

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR NEW EMPLOYMENT, UNDP BULGARIA

From pilot to policy: Introducing community-based social services in Bulgaria



Social Assistants provide social services to the elderly in their communities. / Photo: UNDP Bulgaria

At the beginning of the decade, Bulgaria's unemployment rate reached an unprecedented 18 percent. This put a strain on the social assistance system and threatened the country's economic and social prosperity. Unemployment particularly affected those in the pre-retirement aged 50 and above, representing more than 50 percent of the unemployed in Bulgaria. The Government's initial efforts with social service reform focused on revamping the child welfare system by introducing community-based social services such as day care centres and foster care. Social services for adults, however, were provided solely by centralized state institutions, and no community-based, decentralized services existed. Social welfare was provided by the Social Assistance Agency and municipal-based Labour Offices. UNDP launched an initiative in response to a change in legislation that allowed for community-based organizations to enter the

social assistance market. Enforcement of the new provision, however, was hampered due to lacking secondary legislation.

The *Social Assistance for New Employment (SANE)* project began in 2002, in partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, and assisted the Government with social service reform. UNDP support to the development of a new social service system included developing capacities of community-based service providers, helping to mitigate some of the negative effects of those most affected by unemployment. UNDP supported the Government to develop secondary legislation for the newly adopted Social Assistance Act, assisting with the design of a new system of community-based social services that would meet national minimum quality standards. The project also piloted a cost-sharing model for financing community-based social services between the central government (70 percent), municipalities (20 percent) and beneficiaries (10 percent). The project helped to develop the capacities of municipalities to co-finance, outsource and supervise community-based social services. Specialized training was provided to selected non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to play a more active role in the social services sector. The unemployed were trained to provide social services and, after completion of training, were then hired by community-based organizations to work as Social Assistants at the community level.

The project was initially launched in four municipalities and extended to 12 municipalities in 2006, and has proven to be a viable mechanism for decentralized social services. The Government recognized its benefits and scaled up direct government funding for this approach to 150 municipalities in 2007 outside of the project. SANE also triggered systemic changes. Central government, municipalities and NGOs have joined forces in the provision of social services. The Social Assistant has become a registered vocation in Bulgaria. Standards for community-based social services are clearly defined. SANE contributed to developing the capacities of civil society to better meet the many new demands of providing social assistance. Today, 650 private providers, registered with the Social Assistance Agency, are trained to provide social assistance. An offspring of the project has been the Association of Providers of Community-Based Social Services, which was initially composed of the 12 NGO service providers under the project but is currently open to any service provider. A handbook was produced to guide the 1,700 Social Assistants in providing social services to their communities.

Three factors were critical for the success of the initiative. First of all, its long-term perspective (six years) was vital to fully institutionalize a new system. Secondly, SANE activities complemented a change process, which was entirely driven by Bulgarian institutions. The project took a holistic approach with activities at various levels – work on the policy framework was complemented with capacity development activities for municipalities and NGOs, as well as employment creation for the once unemployed.

Useful links

- **Project Web site:**
<http://www.sanebg.org/display.php?page=wellcome>
- **Project details:**
<http://europeandcis.undp.org/gender/genderandpovertyreduction/show/C2B58CEE-F203-1EE9-B5436EF8EEEC40A2>
- **Press release on SANE:**
http://www.undp.bg/media_room.php?id=1421

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