

# Expectations of Community Social Workers for their Professional Competence

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**Introduction.** Disintegration of family and community has become an area of concern in many European countries. This disintegration could be explained either by unlimited individualism (Brake, Deller, 2008), or by the collapse of former political systems, which presupposed centrifugal tendencies in Eastern European countries. (A. Juska etc. 2005; V. Atkociūnienė a,b; W. Hinte, 2008; etc.). Besides these reasons, growing migration also underlines the issue of community solidarity (G. Franger etc., 2008). Therefore in recent years community development amongst other things has become significant in the policy of the European community („Community cohesion policy“<sup>1</sup>, etc.).

After the collapse of the soviet system the need for a new solidarity within a community has been also necessitated by the challenge to find and master social and financial resources, which existed outside the community and were offered by the national and international organizations, funds, government and municipalities (V. Ilgius, 2001). These needs along with the development of the new values of initiative and entrepreneurship have led to the rise of community movements in many Eastern European countries, especially in rural areas, where people felt the most excluded from the intellectual, cultural and financial resources. (A. Juska etc. 2005; A. Juska etc., 2008). In European countries many rural communities started their activity from the organization of cultural events (traditional festivals, sport competitions, festivals, etc.). Such activities helped to unite people, reduce hostility and distrust. Step by step communities grew up to be able to think about community enterprise, possibilities to provide social services. (A. Poviliūnas, 2003; etc.).

Research indicates that community development is often viewed as “a third social method” also in the area of social work (W. Hinte, 2008). As it is a new approach, specialists often lack skills to participate in these processes and regulate them. This creates a need for the new knowledge, which can be built in the form of seminars and national as well as international projects. In 2006 Lithuania and 6 other European countries (Hungary (the coordinator), Romania, Bulgaria, Belgium, Germany, Spain) started the EU project „Community care approach: a strategy for social inclusion“, which sought to develop the knowledge and skills of community social workers and to enable them to provide meaningful social work practice for young professionals.

Each country has organized trainings within the framework of the project for the community social workers aimed at the development of specific competencies of a social worker in a community.

The *aim of the given article* is to analyze the needs for competencies of community workers from 3 European countries – Hungary, Belgium and Lithuania – which would enable them to work better in/with the communities. These three countries were chosen as the representatives of Eastern Europe (Lithuania), Central Europe (Hungary) and Western – Belgium. The term “community worker” is chosen instead of a „community social worker” as a broader one, because some participants were involved into the related fields of social work (community organizers, volunteers, etc.).

**1. Method of the research:** project participants were asked to fill out 2 questionnaires, which encompassed 6 areas of competencies: conceptualization of social work in community (theory), means and finances (management), methodological aspects of community social work, specific issues in community social work (work with different groups and individuals), political issues in

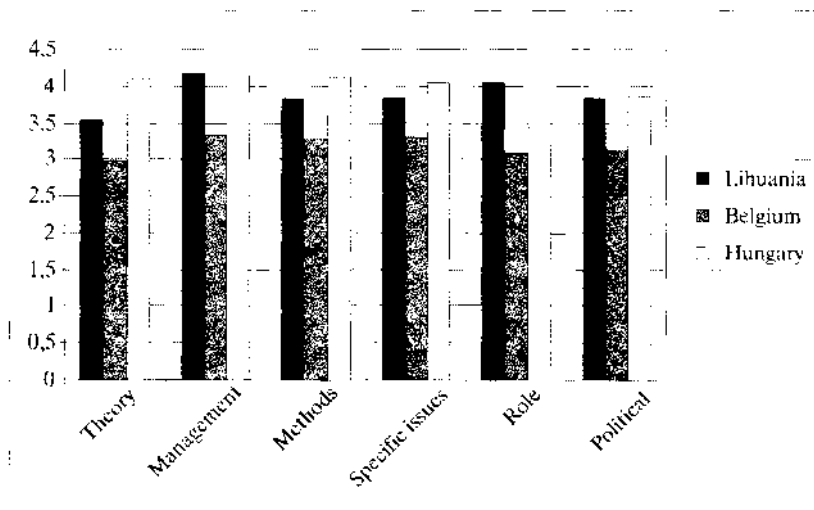
<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/conclu31\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/conclu31_en.htm)

community social work, role and identity of a social worker. The first questionnaire was aimed at identifying areas of values, knowledge and skills, which, according to the participants, they needed most in social work in/with the community. The second questionnaire was filled out after the trainings and revealed how satisfied they were with the development of the competencies they preferred as well as other ones listed in the questionnaire. Participants had to mark their preferences in a 5 score scale. In this article only the overview of the *needs* will be presented, assuming that they indicate what expectations a social worker has for himself/herself and what expectations the society in general and the community in particular have for these professionals.

*Respondents.* The number of community workers participating in the trainings was different: Lithuanians – 68, Hungarians – 11, Belgians – 14. The number was determined by the possibilities of each country to organize teachings. Despite a significant difference in numbers, attitudes of Hungarians and Lithuanians coincided in many aspects, therefore it was considered acceptable to include a bigger group into the comparative analysis. The general characteristics of an average participant of the trainings could be outlined as follows: she is approximately a 39,2 years old female with an average of 8,74 years experience of the work with/in a community, especially with children, young people, the unemployed and risk families. Hungarian partners also indicated big experience in the work with ethnical minorities. All participants were activists in their communities motivated to develop further their competence. These results correspond to the data of Gegužienė and Žiliukaitė (2004), who identified the portrait of a community activist in their research – it is a 42-year-old married women with higher education.

## 2. Research results

First of all, it was interesting to identify which of these 6 competence areas were considered to be the most important by the trained participants. A general view of the learning needs is presented in the Picture 1.

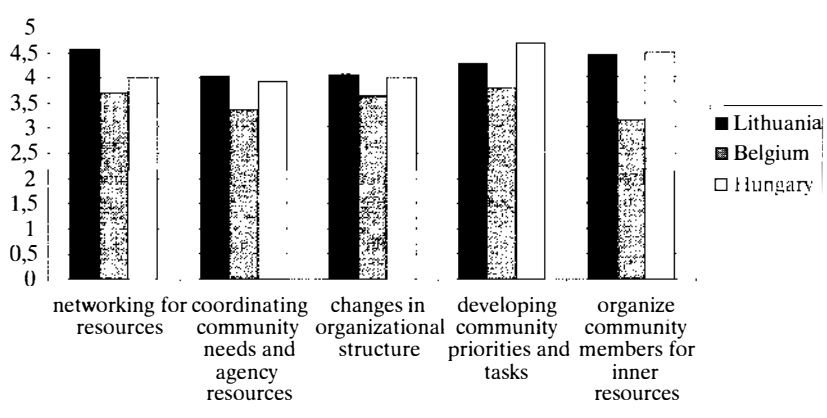


**Picture 1.** Needs for competence areas: results of 3 countries

The results indicate, that the need for knowledge and skills for the work in a community was especially high in Hungarian and Lithuanian groups. Belgian participants expressed only average interest in all competence areas, but the management area together with the methods of commu-

nity work and specific issues (ability to work with different groups and individuals) was marked as slightly more important.

Taking into account a slightly higher preference of all groups for the management field, the detailed analysis of management competencies is presented in Picture 2. It may be seen that Lithuanian community social workers have the acutest need to create networks in order to raise resources as well as to organize community members to develop inner resources. Hungarian trainees showed a preference to learn how to contribute to the development of community priorities and tasks – this aim is directly related to community building. Belgian partners were more interested in the development of community priorities and tasks, changes in the organizational structure in order to increase its effectiveness and creation of networks with other partners in order to raise resources.

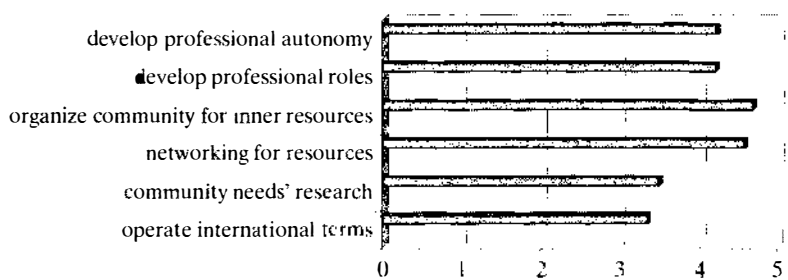


**Picture 2. Needs for management competencies: results of 3 countries**

The second underlying competence area was different in all countries: role and professional identity of a community social worker seemed important for Lithuanians, methods of social work and theoretical basis – for Hungarians, methods and specific issues – for the Belgian group (see Picture 1).

Comparison of the areas of interest for different competence blocs shows that Hungarian participants' need for theoretical conceptualization of community social work is more urgent than that of their Lithuanian counterparts, although both countries are making their first steps of the community development and community social work.

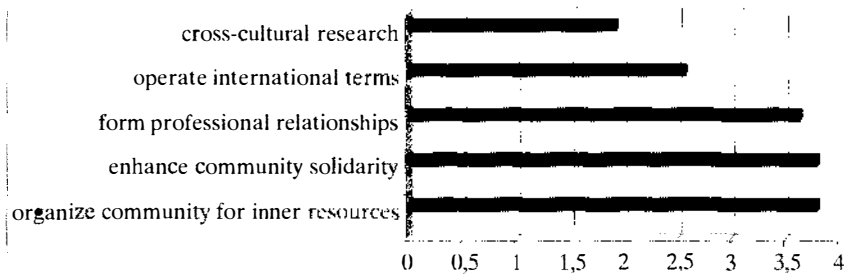
Irrespective of the fact that some competence areas were scored somewhat higher than others, deeper analysis revealed that there were separate competencies in each competence area, which were marked quite differently. At first the lowest and the highest priorities of the Lithuanian trainees will be analyzed (Picture 3).



**Picture 3. Highest and lowest learning priorities: Lithuania.**

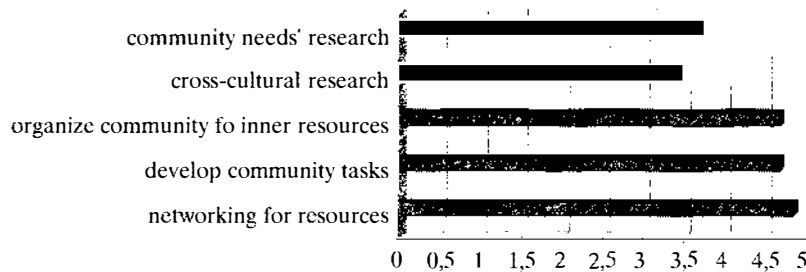
Picture 3 indicates that the most important issue for the Lithuanian participants is to learn the creation of the networks to develop resources, organize people for the development of inner resources and specify their professional role and autonomy. However, the picture also shows an area of concern: the research of community needs, which has to be the prerequisite for the work with the community (A. Poviliūnas, 2003; A. Juska etc., 2005), was not considered as important as other competence areas by the Lithuanian social workers. The ability to operate internationally recognized terms failed to be very attractive to Lithuanian specialists, as well as to the participants in other countries.

Picture 4 reveals the variation in the needs of Belgium participants: alongside with the quite highly ranked need to learn the formation of professional relationships with different client groups, to enhance community solidarity and to develop inner resources, Belgian participants did not find it important to develop the international dimension of their skills either.



**Picture 4. Highest and lowest learning priorities: Belgium**

**Attitudes** of Hungarian trainees ( Picture 5) in some areas overlap with those of Lithuanian ones and in some others – with the Belgian counterparts: Belgian trainees were quite ambiguous about the need to learn to conduct a cross-cultural research, whereas the Lithuanian group – did not find it important to learn to carry out a research of community needs.



**Picture 5. Highest and lowest competence priorities: Hungary**

Paradoxically, irrespective of the lower ranking of the research of community needs Hungarian trainees singled out the competence “to contribute to the development of community tasks”, which, however, is difficult to achieve without a thorough analysis of community needs.

### 3. Discussion

The results of the research revealed some differences in the learning needs of the participants of 3 European countries: social workers from Belgium, the country with a longer tradition of community social work, demonstrated the least interest in the development of all competence areas. Later interview with the Belgian practitioners revealed that compared with other participating countries their needs in community social work training were mostly satisfied. Hungarian and Lithuanian trainees indicated almost the same high level of needs and this proved that the community social work approach in both countries is developing motivating of social workers to seek specific knowledge and skills.

The results also show an area of concern: Hungarian and Lithuanian social workers fail to consider the research in the field of community needs, which has to be the prerequisite for the work with community (A. Juska etc., 2005; etc.), to be as important as other competencies. This implies the danger to impose one’s own attitude and personal aims on the development of the community, that is, to practice managerial strategies, which will never guarantee success unless community priorities are taken into account. Therefore, emphasis on the managerial knowledge and methods might indicate that social professionals are under the impact of the trend of managerialism, which leads to the assumption of a more distant approach, less direct involvement with a client or a group and striving to demonstrate an immediate efficiency of their actions. It is, however, important to attend to community needs in order to enhance and support democratic processes.

Lithuanian trainees demonstrated another significant tendency – alongside with the emphasis on the managerial skills they are trying to specify their new professional status, that is, a new role and identity in their work with the community. The research proves (V. Gegužienė etc., 2004; A. Juska etc., 2005; W. Hinte, 2008; etc.), that on the first stages of community formation (especially in rural areas) most active professionals play an important role. A social worker often assumes a role of a community leader and even organizer and seeks to balance the professional code with the new requirements.

Participants of all 3 countries ranked the ability to organize the community for the development of inner resources quite highly, and Hungary and Lithuania also emphasized the need to attract external financial resources for the local needs. This need may be determined by the difficult eco-

nomical situation in both countries and the lack of government attention to the needs of local communities. However, such approach may also lead to shifting the focus from community needs to the management of mostly external resources, which could lead to an inefficient community work.

Interestingly enough, none of the 3 countries considered the international aspect of competencies – ability to operate internationally recognized terms and to conduct cross-cultural research to be of importance. This leads to the conclusion that at the beginning of a community development, even where this policy is strongly supported by the EU, local problems, local needs, local methods outweigh the advantages of the international social work practice. It may also be presumed that international resources in the form of international projects are either unavailable or not sought by communities due to the lack of specific knowledge or means to reach them. However, Hautekeur and Henderson (2008) argue that cross-boarder cooperation is very important for the developing communities since they face the same major challenges.

## Conclusions

Community social work is one of the ways to provide answers to the social problems. Work in/with the community requires specific values, knowledge and skills.

The research revealed that the need to acquire knowledge, attitudes and skills in the community field was higher in Lithuanian and Hungarian groups. Belgian social workers were more satisfied with their current competence and their needs for additional competencies were only average.

Knowledge, values and skills of the management area were identified by the community workers of all three countries as most important. The development of inner community resources was considered to be one of the biggest challenges by all participants, especially those from Eastern and Central Europe. However, the need of Hungarian and Lithuanian groups to learn the examination of community needs, which are a prerequisite for a successful community work, was not identified as a priority.

Assuming new functions in the developing communities Lithuanian specialists seek competencies, which would help them to identify their new role and identity.

International dimension of community work failed to seem important to the participants of all three countries.

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## **Bendruomenių socialinių darbuotojų lūkesčiai savo kompetencijai**

### **Santrauka**

Bendruomenės irimas ir šio reiškinio socialinės pasekmės jau keletą metų yra vienas iš atidesnio ES valstybių dėmesio objektų. Dažnai į bendruomenės plėtrą žvelgiama kaip į „trečiąjį“ socialinio darbo metodą, galintį padėti spręsti socialines problemas. Socialiniai darbuotojai, dirbantys bendruomenėse, susiduria su papildomais reikalavimais savo kompetencijai. Šiuos reikalavimus mėginama spręsti įvairiais projektais bei mokymais. 2006–2008 metais Lietuva kartu su šešiomis Europos šalimis dalyvavo Leonardo da Vinči projekte „Bendruomenės plėtra: socialinės inkluzijos strategija“, kuriuo buvo siekiama tobulinti bendruomenėse dirbančių socialinių darbuotojų kompetenciją. Visos projekte dalyvavusios šalys surengė mokymus, jų dalyviai įgijo su darbu bendruomenėje susijusių žinių, įgūdžių bei vertybių šešiose srityse: teoriniai bendruomenės darbo pagrindai, vadyba, metodologija, specifiniai klausimai (darbas su skirtingomis klientų grupėmis), politiniai aspektai, socialinio darbuotojo vaidmuo ir identitetas. Prieš mokymus ir po jų buvo atlikta dalyvių anketinė apklausa, kurios pagrindas – kompetencijų sąrašas. Dalyviai žymėjo savo pasirinkimus penkių balų skale. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kokius lūkesčius savo kompetencijai kėlė trijų šalių (Vengrijos, Belgijos ir Lietuvos) bendruomenių darbuotojai (iš viso 93 dalyviai). Šios šalys buvo pasirinktos kaip reprezentuojančios Rytų, Vidurio ir Vakarų Europą. Tyrimas parodė, kad lietuvių ir vengrų respondentai jaučia didesnę žinių ir gebėjimų stygių nei Belgijos socialiniai darbuotojai, juos labiau tenkina turima kompetencija ir jų poreikis įgyti žinių ir įgūdžių bendruomenės darbo srityje yra tik vidutinis. Iš visų kompetencijų sričių visiems mokymų dalyviams labiausiai pageidautina vadybos kompetencija. Kitas visų trijų šalių specialistų prioritetas – vidinių bendruomenės išteklių plėtra, jos narių aktyvinimas. Vis dėlto kelia nerimą menkas Vengrijos ir Lietuvos specialistų dėmesys bendruomenės poreikių analizei, kuri, kaip rodo kitų autorių tyrimai, yra bendruomenės plėtros pamatas. Be jos, dominuojant vadybos metodams, sudėtinga sudominti bendruomenės narius aktyviau įsitraukti į bendruomenės gyvenimą. Įdomi tendencija pastebėta Lietuvos dalyvių atsakymuose: greta pabrėžiamų vadybos gebėjimų šiems respondentams rūpėjo savo vaidmens ir identiteto bendruomenėje paieška, rodanti socialinio darbuotojo statuso bendruomenėje kismą. Visas šalis siejo menkas poreikis įgyti gebėjimų, turinčių tarptautinį aspektą – atlikti tarpkultūrinius tyrimus, operuoti tarptautiniame kontekste pripažintomis socialinio darbo sąvokomis.

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