

Support provided by municipalities for families: Experience of families with children with special needs in Latvia

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Abstract. For families that are not capable to obtain necessary supplies to meet their needs, State's social policy guidelines determine support for improving the quality of life for these families. However, it is concluded, that neither the state nor municipality' provided support for families with children with special needs, does not meet the needs of families, because state social policy is not focused on the assessment of the family needs, as well as often families do not receive the support due to lack of necessary information and disinterest by social service workers, which in turn reflects the problems in social policy delivery mechanisms. The most necessary support that families need is concerned with lodging and financial security, lack of assistants/care at home, as well as – emotional support.

Key words: *family needs, social policy, support*

The social significance of family in the physical and spiritual reproduction of the population and the continuation of society, underpins the responsibility of the state to ensure effective functioning of family as a social system, which is possible only through creating of circumstances favourable for meeting family needs.

Social policy's main objective is to create good conditions for human existence and continuation of family. It includes state organized events and specific activities that should be focused on the social safety promotion of each member of the society. The capacity of families to meet their needs greatly depends on the support of state, municipality, NGOs and the society as a whole, so the policy makers must pay attention to the support for those families that for some reason have limited access to resources. Families of children with special needs often need more recourse to satisfy family needs than those families where no children with special needs are. However, not all families of children with special needs can provide themselves with necessary recourses, as a result – they cannot fully satisfy their material, mental and social needs, as a result – not only family member's integration in the society is threatened, but also family's as a social unit existence.

Based on various scientific theories and also on research data analysis, in the article will be analyzed support by municipalities for families with children with special needs. Method used in the research – standardized interviews. By November 2010, there were registered 7049 families with children with special needs and that have been granted disability. That in general represents 2.8% of all families with up to 19 years old children (<http://www.vsa.gov.lv>).

Social policy and it's theoretical explanation

Social policy is the governmental policy (both central and local) that is directed towards meeting the social needs of the population, and the list of needs includes the issues that concern social security, health, housing, education and (sometimes) law and order (Scott, Marshall, 2005).

Social policy, as much as all other social institutions have particular functions in the society that are focussed on ensuring the functioning of society. We must mention ensuring of social security and

stability of the society as one of the most important functions of social policy that can be carried out through the interaction of the following elements:

- institutional element (policy is being formed in one particular institution);
- normative element (policy is based on particular needs, interests, norms, values);
- procedural element (policy is carried out through particular activities) (Социальная политика, 2002).

It can be concluded that the main purpose of social policy is to create social circumstances favourable for human existence and continuation that include organized state undertakings and specific activities directed towards the promotion of social security of every member of the society.

Support by municipality in the context of satisfaction of the family needs

In order to satisfy family needs, the support is more or less dependent on the state, municipalities, NGOs, support from the whole society as well, that is why the state, when making social politics guidelines, that are connected with supporting families, should mainly pay attention to supporting those families that access to resources for different reasons is limited. For example, for families where there is a child with special needs, to use an opportunity to satisfy their needs often is affected by many, with children specific needs connected, factors, for example, Sally Baldwin and Jane Carlisle (2004) analyzing families' experience involving disablement influence on quality of life, pay attention to practical problems that are involving care expenses, emotional expenses, the importance of financial provision, employment, disablement influence on spouse's relations, as well as stress, adoption and recourses that are needed to solve existing situation (Graham, 2004). According to this, families of children with special needs face problems that are connected to parents' possibilities to provide children's special needs that can influence family's social-economic security and also family quality of life.

Family needs are divided into three groups:

- spiritual needs;
- material needs;
- and social needs (Krūzmētra, 1993; 23). Meeting spiritual needs of a family means to create circumstances in family that provide harmonious development, wholesome recreation, joy of work and buoyancy to every family member. Family social needs include communicational need, need for emotional contact and enjoyment of it and the necessity for self-expression. A very significant family social need is the need for interaction with relatives, neighbours, friends, colleagues and others. The meeting of material need of family is usually connected to all most important income and expenses of family budget (Krūzmētra, 1993; 24). Based on proportional division of family needs and their characteristics, it is possible to mark out the necessary social support that serves to provide the meeting of needs of the family.

According to family needs, municipality have jurisdiction to provide support for families that cannot make through without help. Social support is a concept that is generally understood in an intuitive sense, as the help from other people in a difficult life situation. One of the first definitions was put forward by Cobb (Cobb, 1976). He defined social support as “the individual belief that one is cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligations” (Dalgard, 2009).

Types and sources of social support may vary. House (House, 1981) described four main categories of social support: emotional, appraisal, informational and instrumental or material.

Emotional support generally comes from family and close friends and is the most commonly recognized form of social support. It includes empathy, concern, caring, love, and trust.

Appraisal support involves transmission of information in the form of affirmation, feedback and social comparison. This information is often evaluative and can come from family, friends, co-workers, or community sources.

Informational support includes advice, suggestions, or directives that assist the person to respond to personal or situational demands.

Instrumental or material support is the most concrete direct form of social support, encompassing help in the form of money, time, in-kind assistance, and other explicit interventions on the person's behalf (Dalgard, 2009). The term "material support or resources" is defined as "any property, tangible or intangible, or service, including currency or monetary instruments or financial securities, financial services, lodging, training, expert advice or assistance, safe houses, false documentation or identification, communications equipment, facilities, weapons, lethal substances, explosives, personnel, and transportation, except medicine or religious materials" (Hashmi, 2009). If the family cannot receive the necessary support from the family members, friends or persons of the community, the family policy of the state includes activities to provide the necessary support to the family.

The family policy of the state in Latvia is formed in accordance with the concept that was accepted in 2003 and the purposes included in it provide for rather broad range of undertakings, which include all social risks that could threaten functioning of family as a social institution. The concept provides for the support for the families with children with special needs emphasizing that these families are exposed to great risk of social insecurity. The policy that is oriented towards supporting of family has to be formed in compliance with specific needs and interests of families, as well as make state provisions easily accessible (Support provided by the state. <http://www.politika.lv/print.php?id=5119>). Social assistance and services are functions of municipality that are aimed on the improvement of quality of life of families and include all forms of support.

Social services are a set of activities that focuses on individual social functioning ability's renewal or improvement in order to ensure their inclusion in society and individuals', who have objective difficulties to look after themselves due to age or functional disorders, basic need satisfaction and includes services in individual's home or institution of social care and social rehabilitation (Social services and social assistance Law 31.10.2002).

The purpose of municipalities is to provide social assistance, as well as social care and rehabilitation for low-income families and socially unprotected individuals. Families with children with special needs are entitled to receive support in the area of social services that include:

- consultations of psychologist and social worker,
- home care and day care for disabled children,
- rehabilitation for children with mental disorders.

Social assistance – money or material benefit, the grant is based on the evaluation of material resources for individuals who lack the means to meet their basic needs.²

Municipalities provide material assistance to families with children with special needs on if it has obtained the status of low-income or needy family. Family or individuals can be declared to be needy, if its average income per one family member for the past three months has been lower than 90 Ls. Person can have low-income status, if his/her income and material status do not exceed the level that is set by the local municipality, which shall not be lower than needy individual's income and financial status level – 90 Ls per month (Family case). It means that the municipalities can determine preferential terms in order to declare an individual's or family's low-income status; however, experience shows that very few municipalities use the opportunity to declare residents, living in its territory, indigent in order to be eligible for various types of support. Municipality can support family in following ways – lodging benefit; care benefit; medical service benefit; benefit for children – free lunch in educational establishment, acquiring of school supplies; guaranteed minimal income (GMI) benefit – 40 Ls for adult family members and 45 Ls for children and other types of benefits in compliance with municipal

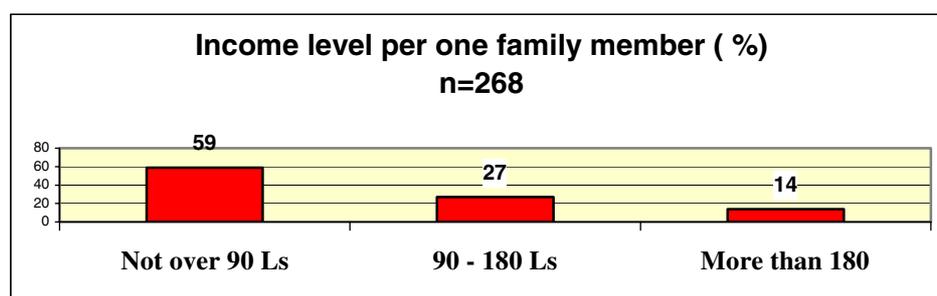


Figure 1. Income level per one family member.

legislation. Municipalities are authorized to increase GMI relief in accordance with their financial capacity (Social assistance in Latvia. <http://www.likumi.lv/doc.php?id=68488>).

Referring to the previously mentioned municipal support forms, municipal support for families, within the framework of social service and assistance, will be analyzed in this article. It is municipality's duty to provide social support and service for families, if its average income per each member does not exceed 90 Ls a month over the past three months and if:

- it has no provision of cash, securities or property,
- it does not have a maintenance contract,
- it does not receive long – term social care and services provided by social rehabilitation institution or it is not in custody,
- person has been registered with the State Employment Agency as unemployed or employment seeker (Social services and social assistance Law 31.10.2002).

In order to meet needs of families with children with special need these families need bigger resources than other families due to additional amount of parental work and care. Social security of these families is greatly affected by support given by state and municipality.

Research about support provided by municipalities for families with children with special needs in Latvia. Research was conducted in a period of time from May 2010 until April 2011 in different regions of Latvia.

Participants – members of families with children with special needs.

Method of the research – standardized interviews.

The goal of research – to analyze support provided by municipalities for families with children with special needs.

For the collection of data, the author used targeted sample, which included only those families that have children with special needs and the status of a disabled person. The research was carried out in 7 regional districts and included both rural and urban territories. The research encompassed 268 families with children with special needs, and the interviews were held in a free setting in a form of discussion in the homes of informants. Interviews caused great interest in participation in the research. It can be concluded, that it is up to municipalities to subjectively assess which family to support and which – ignore, because, for example, property can be very different, as well as underground economics is spreading in the country.

Results

As obtained data in the study reflects (Figure 1), 59% of surveyed families' income per one family member is less then 90 Ls a month. It means that these families are entitled to social assistance from the municipality. But only 27% of surveyed families receive household benefits (Figure 2), 18% of

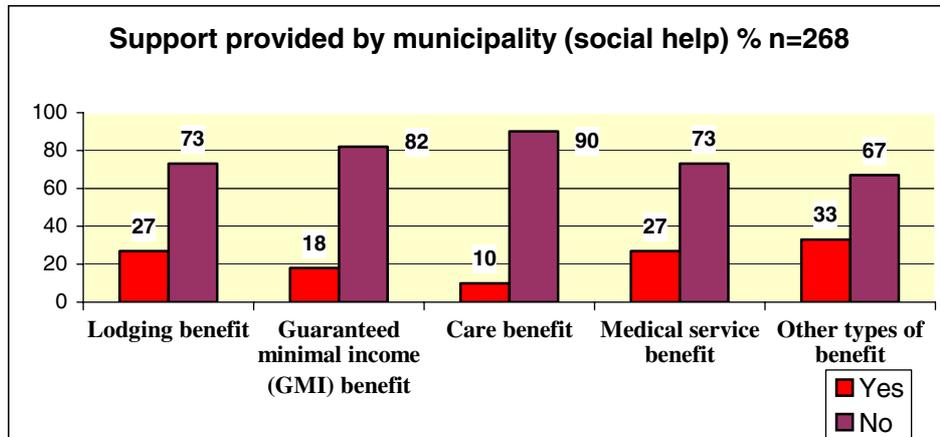


Figure 2. Material support from municipalities.

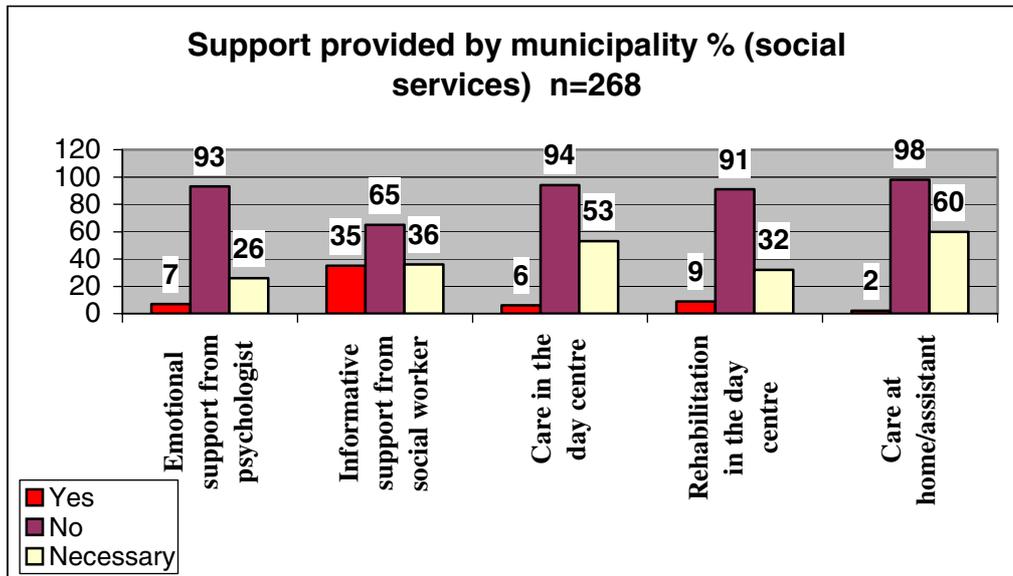


Figure 3. Social Support from municipalities (social services).

families are provided with guaranteed minimum income benefit, which characterizes the situation, that the income per member of these families is less than 40. Ls for an adult and 45 Ls for an underage family member.

As reflected in the study, only 10% of surveyed families receive care benefits (such benefit is paid only to families living in Riga city), as well as only 275 receive a grant for medical services. Other types of benefits include free meals at school, benefits for disabled children at Christmas or food packages and clothes.

The municipality has jurisdiction to provide social services for families that need it, however, as reflected in the research, authorities have very limited abilities to provide the most necessary support for families. For example, 60% of families need an assistant or home care services (Figure 3), but only 2 families receive such kind of support.

Similarly, 53% of surveyed families need day care centre services, because there is no-one who could look after child with disabilities after classes on school days and during school holidays, only

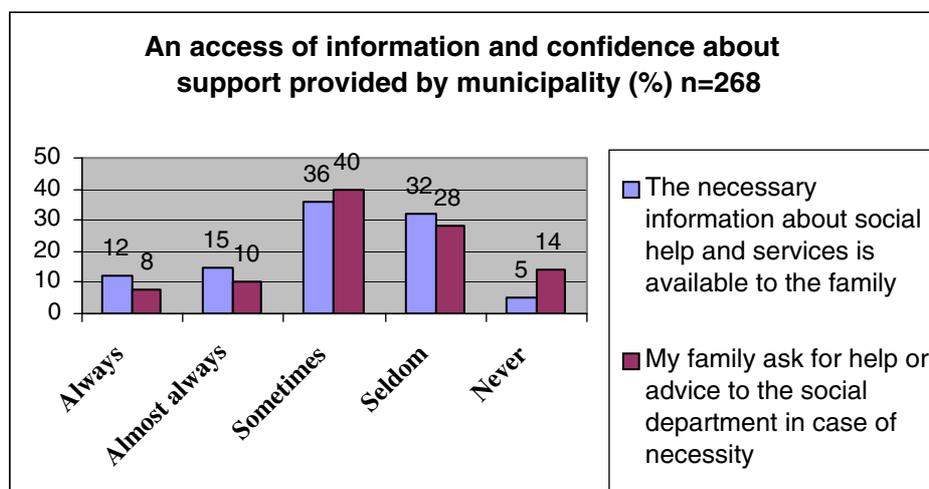


Figure 4. An access of information and confidence about support provided by municipality.

6 families receive such support. 26% of families need a psychological counselling, but only 7 families use such type of service. However, given indicator does not mean that municipalities do not provide such services, as families often lack the necessary information about municipal support types (Figure 4).

According to data gathered in the research, 32% (Figure 4) of families say that the necessary information about municipal support is rarely available, but 36% of families say that the necessary information is sometimes available, while 12% of families are always informed about municipal support.

This means that municipalities are not doing a good job in informing local residents; as a result, families are denied the support options. 8% of surveyed families can always count on their municipality's support in tough times and if there is a need for an assistance or advice they visit the municipality, 32% of families do that rarely and 5% have never visited the municipality in order to ask for an assistance or advice.

This means, that family trust in local municipalities and therefore the willingness to ask for advice and assistance are affected by factors such as – previous experience related to positive or negative attitude of municipality's employees, the information of potential support availability, as well as pride to ask for an assistance or advice.

Discussion

It would be preferable to continue this study focusing on the family quality of life; it would allow researchers to study all the aspects of family quality life to understand better about necessities of the family with children with special needs. It would be necessary to involve in the research not only researchers, but also practical workers that are responsible for the improvement of social policy in the respective area. The research reflects gaps in the area of state social policy that are connected with entitlement of local government to ensure material support to all the needy families of their territory and to provide necessary social services to families that would advance their quality of life.

Conclusions

- The research reflects the tendency that families, which need material assistance in meeting their needs, not always can rely on the support provided by municipality.

- State social policy is able to improve family quality of life in limited ways, because the support does not comply with the needs of these families.
- Local municipalities support families raising children with special needs only if the family is stated as needy, whereas, it is not always possible to obtain the needy status, even if the income per family member is less than 90 Ls, because family owns, for example, a little garden or land that makes no extra income for the family.
- Municipalities have rights to evaluate at its own discretion if the family corresponds to a needy status, as a result regional inequalities are promoted in the country.
- Municipalities that duty is to implement state social policy that is focused on family well-being often are not interested in informing, as well as providing various kinds of support for those who need it the most.
- State social policy in the case of family well-being, only partially fulfils its mission, because many families raising children with special needs do not receive necessary support. Assistance, day care centre service for children with special needs and material support for the satisfaction of the needs of these children, are the most necessary support that families need.

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