

Report on Social Cohesion in Switzerland

Forwarded to IFSW Europe

1. Fundamental Issues

- (a) What distinguishes the profession of social work in Switzerland?
What is its main function?

The social work profession in Switzerland is especially distinguished by its infrastructure. It comprises sound social work (which involves e.g. youth help, individual support for adults, financial welfare, local projects, etc.) as well as socio-cultural animation, which is realized integratively in a Latin-American, Francophone tradition through participatory socio-cultural work and local development.

In contrast the discipline of social work is rather poorly developed in this country (thus, for example, there is no university chair for social work and a scientific association will not be established until Jan 2006). Switzerland is still hanging on to a heterogeneous education in social work; in addition, studies at a college of higher education are still quite recent. A strong Swiss educational system surely means combining theoretical content and practical knowledge/skills. Therefore, dual education has a long tradition. The status of the profession in society is relatively good in relation to other professions, e.g. teachers and psychologists and the salary commensurate – even though there are marked differences between social work and social pedagogy and the latter is paid significantly less in certain cantons.

The content of professional social work is, on the other hand, widely accepted. Professionals and lay people share the tasks to be fulfilled. There is an immediate closeness to municipal politics and administration because responsibility for social issues rests to a great extent with the local governments, villages and cities (on a federal level there is no 'ministry for welfare'). In addition, the strategic responsibility for social policy is in the hands of lay politicians (with a markedly small proportion of women).

- (b) What are the most important social problems that hinder social cohesion in Switzerland? Which population groups are especially affected?

Switzerland is certainly a country where people are relatively well protected from social problems by the state. However, politics are being increasingly influenced by neo-liberal economic notions and are withdrawing state funding, which would be necessary to effectively counteract social problems. This policy has resulted in a steadily increasing gap between low- and high-income households. In the meantime the 3% richest of the Swiss

population have the same amount of private means as the total remaining 97% (source Caritas).

Furthermore, this policy has resulted in focus shifting to shareholder value, which is manifested to a particularly scandalous extent in large conglomerates and banks which are reporting record profits and mass lay-offs simultaneously. As politics have long been participating in this system, the will to oppose it is lacking. Consequently, people with little education or diminished capacity to work can no longer find niche jobs and must be supported by the state. Since more and more people have to avail themselves of state support, rising costs have led to an increase in problems with respect to social security (especially disability insurance and welfare) and simultaneously to a withdrawal of the state in the area of benefits. Pensions and social welfare are being reduced or the obstacles to claims for benefits raised.

Especially affected by this development are:

- The working poor, and low-income families
- The young and long-term unemployed
- People with diminished capability to work (e.g. the sick and handicapped)
- People, especially women, from foreign cultures with low levels of education

(c) Brief description of society and the socio-political orientation of the government. Is the structure of society and the socio-political orientation of the government conducive to social cohesion? Are the responsibilities for this borne by everyone (regional and federal governments, political parties, the public, families and individuals)?

The societal prerequisites for social cohesion are both favourable and problematic. Switzerland is a highly federalistic and consociational democracy. The members of the government are individually elected by parliament and are composed of the most important political parties. Since the founding of the confederation in 1848, they have had to govern in a relatively stable composition and to find answers to the problems of the people and the state. Through the distinct political rights of the people (right to petitions on a constitutional level and referendums on the level of federal laws) a natural balance has been continuously maintained.

Precisely these instruments of the direct democracy have produced many interest groups which represent people of diverse attitudes and operate as lobbyists. Political awareness among the population is quite high.

If the government and parliament tend towards a certain direction, the people are inclined to elect representatives and vote in the opposite direction. Currently parliament and the government are leaning towards conservatism and neoliberalism but social-democratic and

unionist concerns win the polls. Due to the possibility of constant political influence there is a widespread awareness of social issues among the public, the administration, the economy and politics. There is a tradition of socio-political discourse among all the representatives of interest groups. For these reasons the realisation processes of socio-political projects are sometimes very time-consuming and the obstacles practically insurmountable. On the other hand, Switzerland realises pioneer work again and again, even from an international perspective (e.g. drug policy). However, on the whole the development in social areas is rather inefficient.

The current trend of the government is to be criticised for their extreme focus on the failure of the individual and for employing subsidiarity and personal responsibility as ideologically inciting expressions, which completely ignore the connection between individual success and collective embedding. This attitude does not cultivate social solidarity: It fosters second-class medicine, does away with smaller structures (in the areas of employment and business), conveys the image of lazy people out to get disability benefits, and contributes to an unjust distribution of income and wealth (tax benefits). The responsibility for social solidarity is placed on the individual.

Society is so structured that primarily money is required in order to cultivate social contacts (you go and have a drink or go to the movies, pay for club memberships, etc.), more than a minimal amount, which does not include culture and social contacts.

2. Structure of the service providers of social security.

How are these service providers of social security in Switzerland organised with respect to the problems mentioned in 1(b)?

Are they present in the public or private sector, are the clients involved and does everyone have the same access and are human rights and the principles of democracy thereby observed?

The journey from a virulent social problem to the establishment of adequate public social services is long and tedious in Switzerland. For every emerging social problem private initiative is always held responsible at the beginning with the reference to the subsidiarity principle. In order to achieve, on the one hand, public awareness of a social problem, which must be dealt with by public solidarity systems and service organisations, and on the other hand, to ensure quick support and relief from the concrete social problem concerned, as a rule private sponsors (initiative groups, societies, associations and foundations) are set up. This leads to enormous differentiation in Swiss welfare.

Thus there exists a special social service organisation for every conceivable social problem and for every definable group of people. Most sponsoring bodies are still private in the establishment phase. The percentage of state sponsors of Swiss welfare organisations is below 30%. Private sponsors are not transformed into public institutions or at least state subsidised to a large extent until proof of legitimation has been clearly confirmed. As an interim solution in this process semi-public church organisations are frequently active. On

the whole the process of nationalisation (from public discourse to parliamentary acceptance of responsibility and approval of the executive body) takes at least five years at best. Due to this situation a major percentage of private initiatives never reach a professional project phase at all, let alone achieve the status of a state organisation, for citizens often give up prematurely.

Despite the vast majority of private sponsors the funding of welfare and its organisations is at least 90% public. Even self- help groups can hope for funding in certain circumstances. Despite this funding coordination, strategy development and monitoring implementation is to a large extent in private hands (an impressive example is SKoS).

The service providers of social security are organised primarily via insurance institutions (according to social risks such as age, death, unemployment, disability, maternity, illness and accident) and only secondarily via public welfare. Thereby public providers are actually concerned. Only within the framework of economisation measures and in the terminology of New Public Management are the service providers actually in a market and must adapt to the market (liberal concepts). Moreover, the market is private, given its structure and according to liberal notions, and must observe private laws. An excellent example of this is the asylum system where, in the meantime, a company has taken over direct supervision. It may be said that service providers are in an environment of constant, potential privatisation.

With reference to the problems mentioned in 1 b, this means the following:

- Low- income is primarily fought according to the demand principle via welfare whereby the hurdles are very high due to an extremely narrow concept of subsidiarity and the stigmatisation of being on welfare. Private means have to be practically exhausted, close relatives must provide support and the welfare granted must be reimbursed. Welfare has been delegated by the federal government to the cantons and although considerable efforts are made by private associations (esp. SKOS) to harmonise assessment and principles there are considerable regional differences. Recently adopted recommendations of the SKOS comprise a reduction of benefits (new lowest decile instead of quintile) and the establishment of the compensation / counter- compensation principle, i.e. a part of the benefits can only be acquired if the corresponding integration efforts can be proven. This paradigm shift has even been accepted by social work representatives with hardly any resistance. Has the profession of social work subordinated itself to a neo- liberal world- view?
- The problem of youth and long- term unemployment is largely solved by unemployment insurance, which, however, has not been able to develop any effective instruments for the occupational integration of young adults. This is also very difficult if there are structurally insufficient training positions available. Unfortunately, politics is missing the boat with regard to effective incentives for the economy to promote offers of training positions (e.g. tax benefits).

- For people of diminished capability disability insurance provides those with birth defects, whose claims are recognised, with good coverage even from an international point of view. Public discussion of disability insurance fuelled by a neo-liberal policy and social envy has resulted in discrimination of people who have been relieved of the pressures of the employment market through disability insurance. Basically the system should help to integrate these people and otherwise ensure their habitual lifestyle with the benefits (pensions) of state and unemployment insurance. The problem is that, on one hand, some people have no claim to unemployment benefits (self-employed, housewives, part-time employees, etc.) and on the other hand, state insurances with their integration support are always based on the principle of a well-balanced job market and simply few enterprises are prepared to employ people with reduced capabilities. Politics have not found an answer to this problem.
- In particular foreigners with little or no education suffer and especially a lot of women are affected nowadays. Therefore, such people can hardly find employment. They are the first to be given notice in mass reduction of staff. They are caught in a vicious circle of unemployment or working under bad conditions with low wages, which leads to frustration because a number of needs regarding social status, participation and sharing cannot be satisfied. Politics has not found a satisfactory answer to this problem. For the young there are state or private centres where they can spend their leisure time or get counselling. Women can seek protection in women's refuge houses or turn to public counselling services. There is protection but generally no serious attempts to reduce their problems.

3. Professionals in Social Work

What role do professionals in social work perform with respect to the problems stated above and how do they deal with the following aspects?:

- Ethical dilemmas (balance of power/empowerment, legal counselling)
- Role of professionals in social work in facilitating access to services and their protection.
- Role of professionals in social work concerning the promotion of social cohesion.
- Educational level of professionals in social work and how it correlates to the promotion of social cohesion.

With the aid of empirical means, a certain discrepancy can be seen between description and assignment of a function in social work and the performance of professionals in social work in the Swiss social security system (c.f. Maeder, Christoph and Eva Nadai. 2002. *Die öffentliche Sozialhilfe zwischen Armutsverwaltung und Sozialarbeit - Eine soziologische Untersuchung sozialstaatlicher Intervention*. Abridged version for the Schweizerischen Nationalfonds. Rorschach and Olten: FHS St. Gallen and FH Solothurn Nordwestschweiz; or Peter Sommerfeld. 2003. *Zukunftsszenarien Soziale Arbeit. Überlegungen zur Lösung sozialer Probleme*. offprint, Aarau).

It is not only inherent in its self-perception but also in its societal attribution that social work as a profession has a number of functions – be it towards its addressees, target groups (clients) or society as a whole, on one hand, or towards colleagues and other specialists within the professional field of social work or the organisations therein, on the other. This requires a responsibility towards oneself (development of competencies, quality control as well as fitness and health) but also a responsibility towards the profession (peer review, development of knowledge and representation of the profession).

This is inadequately covered by professionals in social work in Switzerland, especially questions concerning the competence to display competence. As a result there is an increasing failure to convey plausibly to the public the essence of social work and to efficiently represent the corresponding concerns within socio-political discourse (c.f. Peter Sommerfeld. *Professionelles Handeln und Management oder: Ist der Ritt auf dem Tiger möglich?* In: Neue Praxis, 33rd year, Journal 1, 1/2003, pp. 61-89 (together with Dieter Haller); or: *Die Zukunft der Sozialen Arbeit hängt von ihr selber ab.* www.sbs-aspas.ch/de/p11003552.html).

In dealing with these complex problems, professionals in social work are in a difficult situation. On one hand, they often work in the state administration dealing with questions of maintaining a livelihood and at the same time they play an important role in examining the needs and claims of their clients. In addition, they have a certain responsibility in the prevention of misuse, by exhausting private means prior to accessing governmental resources. As a result, professionals in social work are in a fairly strong position and a great number of jobs are available. However, there is a conflict of interests between the financing organisations/financial donors (government agencies) and the beneficiaries (their clients). In a lot of cases this hinders a legal counselling approach.

On the other hand, they try to maintain political independence so they can support the client politically, too. But still, there is a certain dependence on the interests of the funding organisation as well as a fear of spoiling things for oneself. The professionals in social work are trying to heighten public awareness of these problematic developments with respect to social cohesion. However, public awareness of professionals in social work is not very great.

Basically it may be said that all the people living in Switzerland legally have access to counselling programs. But due to low population density, it is difficult for a lot of people to reach these specialized consultation centres.

4. Role of the professional association AvenirSocial

How does AvenirSocial participate in the promotion of social cohesion?

- Interference (strength and concepts)
- Partnerships and cooperation with other participants (administration, NGOs, associations, political parties, private parties)

- Ability to assert oneself with respect to fostering social cohesion?

Considering the structural changes that have led to the founding of AvenirSocial, the influence of our growing national professional organisation is still fairly limited. The goal is to create a strong lobby capable of making the ethical issues of social work popular and which is strong enough to play a decisive role in (socio-) political decision-making (long before any parliamentary discussion).

Such objectives stand in contrast to a deficit of (human and material) resources. This is partially, if not mainly, due to the relatively low degree of organisation in our professional association. The present strategic management of AvenirSocial is working intensively on catching up in this area. In particular, the exertion of influence on members of federal parliament needs to be developed.

5. An example

Do you remember any particularly suitable activity or project of AvenirSocial (SBS/ASPAS, SBVS, FERTES) aimed at fostering social cohesion in Switzerland?

Until now AvenirSocial has been occupied with sensitizing professionals in social work to the concerns of a dignified existence and of a society built on solidarity. Our political efforts are mainly performed on a regional level, most of them with the general aim of social cohesion (e.g. protest marches and demonstrations, stands, letters to the editor, open letters, lobbying). Over the last two years AvenirSocial has committed itself, along with the trade unions, to fighting the negative consequences of a neo-liberal economy, the dismantling of public services and the reduction of state benefits on a cantonal as well as on a federal level and to bringing these issues to the public's attention. National protest days have generated a good response in the media and help to focus the attention of a wider public on the consequences and results of such policies. The participation of teachers, policemen, civil servants and transport personnel was an especially positive aspect.

6. On the future of social cohesion

- (a) What new national and European projects are essential to solving the problems stated in point 1(b)?

Several projects, supported by the general public, would be needed to cultivate solidarity with others, to establish social justice and an effective control of powers as well as the realization of human, social and general civil rights. Professionals in social work and - even more important - representatives of AvenirSocial play a decisive role in initiating, planning, organisation and consolidation of such activities.

- (b) How should the role of the professionals in social work change in order to foster social cohesion?

Professionals in social work are increasingly regaining their role as translators of knowledge and data from their daily work as well as from their practical and empirical research. They explain their clients' situation in an understandable and comprehensive manner. They redefine terminology with negative connotations using internationally accepted standards in social work (e.g. freedom for the people - instead of freedom for investors).

- (c) How do the associations of professionals in social work have to develop in order to strengthen their influence on the development of social cohesion?
 S. pt. B

The national and international professional groups are important and serious partners in society and its sub- systems. They (these groups) take advantage of the potential the ethics of social work incorporates, by extending their respective knowledge and by enabling them to act accordingly. A main focus lies on propagating and spreading the issues of the Montreal Declaration and on assuring that it will be enforced. AvenirSocial is working on the creation of a profile, well known to the public, to allow and facilitate efficient political lobbying.

- (d) What possibilities are there for a general approach to furthering social cohesion?
 From a national and international perspective, what kind of partnerships would be necessary with representatives of clients, other professional groups, politicians, administration, NGOs and associations?

A necessary prerequisite for exerting such influence among the professional organisations is national and international networking (which should not be taken as a synonym for fusion) designed to consolidate their strengths. On an academic level, too, there is a need for an integration of schools and of scientific associations.

7. Background information

Do you have access to background information relating to these questions on social cohesion in Switzerland?

- www.sozialstaat.ch
- Sozialbericht CH

- (<http://www.sidos.ch/socialreport/socialreport04/ge/>)
- Caritas (Hrsg.); Sozialamanach 2005.
 (http://web.caritas.ch/pdf/shop/Sozialalmanach2005_d.pdf,
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 - Maeder, Christoph and Eva Nadai. 2002. *Die öffentliche Sozialhilfe zwischen Armutsverwaltung und Sozialarbeit - Eine soziologische Untersuchung sozialstaatlicher Intervention*.
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 (http://www.schiess.ch/cm/_uploadData/Essay_Peter_Sommerfeld.pdf)
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