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THE ASPECTS OF PROVISION OF SOCIAL SERVICES CONSIDERING THE SOCIAL EXCLUSION DIMENSIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

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Abstract

The article analyses the aspects of provision of social services, reducing social exclusion, in the view of rational choice theory. This approach was selected due to the fact that provision of social services often leads to discussions explaining the appropriate and rational choice of assistance for the socially excluded members of society. The authors discuss the key aspects of provision of social services, considering the dimensions and factors of social exclusion in the context of rational choice theory.

Keywords: Rational Choice Theory, Social Services, Social Exclusion

1. Introduction

As economic conditions change, people are often faced with unemployment, poverty, housing, and discrimination issues, therefore, the countries are looking for effective ways and means of reducing social exclusion and providing more effective assistance to a person, who has lost the ability to live independently and function effectively in society. One of the most widely used measures to reduce social exclusion is the proper organization and availability of social services.

In Lithuania, it is planned to develop a consistent service system that would provide possibilities to every person, facing difficulties, to receive individual services and to get involved in community life by 2030. This process involves the development of social services organizations, organization of their activities, based on the modern management methods. The national laws, legal acts and other documents, regulating the organization and provision of social services of the EU states, define the values and provisions which the activities of social services organizations must be based on. In Lithuania, the basic principles of management, allocation and provision of social services are defined in the Law on Social Services of the Republic of Lithuania (Republic of Lithuania, 2006). Following the principle of organization efficiency, in an organization providing social services, "social services are managed, allocated and provided seeking for good results and by rationally using the available resources" (Republic of Lithuania, 2006). An important aspect in provision of social services is how should it be done best and what forms should be employed, in order the use of the assistance provided would be rational?

One of the theories, explaining social phenomena, is rational choice theory. Rational choice theory is the theory, based on methodological individualism (Norkus, 2005a). Therefore, it explains social phenomena on the basis on agents, who seek for their goals in certain ways. The key concept of rational choice theory is rationality, when an agent chooses one action, which, according to his subjective opinion, is the best (upon subjective assessment of the costs and benefits of all perceived actions) to achieve the goal, thus, a rational agent always chooses the best alternative from a range of possible alternatives, while a rational action is the action by which an agent maximizes the expected benefit. As it is difficult (impossible) to assess all possible alternatives of an action in a particular situation, we are not completely rational. The range of questions covering rational choice in the provision of social services is very broad in terms of the scale and nature of the issues being addressed, ranging from strategic ones, e.g., social policy formation, to tactical ones, i.e., solution of everyday social problems. It is also important to assess rationality of the decisions made at the stages of the provision process: while introducing, implementing, supervising, controlling the provided social services.

The concept of social services in Lithuania, the significance of these services and the characteristics of the organizations were researched by Žalimienė (2003); Bartkutė and Čižikienė (2012); Vanagas and Čižikienė (2013, 2015). Organization of social services have been examined by several researchers, such as Gražulis and Čižikienė (2016). The issues of social exclusion analyzed by Popay et al. (2008); Martin (2004, 2006); Daly and Silver (2008); Lazutka et al. (2008); Žalimienė (2011). Norkus (2005a and 2005b) and Petukienė *et al.* (2007) explored the main aspects of rational choice theory. There is little research on the aspects of provision of social services, reducing social exclusion, in the context of rational choice theory. This was analyzed by Gigerenzer and Selten (2002); Dunajevs (2009); and Žalimienė and Dunajevs (2015).

The practice proved that the most rational level of decision implementation in Lithuania is a local municipality, where residents are the most accessible and emerging problems are the most visible. Provision of social assistance is almost always related to some rational measurement of the benefits of stakeholders, since the provision of assistance, starting from individual's motivation, involves the most rational agreement, chosen by social political structures, existing communities and organizations, which gives them the opportunity to influence the reduction of social exclusion in society. Therefore, there is an open question of how social assistance could be provided best to social exclusion groups, taking into account the conditions of limited resources.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the phenomenon of provision of social services in the view of rational choice theory, while the object is the provision of social services in the context of rational choice theory. Accordingly, the tasks include analyzing the aspects of the concept of provision of social services, influencing the changes in reduction of social exclusion; identifying the links between provision of social services and rational choice, while analyzing the concept of rational choice; and finding out the impact of rational choice on reduction of social exclusion.

By analyzing the scientific literature and documents, the second section of this article examines the aspects of provision of social services and the dimensions of social exclusion. In order to reveal the issue of rational choice in provision of social services, the third section reviews the functioning of social services system in allocation of resources. Finally, the fourth section concludes the paper.

2. The Aspects of Provision of Social Services in Reduction of Social Exclusion

The concept of social exclusion is inseparable from the view of society on what a full-fledged member of the society must be. There is a widespread perception in the modern European Union that social exclusion is the process where poverty, lack of social skills, lack of lifelong learning opportunities, and discrimination prevents individuals or their groups from participation in social life and labor market, causes inability or incapacity to use the public goods. In scientific discourse, social exclusion is defined as a multidimensional and dynamic process that causes negative social, economic, political and cultural consequences for people life (Popay *et al.* 2008).

The following causes of social exclusion might be identified: insufficient income, illnesses, disability, long-term unemployment, various addictions, etc. (see Table 1).

Table 1. Dimensions and Factors of Socially Excluded Groups

Group	Exclusion dimensions	Individual factors	Social factors	Institutional factors
Disabled	Labor market Social networks Education Political involvement	Disability Lack of self-confidence Lack of motivation Sufficient income from social benefits Lack of self-support	Prejudice and stereotypes Lack of access to higher education Insufficient employers' motivation Social stigma	Lack of the required infrastructure, not suitable public and working, learning environment Lack of professional rehabilitation system Lack of qualified professionals
Convicts or ex-prisoners	Labor market Social networks Housing Social services	Lost qualification, work and social skills	Prejudice and stereotypes Lack of social trust	Lack of housing assistance
Persons, addicted to psychotropic substances	Labor market Social networks	Lack of motivation Lack of qualification	Prejudice and stereotypes Lack of social trust	Lack of medical, professional and social rehabilitation mechanisms
Ethnic minorities	Labor market Education Political involvement Social isolation	Language barrier Lack of qualification Criminality	Prejudice and stereotypes Social stigma Lack of social trust	Lack of social integration institutions and financial resources
Older women and women coming back to the labor market after a longer break	Labor market	Lost qualification, work and social skills Unwillingness to requalify Lack of social adaptation skills	Age discrimination	Requalification problems
Current and former students of children's home (16- 29 years old)	Labor market - Social networks	Lack of self-support Lack of qualification	Prejudice and stereotypes	Lack of social integration mechanisms

Source: Public Policy and Management Institute & Labor and Social Research Institute (2011)

The most common groups of people at risk of social exclusion are the following: the disabled, elderly people without sufficient working qualifications, families with children, ex-prisoners, addicted persons, ethnic minorities, victims of violence, victims of human trafficking, the long-term unemployed. The aforementioned group at risk of social exclusion also includes rural residents, single mothers / parents, pupils from children's homes, etc. Thus, the policy on reduction of social exclusion (poverty) and its implementation should include various means, methods, and forms of assistance. Therefore, there is a rational choice problem of how to provide the most appropriate assistance under the conditions of limited resources, since, with regard to the dimensions of socially excluded groups (Table 1), assistance includes many factors that are not always sufficiently secured by the state.

The view to help those members of society, who cannot take care of themselves and their family well-being, emerged in Europe after the World War II (Martin, 2004). According to this concept, a state should be responsible for the welfare of its citizens by creating a funded provision of social services, and, thus, must become a "welfare state". It should be emphasized that according to neoliberalism, the countries cannot intervene in the market processes as this impedes the economic development of the state. As the discussion on provision of welfare emerged, the states, seeking to justify the changes they propose in social policy, had to introduce

a new concept of social exclusion, distinguishing unable to adapt and deviant part of the community that needs assistance. This concept involves the problem of capacity of an individual and his interaction with social structures (Martin, 2004). On the other hand, the neoliberals say that every individual can meet his needs by properly following the natural laws of a free market. Additionally, those who are not capable of taking care of themselves are not worth success, therefore, the state should only help to form and build the skills. Martin (2006) points out that the concept of social exclusion can be emphasized in the narrow sense, when socially excluded people can still be corrected and involved into a proper social structure, making them able to take care of themselves, and in the broad sense, when not only those, who might become socially excluded, but also those, who have the power of control in provision of social services for these persons, are involved. In summary, it can be stated that the concept of social exclusion should combine these dimensions by assessing the ability of each individual to act and taking into account the power relationship between individuals who fall into the ordinary social structure and those who are separated from it.

According to Daly and Silver (2008), social exclusion involves the existing social problems. The concept of social exclusion must cover not only the characteristics of the phenomenon, regarding what people and how they get into this unfavorable situation, but also the related processes, emphasizing the fact that the excluded persons cannot exist without the included ones, and the relationships between these groups. Individuals can become socially excluded not because they are inappropriate or lack the right skills, but because their activities are not compatible with institutionalized schemes.

Thus, social exclusion can be defined as the process where the persons are excluded from the minimum living conditions, leading to discomfort, lack of self-confidence, loss of respect and dignity. The phenomenon of social exclusion is associated with social justice and social equality in society. While analyzing social exclusion in Lithuania, considerable attention is paid on economic aspects and research on socially excluded groups (Lazutka *et al.* 2008; Žalimienė, 2011). Furthermore, social exclusion is often identified with the concept of poverty, however, poverty often describes only the material side of life, i.e., economic structural exclusion is associated with allocation of resources. This concept of structural exclusion distinguishes tangible and intangible resources, which cannot be used by some persons or groups for certain reasons (Gražulis and Čižikienė (2016).

While looking at the situation in Lithuania, it might be stated that 32.5 percent of the country's population face the risk of poverty or social exclusion. What is more, there are approximately 260 thousand disabled people. In addition, populating ageing is noticed (in 2012, 18 percent of the total population in Lithuania were older than 65 years old, i.e., almost 0.5 million of people), emigration is growing (it is predicted that the number of population will decrease by approximately 18 percent by 2060), birth rates are declining, the concept of family model is changing (Ministry of Social Security and Labor, 2013). Thus, the provision of social services is essential factor, helping to reduce social exclusion. The Communication from the Commission "Implementing the Community Lisbon program: Social services of general interest in the European Union" (Commission of the European Communities, 2006) emphasizes this fact by stating that social services may be defined in a narrow and in a broad sense. The Communication indicates that in certain cases social services include the statutory complex assistance and security scheme, organized and implemented by various means. This scheme aims to cover the main risks of life, therefore, social services are linked to "health, ageing, occupational life, unemployment, retirement, and disability" (Commission of the European Communities, 2008). In this way, social services play two roles: first, assistance is provided to the persons, who face certain risk and cannot cope with it by their own; on the other hand, social services play a preventive role by ensuring social integration and guaranteeing fundamental human rights. The Communication (Commission of the European Communities, 2008) specifies that social services "comprise assistance for persons faced by personal challenges or crises (e.g., debts, unemployment, drug addiction, etc.)." They also include activities to ensure that the persons concerned are able to completely and successfully reintegrate into society. A special attention is paid on their reintegration into labor market and on reintegration of persons with long-term health or disability problems. In a narrow sense, social services in the European Union may be

perceived as the aim to ensure services for socially vulnerable groups or socially disabled citizens. Thus, it might be noted that the approach towards social services, presented in the Communication from the Commission (Commission of the European Communities, 2008), includes two dimensions: both very specific assistance for persons, living in unfavorable conditions, and preventive activities, ensuring well-being and quality of life of all European citizens, and preventing from phenomena and factors that negatively influence the life of a person. It should be mentioned that the strategic documents of Lithuania emphasize economic activity, resulting in too high requirements for the right to unemployment benefits, and the persons, who are not ready to integrate into the labor market, are left without assistance. Thus, there is a question of what the solution should be, in order that part of society, which does not need any assistance or services yet, would agree to be involved in the exclusion reduction system. In the view of rational choice, the process of addressing the social problems and providing social services must include a social agreement, chosen by individuals in exchange of the state protection and prevention of negative phenomena (Vanagas and Čižikienė (2015).

3. Rational Choice Problem in Provision of Social Services

While providing social services to excluded members of society, it is essential to consider the principal idea of rational choice theory, which would explain the actions of persons, citizens, and public servants from the position of rationality, because the society tends to consider whether it is necessary to altruistically give away the created good or whether to rely on neoliberal provisions on the basis of selfish actions of producers and consumers. While analyzing the system of social services, the concepts of a rational agent and a boundedly rational agent may be distinguished (Gigerenzer and Selten, 2002). A rational agent would choose the best or the most optimal alternatives from all the possibilities by assessing the benefit of each alternative and choosing the most beneficial one. However, this choice takes a lot of time because we cannot judge whether we are choosing the best of the possible alternatives, since the search process is limited. Thus, we fail to assess all possible alternatives of an action in specific situation, i.e., we are boundedly rational rather than completely rational – we consider only limited range of acts (Žalimienė and Dunajevs, 2015). Rational choice theory is based on the concept of methodological individualism. Therefore, it is analyzed through the entirety of activities of individuals, seeking for their goals. It seems like a human activity has two dimensions: first one – physical, psychological, economic, and legal restrictions, faced by each of the society members; however, if activity is not overlapping, it opens up all opportunities; second one – defines which of the opportunities will be chosen. There are two mechanisms: rational choice and social norms (Dunajevs, 2009). In the context analyzed by the authors, rational choice is important because people, acting under the constraints imposed on them by their resources, psychophysical organization and their decision-making competence, try to implement a consistent set of goals, using the best available way to use the information accessible to them to form opinions about the surrounding world, and to choose the actions, which, according to these opinions, are the best means of achieving their goals (Norkus, 2005b).

While making decisions, a person chooses whether to participate or not, to help or not, to accept or to change. Thus, those excluded may often not understand that the provided social assistance is altruistic, and that it may bring a common benefit. Olson (1965) analyzed the organizations, which support common interests of their members, and found that focusing on the common benefit, i.e., on what is given to one or more members of an organization, cannot be taken away from other members of that organization. Thus, there is a problem, related with the interest of all members, as the pursuit of common good requires a lot of time and energy. Therefore, the interest of each member is not to put his personal efforts, but to leave it for others, but once common good is achieved, it becomes accessible to all members of the group (Petukienė *et al.* 2007). However, a dilemma arises that if the members of society followed this approach, common good would have never been created, since not each person, considering his rational choice, would seek for the group goals. For the reasons above, various sanctions are often used in society, in order to force a person to make contribution to a common good.

In summary, it can be argued that the current debate on assistance and social services is the result of this concept as there is a question of why one should give his resources for a common good, if the excluded persons want only to get rather than to create a common good. It is stated that provision of social assistance is encouraged by selfish motives. First, it is the concern for yourself – a concern of whether the quality of life would not be negatively affected, if you find yourself in the situation, similar to the one of the recipients of social services. However, in society, many people tend to act according to the principle of this day (Elster, 2000) without rational prediction of a future situation.

In the provision of social services, disagreements arise where the population groups share a common outcome and where a person must decide whether to join the provision or not. Rational choice theory emphasizes that individuals are motivated by their goals, which include their preferences. However, individuals cannot get everything they want. Therefore, they should choose both the goals and the means to achieve these goals. Thus, individuals must predict all alternatives to reach the action outcomes, and to calculate which one is the most suitable for them. Rational individuals choose the alternative that gives the maximum benefit for them. If people want to help others and get a sense of satisfaction from this activity, provision of assistance is a rational act of personal interest. Elster (2007) notes that rational choice is instrumental, i.e., it is based on the outcomes of an action. Rational choice means searching for the best measures to reach the desired goal. It is the best way to adapt to the circumstances.

Social services differ from other public services by the fact that they are related with individual's social role and are provided only during social interaction (Bahle, 2002). Thus, the provided social services include new complex organizational structures, e.g., material bases, human resources, adapted measures, etc., which need to be organized, managed, and controlled. A structure of the social services system and its formation in the context of rational choice theory may be analyzed through interaction of mutual exchange between the rational agents, who behave in certain institutional and organizational environment. The system of social services can be analyzed as the system, consisting of agents, resources, and actions (Vanagas and Čižikienė, 2013). While examining a group of agents, it can be named as the process, involving the individual and collective decision making, that starts from abundance of information, on the basis of which the current situation is defined, the expected benefit is assessed, the possible choices are provided for, and, finally, the possible outcomes of the decision are predicted. This process always ends with the choice of specific alternative of the basis of predefined criteria. It is essential to emphasize that decision making is often perceived as a process of discussion that can be both rational and irrational, based on clearly defined or just implied assumptions. The scientific literature usually presents a traditional linear concept of decision making. In other words, it provides a series of steps to help a decision maker to make the best decision.

Social services are part of the social assistance system, where the following can be distinguished: direct system agents, receiving social assistance, assistance administrators, politicians, professionals, representatives of other social groups as potential recipients (Žalimienė and Dunajevs, 2015). Welfare of the society members directly depends on the activities of law-makers and administrators, and on organizations providing the goods. It should be noted that those, who organize the services, often do not understand the expectations of specific social assistance recipients, therefore, individual's possibilities to receive specific assistance depend on whether they comply with the values of society (Vanagas and Čižikienė, 2015).

However, there is no consensus in society on how to organize the social services for their recipients, in order they would get a maximum benefit. Following the provisions of rationality, it is essential to remember that consumer sovereignty of social assistance recipients is limited (Eika, 2009), since an individual is unable to develop the control of his actions due to his physical, cognitive characteristics, and emotional disability. Elster (2000) divides the agents into the following groups: those, who are capable to predict and see the outcomes of their actions, and those, who are unable to predict and see their current actions. The majority of people are characterized by irrational distribution of resources in their life, therefore, social services are provided, seeking to protect the social assistance recipients from irrational decisions. High costs are incurred, while providing social services, as it is necessary to select the appropriate service

providers, to conclude contracts, to solve the arising disagreements between the service recipients and the service providers. In summary, it might be stated that according to rational choice theory, the states should analyze, justify and make the decisions for providing the social assistance so that the socially excluded persons could properly and sufficiently integrate into society by understanding and creating a common benefit.

4. Conclusions

The article discusses the aspects of rational choice theory, which help to deepen the analysis of the system of social services for reduction of social exclusion, and emphasizes that social services are a part of the social assistance system, where a rational choice problem occurs in distribution of resources – how to provide the most appropriate assistance under the conditions of limited resources, since, with regard to the dimensions of socially excluded groups, assistance includes many factors that are not always sufficiently secured by the state.

On the basis of rational choice theory, it can be explained why we need to provide social assistance, and to allocate resources, despite the fact that some members of society are not always willing to care for themselves. The assistance provided is based on the altruism of the community members, although people are more tended to selfish behavior. This can be explained in the context of rational choice, since while scarifying and giving to another, a person acquires social recognition, and the business groups, donating to those, who receive social assistance, improve their image formation, and the welfare of one person can be included into the prediction of the usefulness of another person.

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