonia, Greece, Spain, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania and the United Kingdom.

functioning of public social services¹¹. In broad terms, they are consistent with the main targets for the Portuguese government: i) to reduce social expenses, namely wage costs, ii) to reduce social benefits; iii) to rationalize or privatize public services.

As the social expenses reduction target was manifold in the Memorandum that approved the Programme we have to distinguish several domains of cutting expenses in order to evaluate their respective impact: first, the reduction of civil servants wages¹² and pensions (1.11); second, the freezing of wages in the government sector in nominal terms and the constraint of promotions” (1.9.ii.); third, “the annual decreases of 1% per year in headcounts of central administration and 2% in local and regional administrations” through annual dismissals or negotiated employment termination (1.29.iii.); fourth, the limitations of “staff admissions in public administration to achieve annual decreases of 1% per year in the staff of central administration and 2% in local and regional administration” (1.9.i.); fifth, the reduction of the number of services “eliminating those that do not represent a cost-effective use of public money”; sixth, the implementation of “a comprehensive plan to promote flexibility, adaptability and mobility of human resources across the administration” (3.48) (European Commission, ECB e IMF, 2011).

The implementation of these objectives (and other similar ones that resulted from the autonomous decision of the liberal coalition government that was in office during the period of the Memorandum) had negative effects, first of all in the pocket of civil servants and their families, but also on their job conditions (precariousness, work overload, mandatory mobility, lack of means to perform their work, etc.).

- The social benefits reduction target

The most obvious finding of this target has been the widespread regression of social policies associated with citizenship rights. It resulted from the freezing of the Social Support Index (IAS) for five years, the freezing of the national minimum wage for three years, the freezing of the minimum pensions of the general regime (except for those with less than 15 years of contributions) for four years, the successive cuts and

¹¹ The first version of the Memorandum mentioned the reorganization of local government and central administration services [1.7.3.], the reduction of education costs [1.8.]; the limiting of admissions to public administration [1.9.]; the reduction of the number of municipalities and parishes [3.43.], the reduction of the number of local branches of ministries [3.46.], the reduction of the hospital operational costs [3.71.], the reduction of the maximum duration of unemployment benefits and capping social unemployment benefits [4.1]; the liberalization of the regime for individual dismissals [4.5. iv.].

¹² Since the approval of the Memorandum, new measures have emerged that reinforced the option of reducing public expenditure on personnel. Thus, in June 2011 a 50% cut was decreed in the Christmas allowance of civil servants and in October 2011, holiday and Christmas allowances for civil servants and pensioners amounting to over 1,100 euros per month were suspended. Some other measures in the same direction decreed by the government were declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court.

reductions in social benefits that cover risks such as unemployment or poverty - with particular emphasis on income support allowance (RSI), mostly for families with children - and the reduction of public social services.

In July 2010, the conditions for access to non-contributory social benefits were redefined, through the generalization of the so-called "means test" condition.

The objectives pursued with the new legislation include: harmonizing the means test condition for non-contributory social benefits and other social benefits; promoting greater coherence in the granting of social benefits; increasing efficiency and accuracy in the allocation of these benefits; combating fraud in access to social benefits; sustaining the growth of public spending. In turn, in this effort to harmonize and simplify the social welfare system, the Government decides to apply the new regime to the income support allowance (RSI), to the unemployment social benefit, to the social benefits in the context of parenthood and to other public subsidies and social allowances.

The main changes were mainly in three areas: 1) concept of household¹³; (2) yields to be considered - introduction of greater effectiveness in the determination of total income, with particular consideration to in-kind resources (such as housing, poultry and garden products), as well as financial and patrimonial situation; 3) definition of a new income capitation system depending on the composition of household members, including single-parent households, and taking into account the existence of economies of scale

As a result of these changes, the number of persons entitled to social benefits has decreased, showing the negative impact that successive changes and measures have had on the levels of coverage and adequacy of these benefits. Taking as reference the month of July 2010, the number of beneficiaries of RSI and holders of Family Allowance suffered a reduction of about 1/3 and the number of the unemployed with Unemployment Social Benefit suffered a reduction of about 40 percent. The Solidarity Supplement for the Elderly, after several years of registering a continuous increase of beneficiaries, begins to show signs of retreat. On the other hand, the Unemployment Benefit registered a fall after the 2010 legislation, but with an increasing number of people losing their jobs in recent years, it has been practically impossible to reduce the absolute number of beneficiaries, although the rate of subsidization of unemployment has decreased.

¹³ It is defined as a group of people living in a common economy, united by family relationships, where the applicant is integrated.

- The rationalization target

In some cases, the objective of cost reduction is overshadowed by the argument for a more rational use of resources within services or a greater compliance with international standards regarding the scale and productivity of public services. In other cases, the inability to respond to increased demand has led to changes in the criteria designed to ensure a reasonable level of quality, in order to create new vacancies in schools, kindergartens, homes for the elderly, etc. In the case of nursing homes, where ten thousand additional beds were created, this means that “a room previously occupied by one person will be occupied by two, and three elderly people will now sleep in a room previously occupied by two” (Almeida 2012). In schools, the maximum number of students per class was also increased for all age groups (Leiria 2012). According to the teachers’ unions, “this measure (...) undermines the principles of demand and merit, equality, and quality in education. The Ministry of Education is using the old recipe of not considering the means, whatever the cost, but of saving money” (SPZC 2012). As for day care, the government declared at the launch of the National Emergency Plan in August 2011 that it “also aims to increase the number of places in kindergartens from 8 to 10 children per room for infants, from 10 to 14 for children aged up to 24 months and from 15 to 18 for children aged up to 36 months” (Jornal de Notícias 2011, Neves 2012, LUSA 2013).

- The privatization of social services

The neoliberal vertigo that has assailed the rulers in the last decades and that has become acute in periods of crisis uses several arguments: first, the idea that the market is superior to the state and that, therefore, market rules must discipline the action of the state; second the idea that state bureaucracy is excessive and, for that reason, part of social responsibilities of state must be transferred to the private sector either profit or nonprofit; third, the idea that welfare state is a luxury that only the richest countries can access. These arguments are turning into a new common sense legitimizing the privatization of many public services with market potential or their placement under free competition, as is evident in the European debate on social services of general interest (Penna and O'Brien 2006). And for that to happen, it is enough that selective cuts in their funding will compromise their quality in the eyes of citizens and thus demoralize the idea of public service, with the populist accusation of wasting taxpayers' money.

In the Portuguese constitutional law, the dignity of the human person is consecrated as a fundamental value for the construction of a free, fair and solidarity based society (Article 1 of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic - CRP). In this context, social

security and solidarity are recognized as social rights derived from the principle of human and social dignity, and therefore the State has to organize a system that allows citizens to enjoy these rights (Article 63, 2 of the CRP), or to support institutions that cooperate with it in pursuit of solidarity objectives¹⁴ (article 63, 5 of the CRP) (Canotilho and Moreira, 2007).

Social services are the domain in which the Portuguese state has entrusted more non-profit private organizations to fulfill its functions by means of cooperation agreements through which the state transfers financial resources to the non-profit sector. The few services under direct public administration are now managed by those organizations even if the state continues to promote, encourage and support the creation and access of social services, as well as the supervision and inspection of the organizations that manage them. In many respects this transference of powers was already in progress before 2011, for instance in the follow-up of families benefiting from the income support allowance (RSI) and other active social policies (Ferreira 2010).

But the privatization of social services may develop beyond this contractualized transference of obligations to the third sector. It can instead mean a recommodification of public social services, this is “to extend the commodification to areas that until recently we judged distant from mercantile and financial interests, such as poverty and exclusion, unemployment, school failure, social re-insertion of ex-convicts” (Ferreira, 2016).

A new paradigm of social investment is in the making and Portugal can be its gateway into the European Union. Among the projects to be financed through the Structural Funds for 2020 is a program called Portugal Social Innovation with a financial allocation of 150 million euros, with the aim of promoting the social investment market to support entrepreneurship and social innovation initiatives in Portugal. It is boosted by innovative instruments: financial support for the training of organizations for social investment, partial financing of projects developed in partnership between social organizations and public entities or companies, a fund for the training of investors in social innovation, and the social impact bonds. It is a financial instrument through which social investors (private or foundations) invest in the expected social results of a social project lasting from 3 to 7 years (usually implemented by a social organization) receiving, if the results are achieved, the refunding of the amount invested plus a financial return adjusted for risk and results. The refund of the investment and the return are paid by the State to the investor (Ferreira, 2016).

¹⁴ By means of a “public-social partnership” and a “commitment based on shared objectives and common interests, as well as shared obligations and responsibilities between the state and the social institutions” (MSSS et al. 2013).

Being diverse the risks of this model of financing social services, one of them must be stressed: the risk that the State gives priority to those social problems that can attract private investors because they are easier to measure and more expectable to be successful or less risky (Ferreira, 2016).

Blind cuts and the risk of disqualification of services

At the outset, it is important to stress the immediacy and urgency of the intervention imposed on all national states under rescue, with a strong focus on controlling public spending and increasing the efficiency of the public social systems¹⁵.

In the Portuguese case, this control basically operated through cuts in public spending. In accessible language that everyone could accept, the government's goal was presented as “to cut in the fats of the state”. However, distinguishing between “fats” and “meat” has proved to be a difficult and impractical task when one wants immediate results. Illustration of this difficulty was the identification of fats with current expenditure.

Current expenditure includes spending on activities that are instrumental to the mission of the services and therefore necessary for their functioning. Some of them suffered heavy cuts: travel expenses and “other specialized work” by 25 per cent, outsourcing by 40 percent, “overtime pay, night work subsidies, communications, advocacy and technical assistance” by 20 percent. Contracting professionals in outsource, from the point of view of public accounting is financed by the same funds used to finance the acquisition of xerox paper. That is why current expenditure drastic reduction led to a “massive dismissal” of workers, or in some services, to work stoppages (Hespanha et al., 2014: 210).

In the absence of a structured reform program based on a hierarchy of needs, blind application of the rules of austerity prevailed without any attention to the impact that cuts would have on very sensitive areas of intervention. In general, the measures were carried out without taking into account either their optimal sequence or the capacity of the Portuguese social administration to carry them out (Sakellarides, 2014: 29).

The great criticism that can be made to the implementation of the Troika Programme is that it did not carry out any of the major reforms that were necessary and expected.

¹⁵ How public spending is controlled in a context of urgency is decisive. In a short period of time (every three months), a large number of measures had to be implemented in order to be subjected to and monitored by the troika, which required a strong and centralized government command (Sakellarides, 2014: 26).

During the four years that the intervention lasted, the Government only presented general guidelines for the reform of the State that were never discussed.

The risk of disqualification of services is also due to the reduction of administrative or technical procedures. In the case of services with programs that require personalized follow-up, in the context of active social policies (employment, social insertion and reintegration, special education, etc.), the risks of disqualification are higher. In job centres, for example, the increase in the number of unemployed, coupled with the lack of staff, transformed the negotiation of individual work plans into a mass operation without time to attend to the particularities of each case. Another example is the Social Security Institute, a key public institution to fight against poverty and exclusion, regular employees have gradually been replaced by short-term workers recruited through temporary work agencies. Hundreds of new grads were employed in areas related to administration and direct intervention to perform complex tasks that required several years of experience (SNTFP, 2010).

The degradation of social services quality, as a result of reduced budgets, undermines public confidence and increases discontent. As Mishra cautions against a process of cost containment in some public services under M. Thatcher in 1980s, a friction strategy leading to the loss of service quality may be more effective than direct attack in the form of a campaign for privatization of public services (Mishra, 1995: 41).

2.2 Social work in Portugal

A 75 years old story

The training in Social Work was regulated by the State in 1939: the Institutes of Social Service of Lisbon and Coimbra were recognized as certified training schools and the diplomas and the title of “assistente social” (social worker) were awarded after three years of specialized professional training.

Thus, the institutionalization of Social Service as an academic formation and profession took place during the authoritarian regime of Salazar, a corporatist regime, averse to public interventionism in the social sphere and, therefore, contrary to the model of welfare state in progress in the most developed and democratic countries since the end of world war II.

The ideological and cultural context of the Estado Novo in which Social Work has been recognized was decisive for its mission and professional practices, in the sense that both assumed a strongly doctrinal, corporatist and conservative character.

According to the law “the workers of the Social Service, who are suitable leaders, responsible and active collaborators of the National Revolution, animated by sound doctrines - those of human, corporative and Catholic orientation -, are intended to work in factories, professional organizations, care institutions and particularly with humble and less educated families, those more easily influenced, with hygienic, moral and intellectual objectives” (Decree-Law No. 30135 of December 14, 1939).

In this first phase, the training of social workers comprised the medical-health, legal, philosophical and social service dimensions and the professionals were oriented to public services of social assistance. After 1945, the professional field expands to the hospital area, health dispensaries, tutelary educational institutions and prisons, being the State the main employer (Martins, 1995).

In the 1960s a gradual reorientation of the social workers training is noticeable, through a progressive introduction of the disciplines of social sciences and methods (“case work”, “group work” and “community work”) influenced by the American social service and similar to which occurred in other more advanced countries.

In the professional field, social service would be strongly influenced by the new guidelines of human and social development adopted in the post-war under the aegis of different international organizations¹⁶. This structuring and innovative orientation, coexisted with the traditional domains of action of social service and, above all, with the corporatist and labour oriented social service, which embodies the conservative orientation coming from the institutionalization phase of social service in Portugal (cf. Branco *et al.*, 1992).

In 1974, with the fall of dictatorship, a new phase of social service in Portugal opens strongly marked by both the revolutionary and democratic dynamics that permeates Portuguese society and the ideological and cultural context eager to freedom. In this new context, the influence of the currents of critical and radical social service, and more particularly of the so-called reconceptualization movement of social service coming from Latin America, will lead to a questioning of the classical methodology of social service (based on the triad “case”, “group” and “community”), to the preference for an integrated and global methodology, and to the idea of the social worker as a professional committed to the interests of excluded classes and as an agent of institutional change.

¹⁶ In Portugal, it can be witnessed the creation of the Service for Community Social Promotion and the appearance, throughout the country, of several local and community development projects.

This movement that brought together, at the national level, schools and professional organizations, professionals and students, in the most significant dynamics of social service in Portugal (Negreiros, 1999) culminated in the recognition of the university degree in 1989, and of a career of social service in public administration dedicated to social workers in 1990.

The Marxian perspective that social service is consolidated by monopoly capitalism, when the working class reaches maturity and demands from the state answers through policies, enters into rupture with the humanist tradition that characterizes the first phase of the profession and begins to inspire the new generations of social workers. According to this perspective, social service and social policies are two sides of the same coin, since both are justified by the same social question.

From the mid-1990s onwards, a new phase of the historical course of social service in Portugal could be delineated. The two more salient dimensions of this new stage are the change in the structure of the labour market for social workers with a shift from the public sector to the non for profit private sector as a consequence of the transfer of social functions from the State to the third sector organizations¹⁷ and the retraction of public employment, together with a dynamic of deregulation of the labor market.

Main areas of intervention

Social service has been considered both as an area of knowledge or discipline and a profession. “Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” (IFSW, 2014). Accordingly, many social workers prefer to define their action as an emancipatory practice aimed at challenging the oppressive dynamics of power and structural sources of injustice instead of exercising a profession (APSS, 2015).

Anyway, the available information on the social professions in Portugal is fragile and dispersed. It is therefore relevant to characterize the functions performed by social workers in Portugal. Let us take into consideration some of the main areas of work.

Social Security has historically been a professional area where social workers perform their functions under different social assistance programs, namely programs aimed at

¹⁷ Mostly *Instituições Particulares de Solidariedade Social* (IPSS) and *Misericórdias*.

guaranteeing social support in situations of economic and social precariousness which may lead to processes of marginalization and social exclusion. They are, as a rule, involved in the implementation and administration of social intervention programs of the State, such as the “guaranteed minimum income” created in 1996.

Alongside the Social Assistance line, the social workers are also responsible for developing programs in the areas of programs to combat poverty and social exclusion and social development projects at the local level. These professionals are also responsible for providing technical support to the associative bodies involved in these areas, as well as in juvenile and family law cases, both in court counseling and in the implementation of measures to protect children and young people at social risk.

In the area of Justice, the intervention of the social workers takes place, in particular, in the framework of prisons and social reinsertion services. Without prejudice to the exercise of direct intervention functions, the essential nature of the functions performed in this area, especially in the social reintegration services, lies in the technical assistance, through the elaboration of social reports for diagnosis, prognosis and evaluation of the minors, defendants in general, victims and their families.

In the area of Health, social workers work mostly in hospitals and with less expression, in primary health care services, where a great growth in demand is expected in the next future. It should also be noted that other important functions institutionally attributed to these professionals are related to the humanization of services and to the role of social advocacy. This latter function is directly related to their responsibilities in the coordination of the user’s offices, a structure present in the primary and hospital health services, which is entrusted with the handling of complaints of citizens who use health services.

The Local Authorities are also a relevant employer for social workers who develop their activity mostly in the municipal services of social assistance, education, and health. Although in a smaller number, the social workers are integrated as well in municipal services of housing and urbanism and of human resources.

Non-Profit Organizations in Portugal constitute an important field of work for social workers, namely those that cooperate with the District Social Security Centers, such as the Private Institutions of Social Solidarity (IPSS) and the Misericordias. Often they are responsible for the coordination and administration of social services and equipment, particularly in the areas of support for the family and the elderly. The diversity of services offered by these organizations is enormous, from day centers for

the elderly, going through workshops for youngsters to the implementation of anti-poverty programs.

In this and other areas, the social workers' field is shared with other social scientists (sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists), socio-cultural animators, doctors, and nurses. It is evident from the brief trajectory of the Social Welfare areas in Portugal that these professionals perform their functions in very relevant areas of society, dealing with issues central to social well-being and that they are an essential tool for the implementation of most social policies. Conversely, insofar as implementation of social policies are taken in charge by social workers the latter become more socially recognized and empowered.

The urgency of social needs, the existence of major inequalities in the access to services, the severity of poverty and marginalization for certain groups of the population, the breakdown of solidarity practices and traditional aid institutions are, together with other factors that affect well-being and social cohesion, social problems that society greatly values. No wonder, therefore, that the perception of social workers themselves of their role is to “mediate between social policies and citizens” (Hespanha and Ferreira, 2009: 79).

Work conditions

The structure of the labour market for social workers in Portugal is characterized by both a process of segmentation of the labour market and a dynamics of precarious labor relations.

First of all, it is important to note the strong dualization of the labor market polarized in the public sector and in the third sector of private social solidarity organizations. This duality has impacts at various professional levels: 1) career structure; 2) remuneration conditions; 3) mechanisms of professional regulation in work situations. There is, therefore, in general terms, a relatively well protected nucleus, constituted by the professionals who work for state entities, and a another nucleus, nowadays involving the majority of social workers, less protected in terms of labour conditions (low wages, disrespect for professional titles, precariousness of the employment relationship, among other situations).

Secondly, it should be noted that the precariousness of the labor relationship is transversal to the two nuclei in which the labor market is structured, observing both in the public sector and in third sector, the growth of individual labour contracts under the regime of fixed-term.

It should also be noted that in Portugal, as in other countries, there is a strong feminization of the profession of a social worker. In the absence of systematic data, there is an empirically based perception that the massification of supply has favoured a greater demand for the profession by men. However, the systematic survey of professionals currently performing functions does not exist, and it is therefore also impossible to make reliable estimates of gender ratios.

The universe of social workers

Statistical data that allow the analysis of the distribution of social workers by the various areas of activity are currently very difficult to estimate, not only because of their dispersion due to the diversity of professional fields but also because of the public or private nature of the places where they work.

With regard to the public sector, the latest data available for 1996 show that 2,571 social workers perform their functions in the different departments of the State and that the areas of greatest relevance for social workers are Justice (25.4%), Social Security (24.4%) and Health (21.7%). At the local level, 13.8% of social workers are hired by municipalities, an area of recruitment that expanded much after the restoration of democracy in Portugal and particularly after 1980 (Branco, 1998)¹⁸.

Non-Profit Social Organizations constitute an important source of recruitment for social workers since these entities are one of the main providers of social services, namely in the field of social responses for the elderly and for the first and second childhood. With the restrictions on the admission of civil servants to the public administration and the growth of the social services hired by the State, this sector is nowadays the largest employer of social workers in Portugal, estimating that its workforce has already exceeded that of public sector¹⁹.

The private for-profit sector where, before April 1974, the greatest number of social workers were concentrated (Ferreira and Perdigão, 1972), seems to have lost importance relative to the public sector and to the third sector

In the absence of rigorous data, the number of social workers in the labor market was estimated to be around 8,000 in 2009, corresponding to a ratio of 80 social workers per

¹⁸ It should be noted, however, that these numbers predate the implementation in Portugal of social policies with a significant impact on the employment of social workers, such as the Guaranteed Minimum Income (1996) and the Social Network Program (1997), whose repercussions on the recruitment of Social workers was notable.

¹⁹ According to the Social Charter of 2001, a census of nonprofit organizations published by the Ministry of Social Security and Labor, 71% of existing social facilities in Portugal were owned by Private Institutions of Social Solidarity (IPSS).

100,000 inhabitants (Hespanha and Ferreira 2009). More recently the estimated that in Portugal there are around 18,000 social workers (SNAS, 2016).

Professional representation

In 1978, an association representing the interests of the social workers was created - the Association of Social Service Professionals (APSS), a non-profit association whose primary objective is to deepen the associative spirit and to ensure professional rights and duties. Its various other objectives include “contributing to the development of social policy, particularly those aimed at the well-being and quality of life of everyone and the respect to social and human rights.”

Since 1997, has been developing a process aimed at transforming the APSS into an Order of Social Workers, an objective considered of strategic interest for social workers in Portugal. However, to date, the various attempts to submit a proposal to Parliament have been hampered by the fact that legislation on the subject has become much more demanding since December 2007.

Alongside the APSS, there is the National Union of Social Workers (SNAS), founded in 1950, whose main objectives are to participate in the elaboration of labor legislation, to supervise its implementation as well as to supervise labor regulation instruments namely collective bargaining in different sectors of professional activity. However, this union has experienced a deep crisis for a number of years, due to a significant decrease in the number of their members, and its activity ceased in 2010. To fill this gap and express the general dissatisfaction of social workers with a policy of dismantling the welfare state, a new National Union of Social Workers (SNAS) was created in 2013, affiliated to the União Geral de Trabalhadores (UGT), one of the two big trade unions confederation²⁰.

2.3 Social work under pressure

The malaise within the profession does not arise with this crisis. Even before that, the social services were highly criticized by the social workers, in order to question not only their position in the mission of the services in which they are inserted, but also the social policies themselves that in their bureaucratic demands reduce the performance of the professionals to a mechanized job of filling out forms. That is, the functions of social services are doubly adulterated because, firstly, the social worker is diverted from the skills that his training endows him/her and, secondly, he/she starts to do

²⁰ The creation of this union is explained "by the fact that there is no representative Union and that the professional class is represented by a dozen unions which have contributed little dignify the profession of social workers" (SNAS, s/d).

administrative and bureaucratic work that is likely to be performed by other professionals.

Hence their complaint that social workers are being disregarded in their competencies, in particular, because their functions are being attributed to other academic formations that, despite addressing the social field, do not do so in the same perspective of social service. Moreover, due to various requirements, social workers are in a position to intervene in areas that do not belong to them, jeopardizing the effectiveness of their performance (Hespanha and Ferreira, 2009: 81)

The crisis has increased the demand for social workers and aggravated their professional status. The context of the economic and financial crisis of recent years and the problems resulting therefrom, notably unemployment, low incomes, and indebtedness, lead to an increase in the need for social service intervention and a pressure on social workers. Paradoxically, the institutions to which they belong (State and NGOs) have proved incapable of responding adequately to this increased demand and to the professionals claim to a fair recognition of their mission.

In its program of action, the National Union of Social Workers (SNAS) states that: “we are systematically encased by this policy of destruction of the welfare state, where by opportunism and usurpation our jobs are occupied by other professionals with ridiculous and shameful entry-level wages, typical of a third world country, what we call complete savagery, particularly in the private sector but also recurrent in the public sector” (SNAS, 2014: 2). As it clarifies, “it is not difficult to see that, behind the fundamental measures defended by the current Government, there is an ideological option called the ‘Minimum State’, which in our opinion constitutes a violation of the Constitution in matters of social rights” (*ibid.*: 1). This union has been involved in street demonstrations²¹.

Trying to systematize the causes of the malaise associated with the financial, economic and social crisis and austerity, we will next point out those most mentioned by social workers and their representative organizations.

A negative image of the profession

As the social workers are at the forefront of implementing social policies that they have not been called upon to define, these professionals are faced with measures that often “run counter to the basic principles and values of their profession and the safeguarding of citizen dignity” APSS (2013). The strong restrictions imposed on social protection

²¹ For the first time in the demonstration on June 18 organized by the striking dockers (SNAS, 2016)

and social support are part and parcel of the processes of impoverishment and social exclusion of many citizens, and consequently of their state of despair and suffering. The result is the feeling of powerlessness and the limited ability to help people that are experienced by professionals (Santos, 2016).

This inability and the fact that social workers implement austerity policies explains the growing animosity and hostility of the population in despair against social workers. As the President of the APSS acknowledged, “walking on the ground is complicated, since, in times of pressure, crisis and social discontent, frontline professionals deal personally and daily with the population, and are sometimes the target of this discontent. This situation is reflected in situations of physical and verbal aggression, and threats to the social workers themselves and their families, although there are still no numbers counted” (APSS, 2014).

Job precariousness and insecurity

In general, social workers have a highly insecure employment situation and low paid jobs, both in the private sector and in the public sector: term or temporary contracts, outsourcing, low wages. This problem has been denounced repeatedly by the Professional Association – “the conditions that (the organizations) offer to social workers are precarious, underpaid, and do not respect the very function of the social worker” (APSS, 2016) and the Union – “Many Social Service nonprofit institutions take advantage of their professionals and keep them for years through false green receipts, insertion employment contracts (CIS), false volunteerism and even professional internships” (SNAS, 2016b: 7).

The wage depreciation of social workers occurs in both the state social services and nonprofit organizations. According to Martins (2016), the austerity rule weakened contracts and working conditions, lowered wages, increased working hours to 40 hours per week, and reduced labor rights and social rights in general.

The freezing of state recruiting and the lack of financial resources by private non-profit institutions, on the one hand, and the emigration of professionals²² and the increase in demand for social responses by the population, on the other hand, are responsible for an overload of social workers who “are affecting the quality of the response to social problems”, as the President of the Professional Association acknowledges: “There are professionals that have 250 to 300 cases in their hands, which is impossible” (Madeira, 2016). Moreover, the replacement of qualified professionals who have left for others

²² UK alone must be hosting around 3,000 Portuguese social workers: 86% women, 75% under 40 years old (Munhão, 2017).

with little experience can still further compromise the support to the needy families (ibid.).

Back to assistance

As in other southern European countries, the crisis has forced Portugal to adopt drastic measures to contain social expenditure, de-universalize services, reintroduce means tested conditions and transfer risk-bearing responsibilities to the private sector, the third sector, and the informal family care networks (Hemerijck, 2012).

Commenting on the demands made today for social services and social workers, Inês Amaro acknowledges that there has been a certain tendency in Portugal for social policy measures to be taking “a more assistance based and a less protective form of rights.” Instead of “policies that ensure that people have adequate income to enjoy full citizenship” and access to employment and training opportunities, the government opted for immediate responses such as social canteens only available to some people when they are in situations of difficulty. Universal rights have increasingly been replaced by conditioned rights, and the social service profession is no longer based on the two main pillars of human rights and social justice (Amaro, 2015).

When we perceive the existence of a climate of discontent and social unrest among social workers, the question is how these professionals react to the harassment of their rights or to the disrespect to their mission: do they express this feeling, criticizing, complaining, protesting, or denouncing the injustice they are experiencing? To this are added other questions: does the precarious employment relationship of social workers reduce their ability to “voice”? Is this ability enhanced by the action of their professional organizations (the APSS and the SNAS)? Has there been civic mobilization and collective action in defense of the social causes of the profession, for example, public demonstrations)? Or, on the contrary, have social workers abandoned or neglected the defense of their professional interests or compacted with those who define/implement the policies, in a cautious or free assumed attitude of institutional loyalty?

We have used the public positions of their representative organizations to find a response. The World Social Workers Day is celebrated in mid-March of each year, and in general, the Professional Association of Social Workers (APSS) takes the opportunity to express its views on the problems and challenges of the profession. However, even on other occasions, it is possible to find formal positions on the subject.

Thus, the Social Workers gathered at the II National Congress of Social Service, held in Almada in November 2010, approved the “Declaration of Almada” by which they:

i) “express their concern about the restrictions that have been occurring in the framework of social protection and their effects on the lives of citizens, especially those situations of vulnerability, poverty, and social exclusion or in processes of precariousness and impoverishment” (...); ii) “reaffirm the urgent need to be approved by Parliament the creation of the Professional Order of Social Workers as an instrument for regulating the profession, and an essential condition for the defense of the public interest (by guaranteeing the quality of services provided by these professionals to citizens, both in the network of social solidarity organizations and in the private sector” (...); iii) “renew their commitment to the cause of well-being, human rights and social justice, which are particularly at risk in the current financial, economic and social crisis” (APSS, 2010).

In 2011, the Second International Social Service Congress approved a recommendation addressed to the Minister of Solidarity and Social Security so that “within the framework of the austerity measures contemplated in the State Budget for 2012, and taking into consideration the scope of social action and the process of reconfiguration of the social programs and social responses, the APSS, the Universities and Institutes that provide training in Social Service in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles of education, must be consulted as social partners, in order to guarantee the principle of participation, equity and social justice” (APSS, 2012).

In October 2012 a new position was taken by APSS to express “its profound incomprehension regarding the continuity and worsening of policies based on an even more burdensome austerity” and appeals “to the urgency of a governmental action oriented by social investment on the human person”, while at the same time reinforcing the appeal of the International Federation of Social Workers (FIAS), which “demanded more equitable and fairer political measures to combat the crisis” (APSS, 2012).

In 2013, the Association regrets that cuts in benefits such as Social Income Allowance (RSI), family allowances and pensions are contributing to the impoverishment of families and recognizes that social workers are under enormous pressure due to the situation created by these cuts. It also declares that “Social Workers are in solidarity with citizens particularly affected by the situation of profound difficulty and inequality that the country is experiencing” (APSS, 2013, Faria, 2013).

On the World Social Service Day 2014, APSS president warns that “Portugal does not have enough social workers on the ground to deal with the country's new social problems because Social Security is not hiring professionals and in the private sector there is no money for hirings” (Pinto, 2014)

The following year, 2015 and on the same World Social Service Day, APSS focuses on the loss of one-third of social workers in the crisis years and warns of the risks of having “fewer people at a time when situations which need to be acted on increase” (Almeida, 2015)

Finally, on World Social Service Day 2016, the president of APSS says that there is still “a lack of financial and human resources for the sector in Portugal and that the enormous restraint in hiring professionals is affecting the quality of the response to social problems” (Madeira, 2016).

Denouncing the negative effects of austerity policies on both the most vulnerable citizens and social workers is one of the most striking features of APSS's position since at least 2010. Some documents calling for a policy change have been approved at congresses by their members and sent to the government. On the other hand, APSS, together with the National Union of Social Workers (SNAS), called for the approval of the Professional Order Statute with powers of professional self-regulation as a contribution to the defense of social rights and citizenship. For its part, the SNAS seems to want to lead the fight for dignifying work in social service, against precariousness and low wages, and at the same time to break with the union demobilization that affects social workers.

The participation of SNAS in the general strike of the stevedores gave credibility to its project and marked the difference with respect to the more moderate position of the APSS that has not participated in street demonstrations or civil disobedience, as happened for example in Spain with the “orange tide” of the professional colleges of social workers (Truell, 2014) or in Greece with a refusal to implement government policies which required them to approve the disconnection of electricity supplies to indebted families and to register the presence of immigrant children in the nurseries (Holland and Scourfied, 2015:92).

2.4 To combat the effects of the crisis. From generalized pessimism to civic engagement

There is widespread pessimism in Portuguese public opinion about the future.

A Eurobarometer survey conducted in spring 2014 shows that more than half (52%) of respondents think life will be worse in the future, and only -4% compared to the 2009 survey (Standard Eurobarometer 81). The same survey shows that almost $\frac{3}{4}$ (71%) of respondents feel that our social protection system works quite badly (“apply fairly badly”). The feeling that there is a personal risk of falling into poverty is shared by 38% of the respondents (+ 14% than in 2009). Moreover, about $\frac{3}{4}$ (73%) of the

respondents think that falling into poverty can happen to anyone and only ¼ thinks this will only happen to people from particular social groups. Regarding how inequalities and poverty are tackled, 78% of respondents feel that it leaves much to be desired ("enough" and "very poorly")²³.

And, in fact, the crises that started rapidly in 2007 and the austerity policies that have been developed to combat them have had a very negative impact either on inequalities and poverty (amplifying them and reversing a path of reduction that began in the second half of the 90s), or in the mood of the Portuguese. The resounding collapse of the forms of protection that had been laboriously constructed since the mid 1970s and which were believed to be consolidated generated attitudes of discouragement and conformism.

The combination of the negative growth of the economy and the high social deprotection did not only result into a reduction of the social expenditure of the state, but also into a notorious weakening of the programs of social support. Simultaneously a degradation of the supply of public social services had very negative impacts in the organization of the state: closure or reduction of services, reduction of personnel, greater selectivity in access to rights, delays in response or service, disqualification of responses, negligence of the effects of cuts in the long term.

At a moment of reflection and a turning point like the one we live now, it is essential to convene the various agendas that overlap and complement each other (the welfare mix) in order to contribute to the improvement of the social protection system, namely regarding the efficiency and quality of processes, the effectiveness of the offer, the adequacy of funding sources, the role of public social services in social provision and the relationship with the third sector, among others.

The retrenchment of the state will certainly lead to an expansion of the market in the most profitable areas of service production. But it can also lead to third-sector expansion in areas where there is no institutional or commercial response, such as day-to-day services, home-based services or childcare.

In Portugal, the third sector plays an important role in the provision of social services by delegation of the state, which transfers to the non-profit institutions a high proportion of their budgetary resources. In the last few years, the state itself has been transferring the few establishments it offers to these institutions (Hespanha et al., 2000). Notwithstanding, this third sector very close to the state is faced with a double threat, which results both from the decline of state's responsibility for welfare and from the

²³ Special eurobarometer 391, 2013 (Social Climate).

low and decreasing levels of social capital in civil society, expressed in the low levels of participation in these organizations.

Particular attention must be paid to the multiple initiatives of a non-institutionalized third sector resulting from the collective action of groups particularly affected by the crisis in search of alternatives to the responses that public services should ensure. Their role in alleviating the stress created by the crisis and, no less important, in the organization of responses based on collective participation, self-management and solidarity among peers should merit public recognition and be stimulated by appropriate public policies.

In short, rather than discussing the financing of the social protection system and their possible internal rearrangements, it is necessary to diagnose and intervene on the external factors that shape and currently affect the social protection system, namely the high level of wage inequality, and to design a new intergenerational pact that clarifies the model of social welfare that we effectively want for the future. Meanwhile, it is urgent, to reinforce those social policies that unequivocally fight against poverty along with sound investment in public services in order to guarantee a standard of life with dignity for all citizens.

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