

Considerations on the Democratic Challenge from the Perspective of Social Services: Community, Participation and (In)equality



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Abstract This chapter offers a view on the need to find a more democratic approach to the social services system. We start from the premise that the current social services system encounters serious difficulties when trying to respond to, and transform, the different problems facing a social reality greatly impacted by injustice and social inequality. The commitment to greater democracy is therefore inevitable from the point of view of what was supposed to be one of the fundamental pillars of the welfare system. A review of some documents and access to some survey data afford an opportunity to discuss what we have called “greater community”/“intensified community”, understood as a strategy allowing social services to develop a model based on participation and community perspective as preferential lines of intervention. The defence of this intensified community allows us to recognize the importance of working with the community towards the construction of active citizenship, this being understood as a fundamental condition for developing democracy. Following an overview of the main postulates supporting this interpretation, a brief summary of the reality of the Basque social services system is provided with the aim to outline the scope of greater community proposed herein.

Keywords Intensified community care · Citizenship · Territory · Community social work

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J. Zabalo et al. (eds.), *Made-to-Measure Future(s) for Democracy?*,
Contributions to Political Science, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-08608-3_13

1 Introduction: Participation and Community – An Opportunity for Social Services?

This work provides an overview of the challenges and threats facing social services, in order to subsequently offer proposals that focus on participation and the community perspective as tools to help provide the social services with an orientation in accordance with the principles of a strengthened democracy. Although some international works are referenced, this reflection on social services focuses fundamentally on the Spanish context, as the social services systems of the different Autonomous Communities share elements that place them within a Mediterranean welfare model. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that particular attention is made to the Basque social services system.

It is important to stress that this approach is carried out from the community dimension of social work, with the understanding that social services are basically powered by the principles and models of intervention offered by the discipline of social work. In order to give structure and sequence to this proposal, we start from at least two premises: (i) that the democratic system must avail (to a greater extent) of social services as a fundamental pillar for the defence of the common good and social protection and (ii) that a relational, participatory and community perspective of social services allows action to be taken concerning the challenges posed by social inequality from the perspective of strengthened democracy. Last of all, this work offers a brief description and assessment of the presence and development of the community dimension in the Basque social services system.

A reflection on the enhancement of democracy in social services is even more necessary nowadays. The current context of crisis highlights one of the main characteristics of the abovementioned democratic crisis: that referring to the persistent and possible worsening of inequality (Bergantiños & Ibarra, 2018, p. 19). Furthermore, the debate on the problems of the “actually existing democracy” has inevitably been alluding to the different and manifest forms of exclusion that the latter includes (Subirats, 2018, p. 44). In this respect, it could be said that the former financial crisis as well as other social transformations generated a climate of uncertainty in which the actual capacity of the welfare state (SIIS, 2019) to cope with situations of inequality and exclusion was questioned.

The different solutions put forward for the contexts of crisis reveal that responses based on the principles of austerity (debt reduction and reduced investment in public expenditure) and late neoliberalism (Rolnick, 2013) generate tension with the principles of a social state (Gordillo, 2013). Thus, increased unemployment, poverty and social inequalities (Intermón-Oxfam, 2016; EAPN, 2019; Foessa, 2019) cast doubt on the efficacy of the austerity models as a solution to the crisis (Flores Paredes & Nieto Solís, 2013; Bergantiños et al., 2017) and highlight the weaknesses of welfare policies with neoliberal orientation (Morales-Villena & Mestre, 2020) that focus on the idea that the individual faces diverse and multiple threats on their own (Torres & Garzón, 2010, p. 221).

In this context, the need for answers in terms of regeneration and democratic alternatives is likewise crucial in the sphere of social services. Beyond the traditional view of social services as a tool for assisting in solving social problems (Hernandez-Echegaray, 2019), the latter could be considered as an agent and a scope of action in itself, since they arose from the need to understand reality on the basis of interaction and communication with people, this quality of interaction being a source of democratic power and a commitment to designing social politics in democratic terms (Bouverne-De Bie et al., 2014). In this respect, we understand that participation and, specifically, community engagement become a fundamental tool for transforming social reality in terms of democracy.

The development of Autonomous Community regulations concerning social services echoes the consideration that citizen engagement is one of the keys in processes seeking inclusion and attaining equality of opportunities or social justice. Moreover, it could be said that this trend is similar in other European countries (Pestoff, 2009), where different ways of involving citizenry in providing and governing social services are being sought, with an aim to work on the challenges faced by the system.

Participation in the area of social services is contemplated from a variety of viewpoints. On the one hand is people's participation in the design, implementation and assessment of social policies, through structures that allow for the engagement of different social players. On the other is the direct participation of the citizenry in their own process of social intervention. This dimension implying the participation of users of social services is the one that has been most addressed from the scientific and professional point of view, with progress being made in diagnoses and intervention plans shared or co-led between experts and the people being attended (Zamanillo, 2008; Santos, 2012). Lastly, it is understood that, generally speaking, participation in social services must address a community and relational perspective aimed at promoting, from the communities themselves, support networks and forms of social relation with an aim to transform the environment into areas with greater equality and social justice.

Participation in social services is likewise an opportunity to work with people who, on many occasions, find themselves in a situation of vulnerability or social exclusion. These situations appear to indicate that a return to participation is fundamental and that being able to feel part of a group is vital (Arenas, 2016). In this respect, some studies underline the importance of creating processes and structures in which people can take part in defining their own future well-being (Truell, 2019, p. 756) as well as in the social policies and services that underpin the welfare state.

In relation to the aforesaid, the latest laws concerning social services passed in the Spanish Autonomous Community framework explicitly refer to the importance of participation as a central element to be developed at the different levels and in the different areas of social intervention (Government of Valencia, 2019; Andalusian Government, 2016; Government of Aragon, 2009; Basque Government, 2008; Catalanian Government, 2007; Alemán, 2010). In the case of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (CAPV), which we shall study in more detail later, Act 12/2008 concerning Social Services includes the need to foment

participation with the implication of the citizens affected while, at the same time, considering engagement as one of the principles of the system itself, as well as being one of three mechanisms for reaching its objectives:

To promote the participation of the community in the resolution of social needs that can be met within the framework of social services, and, in particular, the individual, organised engagement of the users and the bodies active in the social service sphere. (Basque Government, 2008, art. 6.2b)

2 Social Services and the Welfare State: A Critical Review

In this section, we shall offer an overview of social services from the viewpoint of Truell's idea regarding the challenge they face in order to reinforce their role to enable and build community engagement in a democratic process focused on sustainability and social justice (2019, p. 757). To this end, we shall start by conceptualising and contextualising the development of social services and then go on to identify and characterise the different orientations and perspectives that run through them, as well as the current challenges and obstacles in order to foment social justice and social transformation.

In democratic states, together with education, employment or health policies, social services have been set up as one of the fundamental pillars of the welfare state. Among their objectives, of note is that of guaranteeing social protection and covering social needs, by means of benefits and services deployed in different administrations and tiers of competence. However, historically, they have had a smaller projection than other systems of protection, and, together with the welfare state itself, they have experienced a certain weakening that has undermined their capacity and original objectives (Fantova, 2014).

The introduction in Europe, in the 1980s, of strong neoliberal policies implied a critique of the welfare state associated with the idea of high costs and inefficiency (Del Pino & Rubio, 2013). Up till then, the welfare state, of a Keynesian ideological and political nature, had played a decommercialization role, where solidarity and redistribution were the lynchpins of the protection network for citizens (Inza-Bartolome, 2015, p. 391). However, the neoliberal tenets began to exert pressure and direct the responsibility for welfare towards the individual while defending a more businesslike, non-public, management of services previously covered on the basis of principles of non-commercialisation typical of the public sphere (Inza-Bartolome, 2015, p. 386).

In the case of Spain, the setting up of the welfare state was affected by the political situation resulting from Franco's dictatorship. While the welfare state began to take shape in Europe, in Spain, charity and assistance-oriented actions still played a fundamental role (SIIS, 2019; Santos, 2012) and subsequently gave rise to social assistance. Therefore, in the 1980s, social services were still considered to be within the framework of the social security system, and social assistance still existed for people who were excluded from the rest of the protection systems (Aguilar, 2017).

Because of how it developed and for a variety of other reasons (a young system, the diverse competences and institutions, etc.), it could be said that the social services have failed to reach the same level of consolidation as the rest of the systems (Hernandez-Echegaray, 2019; Jaraíz, 2011).

The welfare states and, by extension, social services, as their names suggest, aim at procuring welfare. Esping-Andersen (1993) proposes that welfare needs are satisfied, in the main, by three structures providing welfare and security, the state, the market (employment) and the family, thus forming what he calls the welfare triangle. Authors like Bauman (2000) point out the difficulties that these structures encounter as structures providing security and welfare. As previously mentioned in the introduction, an increasingly less stable and more precarious labour market makes working lives highly uncertain (Aznar & Azorín, 2010). Precariousness is already a feature of the labour market, with the result that it is hard to see how it could act as a provider of security and welfare.

In the second place, the family too is incapable of providing the security and welfare that it has, so far, been able to offer, particularly, in situations of great necessity. Families' economic capacity has dropped considerably (Foessa, 2019), and women's participation in the labour market has meant that the family is losing relevance as a stable structure for providing security and welfare (Moreno, 2002). Linked to this is the fact that individualism has led to primary sources such as networks, the community and, in short, organised society losing their capacity as providers of welfare (Hernández, 2009).

Last of all, the state is increasingly less likely to guarantee social security. The state finds itself in a position in which the regulation of the economy and its capacity to intervene and control appears to have been relegated by the mercantile logic of globalisation. Its forms of intervention are no longer aimed at extending public protection through employment, health and education but rather at making up for the forms of exclusion generated by a highly exclusive labour market (Cabeza, 2006).

In this context, it could be said that, with the development of the welfare state, we can identify different models and orientations in which each one of the former providers has a different relevance. In the case of Spain, just like in Greece, Italy or Portugal, we can speak of the existence of a Mediterranean model, whose main distinguishing feature is the fundamental role of the family as the provider of welfare and security. Moreover, benefits and services are usually linked to labour inclusion. The system is often selective rather than universal, and it has limited powers of redistribution. Consequently, the impact on society is the reproduction of social inequalities (Moreno & Mari-Klose, 2013).

Social services are not alien to the major advent of neoliberal policies which, if anything, have been more present in a context of economic crisis (Pastor et al., 2019). In this regard, some studies point out that social workers, being the main professionals in social services, have gone from exercising their profession based on Marxist/Socialist ideologies in which state intervention was extensive and had greater responsibility to ideologies of a more neoliberal nature (Boryczko, 2020) and thus promoting the responsibility of the individual in their own welfare while reducing the state's role as provider. Therefore, and according to these studies,

neoliberal tendencies appear to be weakening the power of social services as an agent of change and influence in social policies (Lazar et al., 2018).

In this respect, the creation of social services has undoubtedly been marked by the political situation. Non-consolidation of the system (a young system, the diverse competences and institutions, etc.) means that the social services find it hard to define their object (Jaraíz, 2011; Aguilar, 2017; Fantova, 2017), the population with which social services work. Despite it being outlined explicitly in legal frameworks, there are doubts about whether these social services have the necessary features to be defined as a system (Arrieta, 2019; Roldán, 2009). The latest laws concerning social services state that the latter are comparable to all other protection systems; they are universal and, therefore, for all citizens. Nevertheless, when you analyse the profile of those being assisted by social services, what you see are mainly people with a low income, people who are more vulnerable or people occupying the weakest links in the social classes. This implies that the work of the professionals in the sector is an exercise in covering the basic needs of a specific type of population and turns the systems itself into something residual rather than universal. This is why, as Fantova points out (2000, p. 2), it is “increasingly irresponsible, inefficient and dangerous for society and for social services to pretend that we can be the ultimate general network”, and, consequently, it is indispensable that we work along the lines of universal social services, from the perspective of the so-called new social risks (Taylor-Gooby, 2013).

In relation to the aforesaid, it is important to highlight the challenge posed by the attention model. It is clear that we can't get rid of the assistance-oriented bias (Arenas, 2016) based on the demand-resource binomial proposed by Zamanillo and Gaitan (1991) which, even today, is constraining social services. This binomial refers to the importance of urgent and timely intervention in order to guarantee the minimum subsistence of families and individuals chiefly by means of interventions concerning the individual and the family, which are provided from the desk in the wake of a need expressed by the person or family. Zamanillo and Nogués explain that this facilitates both neoliberalism and inequality (2020, p. 4). In contrast, it is decisive for social services with performance capability in the welfare state and democratic development to cater to emerging needs and reverse the attention model, by trying to increasingly support and work together with people and groups at the outset, and thus prevent situations from getting worse, resulting in the consolidation of much more proactive and preventive social work (Dominguez & Esperanza, 2017).

It could therefore be said that private management and economic principles have colonised the social services' approach to doing things (Spolander et al., 2016), and social intervention from the perspective of community and the collective has been set aside (Carbonero et al., 2012). On the basis of this idea of commodification, and in reference to the aforesaid, Beck (2006) speaks of processes of individualisation understood as the damage and destruction of primary relational goods. If, from social services, it is understood that the basis of these necessities lies in social problems of a structural nature (social exclusion, inequality, poverty, migratory flows, male violence, etc.), they can hardly be met with purely individual and assistance-oriented answers. Therefore, it is considered fundamental that the collective and

structural dimension of social work be recovered in social services, including an intensification of collective action, putting the general interest above that of individuals and fomenting the participation of all those involved (Rodríguez, 2015).

The absence of this collective perspective and the mainstay of welfare and social protection (not individual) is likewise reflected in citizenry's perception of the system of social services itself. Citizens do not view social services as a universal system or even an essential one, as is the case with the educational or health systems, but rather it is considered as something residual and assistance-based. Incorporating its consideration as a social right for all people is necessary with a view to fomenting social justice, because, above and beyond the support that citizens are given by social services, legitimisation by society is indispensable in order for the system to be maintained, as a public system needs society to consider it their own, something they must defend, look after or claim, if necessary (Santos, 2012).

Following this overview of social services, we can identify at least two of these challenges: (i) a real universalization of the system by defining its purpose; (ii) the evolution from a reactive and individualistic-type model of care to one with a preventive and community nature, not solely attention-oriented (rapid and specific attention); and, last of all, (iii) bringing all citizens closer to social services and making sure the system is understood as a fundamental right.

Moreover, the recent Covid-19 pandemic further ratifies some of the aforementioned challenges, as far social services are concerned. Fantova (2020b) states that this context affords us the opportunity to rethink and reinvent social services with a view to rebuilding the same, and, in the same vein, Zamanillo and Nogués point out that we are at a "crossroads" which is why it is essential that we adopt new approaches which would, for the most part, entail radical changes (2020, p. 8).

Neoliberal ideas and values are undoubtedly a challenge to the values of social work itself (Marthinsen, 2019) and of the actual social services and point to the need to reinvent social services in line with the reality of the challenges being faced.

3 Community and Participation: Vectors of Democracy from Social Services

So far we have argued the importance of social services as a pillar of the welfare state and have identified some of the challenges to be met by these services. In this respect, we propose a strengthening of democracy in this area too. With this in mind, in this section we shall go more deeply into (i) the relevance of a commitment to the community dimension of social work for intervention on the part of social services and (ii) the opportunity to do so by understanding the same from a relational and participatory perspective, as outlined in the different laws concerning social services. We defend a strategy that allows us to advance towards transformative social action based on preventive and community developmental action as opposed to assistance-related approaches (Suirats, 2007).

As already mentioned, diverse studies have highlighted the inadequacies of the current model of Spanish social services (Jaraíz, 2011; Roldán, 2009; Arenas, 2016) due to its lack of capacity to respond to social situations and needs (Navarro, 2015), particularly in contexts of crisis where intervention is even more crucial. In addition, there have been numerous proposals about what some authors have called the reinvention of social services (Fantova, 2020a, 2020b; Zamanillo & Nogués, 2020; Navarro, 2020). All said proposals seek to reinforce the idea of working differently from social services, using different ways of doing things and underlining the importance of doing so from the community perspective: building community, with citizen engagement, in a collective and collaborative fashion, as an indispensable actor in collective social action, making the environment more democratic in their own territories (Blanco, 2019; Pastor, 2017).

As pointed out above, our approach will be implemented from the community perspective of social work, and this dimension will be addressed in the lines below. We could say the main objective of community social work is the “activation of social support and the building of social networks, developing the resources of people and the different environments and social contexts” (Rodríguez & Ferreira, 2018, p. 1). In this respect, as pointed out by Pastor, social engagement is a “defining element” of the community dimension of social work, and the capacity to participate in the community is fundamental for human development itself (2004, p. 107).

This community dimension of social work focuses on its capacity to build social citizenship (Gimeno-Monterde & Alamo-Candelaria, 2018) while insisting on inclusiveness, deliberation and proximity as elements contributing to forms of citizenship and community qualified to build their own future (Pastor, 2004, p. 132). The idea of social citizenship, capable of defining and building their future reality, comes from reaffirming the importance of participation, of working with the community rather than for or in the community (Marchioni, 2004 or Pastor, 2015).

In this approach, the relational dimension plays a significant role in its potential capacity to remedy social inequality and social injustice and help establish that participating through community networks helps reverse certain situations as well as forms of exclusion and social injustice (Morales-Villena & Mestre, 2020, p. 1) As for the community’s capacity for prevention, Fantova (2017) states that the greater the social capital and relational network, the lower the likelihood of reaching a situation of social exclusion, as primary relations are the key source of social protection. Indeed, Rodríguez and Ferreira’s work shows the importance of intervention using social networks and the need for an “orientation towards empowerment” as a strategy for generating forms of full citizenship (2018, p. 1).

On the basis of the above, we can infer that municipal level and primary attention are the closest space of reference for developing intervention practices and community work (Llobet, 2004; Carbonero et al., 2012). Therefore, local social services, being the gateway to social services, are considered those closest to people. Consequently, they are a privileged observation point for doing research on, and working together with, citizens, for exercising countervailing citizen power and having an impact both socially and politically, on the ways to build sufficient

political agency. The local setting is key for the encounter between the political class and citizens and affords a privileged context for developing social policies with a direct impact on citizens' well-being (Rodríguez, 2015).

In this local setting, we place the primary attention of social services whose principles of universality, equality and equity comprise the opportunity for developing community perspective. On the other hand, at a higher level and in the legislative sphere, the different Autonomous Community laws on social services include citizen engagement as one of its pillars (Alemán, 2010) and explicitly advocate for the community approach or community care, generically understood as the capacity to be able to understand and look after people in their own environment (Fantova, 2014, p. 104). From our viewpoint, we understand the community dimension as a continuum, *community continuum*. At one end, we find the said community approach or community care as the lowest sense of the community dimension, whereas at the other end, we find "pure" community social work representing the most profound version of community development, the one defended by authors like Marchioni (2004) or Pastor (2015). The main difference between the two extremes of the *continuum* would be engagement, as, in the second, it is indispensable. Consistent with this idea, we propose the term *community intensification*, as a perspective that would consist in progressing as far as possible in the *continuum* towards "pure" community social work or the more community-oriented dimension of social work, deeply rooted in the idea of engagement.

It is a question of considering the community as a political subject, a stakeholder in the social action of a given territory. Collective interests are put before the interests of the individual, and the community itself, with all its particularities, is the main resource in the face of any difficult situation (Marchioni, 2004). Starting from this premise implies recognising the challenge of recovering community and granting it power in terms of governance, the development of community projects, fomenting people's participation and generating projects that actually improve the reality of the different environments, neighbourhoods and spaces in which people live (Zamanillo & Nogués, 2020).

Community intensification from social services requires the authorities and community to work together, and, to this end, barriers between what is political, technical and social need to be overcome as a premise for developing processes of participatory community action (Blas & Ibarra, 2006, p. 41).

In addition, it calls for a clear technical and political commitment by municipal social services with respect to increased financial investment and to admitting their relevance and importance as a true pillar of the welfare state (Santos, 2012). Community intensification likewise implies directing efforts to coordination and common work with society, the people who make up the community, bodies in the third social sector, social movements, neighbour association movements, etc. The people who are part of the community are the main resource of the more community-based work because they foment citizens' active commitment to collective welfare, the promotion of rights, denunciation and, in short, social transformation (Escartín, 2012).

Unlike the current social work that characterises social service practice, more critical social work calls for greater social commitment, with values such as social justice, solidarity or equity. The consideration of the structural and systemic nature of social problems (Velasco, 2019) requires an understanding that the transformation of the same entails a collective rather than an individual consideration of political agency (Carbonero et al., 2012).

Indeed, the context deriving from the pandemic offers us an opportunity to reaffirm, and focus on, the relevance of community approaches. In recent months, we have witnessed increased solidarity, articulation, self-organisation and self-management in neighbourhoods. Social and community systems have worked like a network, and, when faced with situations of vulnerability, they have played a responsible role, becoming essential agents of social action in neighbourhoods: “The neighbours’ response highlights the need to recover certain personal and family links that had been replaced by impersonal and professional business relations. And social services are an excellent stage on which to try to connect all contributions made by the community in which the social action they are entrusted with is carried out” (Zamanillo & Nogués, 2020, p. 6).

As Rodríguez points out, for social services to intervene in problems of a structural nature, such as poverty, citizens must be involved, and civil society must be strengthened, as it has the capacity for community action everywhere (2015, p. 6). In this respect, the commitment to intensified community engagement can help overcome the challenges outlined in the foregoing section. In the first place, it allows us to defend social services that go beyond welfare-oriented action based on mitigating individual situations of vulnerability or exclusion, in order to turn its gaze to the whole of the community and try to contribute to a true universalisation and normalisation of social services. Similarly, it implies, unlike the individualism that characterises our societies, relational work, a change to a more proactive and collective attention model, to ways of intervention aimed at social cohesion and solidarity between people. Last of all, in the strategy of intensified community engagement, the community is considered a political subject, and from that starting premise, in the face of the weakening of the welfare triangle, it is likewise conceived as a structure providing welfare and security, to complement the rest.

4 The Case of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country

In this section, we shall provide a brief overview of the Basque system of social services. Our aim is to try and describe the presence and development of the community dimension in the current social service system of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country. The objective is to bring this debate closer to a given reality, with a view to identifying the challenges faced by the Basque system of social services in matters relating to intensified community engagement.

When we look at the opportunities that the Basque system of social services generates in relation to intensifying community engagement, Act 12/2008 concerning Social Services clearly stands out as one of the most important. Apart from presenting social services as a subjective right of a universal nature, said law clearly advocates the community care model as a key element in care procedure. Among the law's principles are concepts of interest for the community such as universality, equality, equity, proximity, prevention, integration, normalisation, coordination and cooperation or citizen engagement.

Defence of the community is envisaged as a condition for access by the population to the exercise of citizenship, promotion of social justice and work on the causes of social exclusion; and it does so by recognizing, in its explanatory memorandum, the need for collaboration with the third sector:

Promotion of the organised participation of the very people affected, the design of spaces of cooperation and coordination between systems (social and health care, socio-occupational, social and residential, social and educational, social and legal, social and cultural and others) and the development of a social policy that allows access by all the population to full citizenship, the promotion of social justice and tackling the structural causes of exclusion. (Law 12/2008)

Moreover, the law is developed through different tools such as the portfolio decree (Basque Government, 2015), the strategic plan for social services and the map of social services (Basque Government, 2016). All of them include and explicitly support engagement, the community model, governance and cooperation with other systems so that it could be said that the main legal and theoretical frameworks of the Basque system of social services consistently include references to participation and the community, making the latter a direct commitment of the actual social service system.

Additionally, the data offered by the Basque Government's Statistics on Social Services and Social Action (OEE-Basque Government, 2018) can help us appreciate the practical development of this community outlook, at least as regards (i) the services and benefits offered by social services, (ii) the expenditure made and (iii) the personnel who work in the system. We shall only refer to some of the relevant data that helps provide some context, as a deeper analysis would be overly complex.

First of all, regarding the services and resources used by social services, data on the home help service, understood as one of the services with the strongest community-based approach as well as with the greatest proximity as far as the people assisted are concerned, showed a continuous decline up to 2014, though, in 2016, the figures were more similar to the best ones recorded in the series (those corresponding to 2012, with 7.2 persons per one thousand residents assisted). In a context of an ageing population, there has been a decrease in the scope and intensity of the service: although the number of elderly people has risen and, consequently, the number of dependent people too, the service has failed to grow (OEE- Basque Government, 2018). In consequence, the scope and intensity of the service with the system's strongest community-oriented approach (the lowest link in the *community continuum*) have shrunk. On the other hand, among the services and benefits offered are old people's homes, day centres, home help services, telecare, social emergency

services and help, being as they are essential services, but with a clear emphasis on assistance or care. The main resource for carrying out work with a community dimension in social services are the actual social workers, who are not even mentioned as a resource or service, a glaring absence in the strategy for fomenting community included in the regulatory frameworks.

Secondly, with regard to the outlay, it could be said that 50% of public expenditure in social services is made by the regional governments of the different territories, 30% by the Basque Government and only 10% by local authorities. Furthermore, since the community model was first promoted in 2008, the numbers have changed, and expenditure by the regional governments and Basque Government has risen by more than 100% and 70%, respectively, whereas that of the local authorities has dropped from 16% to 10% (OEE- Basque Government, 2018). Of this public expenditure, municipal expenses account for 12.5%, an amount that has dropped by almost 2 percentage points since 2012. If, as mentioned above, the municipal sphere is considered the point of reference for the community dimension, it is hard to imagine how it can develop in line with what is laid down in the legal and theoretical frameworks, without financial outlay or investment in technical personnel.

Lastly, in relation to the people working in social services, we can observe an increase in numbers of almost 25% since 2006 (OEE-Basque Government, 2018). However, personnel in municipal social services, a reference in the development of the community perspective, has hardly grown in numbers since Act 12/2008 (OEE-Basque Government, 2018) was passed, so, although it may be a firm commitment in the law, the fact that professional resources have not been increased in the sphere where it is to be implemented hinders its progress and consolidation.

Moreover, in the Ararteko's (Basque Ombudsman) report (2016) on the challenges and threats identified, special emphasis is put on those that are related to the weakness of the community perspective of Basque municipal social services.

In the first place, reference is made to the need for collaborating when providing services that are considered fundamental to guarantee social cohesion and people's quality of life. The report points out the importance of boosting self-organisation initiatives in the community making up public social action and which are only feasible at local level (2016, p. 171–172). Similarly, among the proposals included in the report is promotion of the active participation of the people in the services and in the processes of design and development of municipal policy concerning social service primary care, by prioritising citizen engagement. As for the programmes and services to be developed by municipal social services, community development and mediation programmes are contemplated (p. 174), while emphasis is placed on the fact that (i) community work (complementing individual work) affords the possibility of participation to a significant part of the people making up the community; (ii) the community approach implies managing diversity; (iii) one works from the community perspective, with the aim to strengthen community relations and participatory dynamics; and, last of all, (iv) the community approach includes concepts like proximity or networking in the collective imagination (2016, p. 175).

Last of all, the report refers to the fact that community development programmes help contribute to citizens' social and economic development through their

revitalisation, reinforcement and the creation of self-help networks or other social and/or economic initiatives, with the aid of collective and cooperative projects (Ararteko, 2016).

This brief analysis of the community perspective in Basque social services reveals its weakness in practice, despite the major development contemplated in its regulations. In any case, in the face of the insufficient response of social policies, the global context would appear to indicate a rediscovery of self-managed initiatives and community and relational links in their creation and development (SIIS, 2019, p. 6). In the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country too, we can appreciate different experiences of community self-management and new forms of voluntary action, experiences in which, in spheres such as the one related to the elderly, there is a commitment to “co-creation for designing community services” (SIIS, 2019, p. 7). Thus, along the lines of this work, in this last year marked by the pandemic, we have witnessed the emergence of forms of joint and community action between citizens and social services at municipal level¹ (Naiz, 2020).

5 A Final Reflection/Conclusions

This work has discussed the need to explore the democratisation of social services and the tools or perspectives required to do so. Our analysis has helped us conclude that social services have great difficulty in meeting their objectives of social justice and transformation. Consequently, we believe a commitment to a deepening of democracy in the sphere of social services is necessary. There is need for a strategy based on the participatory, community aspect, one which is in fact present in the regulatory principles and objectives that characterise these services.

Accordingly, our proposal is based on the concept of intensified community care as a strategy for contributing satisfactorily to democratisation. Furthermore, it was our intention to demonstrate that the context of crisis arising from the pandemic makes it even more urgent to insist on the fact that only with sufficient community and political perspective in social services can we go forward with building and strengthening democracy.

The worsening of inequalities which is likewise a reflection of the social service system’s own shortcomings leads us to look at the role of social services in the development of a form of democracy based on social justice and the common good. The importance of an intervention still focused on individual situations and problems, in a reactive and care-oriented way, makes it highly unlikely that the community dimension will ever be the central point from which to foment deep

¹ Interview with the mayor of Errenteria in NAIZ newspaper, which covers the work carried out jointly by the social services and the different community players in the town. In: Naiz irratia. 2020. (April 6). Esku hartz epublikoaren eta komunitatearen ekimenari esker ari gara honi eant-zuten” Aizpea Otaegi Errenteriako alkateari elkarrizketa. https://irratia.naiz.eus/eu/info_irratia/20200406/eskuhartze-epublikoaren-eta-komunitatearen-ekimenari-esker-ari-gara-egoerari-honi-erantzuten. Accessed 20 April 2020.

social transformation. Thus, more and more people are defending a more relational intervention by social services, in a more proactive manner and with networking as a condition for social transformation.

In this respect, insisting on the need for an intensification of the community dimension in social services implies being able to make the necessary changes and reinvention for a professional practice focusing on the opportunities offered by this channel to democracy. On the one hand, due to the proximity of the intervention and professional practice, heavily focused on territory and communities, a necessary step would be to share a reflection on the needs and the work for developing already existing resources in the community with the people affected. On the other hand, it is advisable due to the community's leading role in articulating forms of community participation aimed at building an active social citizenry, present at decision-making process.

The brief and still exploratory introduction of the data referring to the Basque system of social services reveals that the importance granted to the community in the legal sphere is not sufficiently reflected in professional practice and in the conditions referring to expenditure and adapting to context which they clearly imply. On the other hand, a review of the documents reveals that a view of social services as the central player for the development of the welfare state and democracy is beginning to take hold in theory and in academe as well as in all the experiences which are globally incorporating the community dimension. It will therefore be quite a challenge to go on exploring the channels which this community dimension of the social work discipline implies for the greater democratization of social services.

In this regard, and on the basis of the community intensification approach, progressing towards community social work based on participation would seem urgent and a priority: power sharing, making people participants in their own lives and building fairer and more democratic territories in cooperation and collaboration, where relations are social networks and, in short, where more and better welfare is achieved.

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