

Life of the network and the meaning behind of its work

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Introduction

As an “external” evaluator of the network of **street social workers**, we have set out an evaluation policy which slots neatly into the international legacy formed by the institutionalist trend. We have therefore suggested that an evaluation worthy of this name does not involve “monitoring” to check compliance with the programme (in particular the number of projects carried out and how frequently). This perception of action presumes that the world is not actually full of players that interact, stand up, step back, dominate or get involved: in reality, only the protagonists/directors of the evaluated programme are taken into consideration, but in an artificial manner because the activity is presented as though it was solely reliant on their will/persistence/energy, on their own hard work.

This “monitoring” of the world, although it may be a perpetual tribute to the model of “free” enterprise, is, in practice, totally irrelevant and does not take into account the reality of challenges faced.

On the contrary, street workers are in a good position to know the reality of the social world and the consequences of policies that place management on a pedestal as the central school of thought:

“the full consequences of a policy designed to manage economic stability (in the strict sense of the term) are paid for in a thousand different ways, through social and psychological costs, through unemployment, sickness, delinquency, drug and alcohol consumption, suffering leading on to resentment and racism, to political demoralisation, etc.”¹

By moving away from the managerial model of evaluation, we are asking Network leaders to join us in reflecting on the meaning and value of their work, based on several sample questions. The questions put forward here involve the Network’s 2012 programme insofar as it represents the backbone of the component meetings and discussions, **but also a more or less well-supported foreign body.**

This framework recognises that the Network, via the “Progress” programme, is becoming partially stabilised (in particular for European leaders), and that this has gone hand in hand with an inclusion in European social policy, the effects of which are worthy of note.

Questions relating to network beneficiaries

The main concern here is to discern whether or not the work carried out is misleading, or if in fact it even serves to strengthen the control they are subjected to.

Indeed, the deterioration in many social policies is bewildering.

In reality they mask the **State disinvestment** through “reforms” which involve washing their hands of the collective solidarity aspect of its commitments in favour of “accountability and empowerment” of the very individuals who bear the brunt of the consequences of economism (as criticised by Pierre Bourdieu). This “accountability and empowerment” is besides, often impossible for the beneficiaries to implement and becomes a moral matter, supporting increased controls and exclusion, proffering an elaborate justification for them in the name of “combating social fraud”. There is no alternative but to remain immorally moral in order to roll out “humanitarian” policies which, firstly do not tackle the structural roots of social dominance, and, secondly, carry out a form of “laundering” of part of the money from tax evasion.

Even if these policies are difficult to combat, and if the structural roots that make them possible are

1 P. Bourdieu, *Interventions, Science sociale et action politique*, Marseille, Agone, 2002, p. 242.

hard to curb, it raises a two-fold question for the members of the Network:

- do they make the most of all opportunities and room for manoeuvre, as small as they may be? (Can they identify them? Do they draw up a strategy?);
- do they put up resistance to the changes in the meaning of social work, the main aspects of which we have outlined above?

Questions relating to the practices of Network players

Contracting members of the non-profit sector along with public authorities which agree to fund some of the former's initiatives via a relevance-based agreement, could be an opportunity for creating positive synergies. For example, non-profit players can offer public authorities flexibility and creativity, based on real knowledge and experience of the social environment and, they can finally offer beneficiaries a framework that leaves room for their freedom². As for the public authorities, when looking out for public interest, they can ensure that corporatist activities or **activities for attractive causes are avoided (added emotional value or laundering)**³.

However, this type of contracting could also prove to have adverse effects. We have identified three at least; it is up to Network members to try to prevent these from happening.

- The contract may make a type of “bougisme” obligatory (i.e. artificial renewal of activities); this is notably the case when funding is contingent upon countless “innovations”, which, more than anything, leave players exhausted and distract them from the requests they receive. The “bougisme” forms an integral part of the managerial model. The labour sociologist, Danièle Linhart, explains that senior managers move every three years on average, which enables them to sidestep the obligation of forging ties and respecting players where they are **and not to see and**, furthermore, facing the sometimes disastrous consequences of “reforms” or “innovations” that they pretend to “implement”.
- Another adverse effect is that the non-profit sector's energy is drawn towards activities which are peripheral to the main focus of their efforts and which can lack financial resources. The danger is significant: in order to overcome this resource deficit, NGOs focus their efforts on calls for projects specifying the issues or even setting out guidelines and all their energy is taken up with these peripheral activities and meanwhile the core focus of the work drains away, because the manpower required is distracted with fundraising. There must be support from within the network to help avoid this danger.
- Finally, when, in order to prove the extent of the demand on the non-profit sector, such a contract requires extensive planning (for example, a five-year plan), the risk being, and this is terribly ironic for an NGO, that it is no longer sensitive to emerging or unpredicted demands or that they underestimate the unforeseen circumstances that come with the territory of all projects.

Questions relating to the life of the Network and its organisational structure

Contracts with public authorities, in this case European, provide resources without which our action would be nothing more than wishful thinking. The distribution of these resources amongst NGOs whose structural, national or local funding can be very different obviously raises a certain number of questions. Can additional resources granted through the Progress programme be used to develop the network in a **sustainable** way?

2 We have shown that this last condition was essential in regard to street work, which involves building a type of unlikely cooperation with beneficiaries for whom the risks of disaffiliation and loss of social protection lead to a general mistrust of State officials.

3 This is the meaning of the “Non-profit charter” adopted several years ago by the governments of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation but it has still not been put into action, etc.

In particular, this issue involves building a common “cultural capital” between all street workers in all countries; do the methodological guides help to both mobilise everybody and share knowledge (particular attention could be given to the way in which data collection is conducted, which appears to be a good yardstick for this area)?

Incidentally, the project for creating an “International Institute” seems to be the long-term goal for which efforts in terms of cultural capital will converge: will it be sufficiently in keeping with street work itself? Will there be enough scope and exposure (would too big a difference between the expectations and efforts invested and the possibilities it will lead to in reality send out a negative signal)?

Above and beyond the issue of common cultural capital, one wonders if the Network has or is beginning to have enough significant symbolic weight to influence different national realities: do we have examples that give reason to believe this or do we instead need to consider that the reinforcement allowed by the Network is “limited” exclusively to supporting its members (which is not to be which, in itself, is already not negligible)?

Particular attention should also be given to the **relationships** between the different levels of management, initiative and coordination: coordination team tasked with specific “areas”, project leaders, group of European coordinators, international pilot group. The following questions should definitely be addressed by mid-2012.

- What is/are the real centre(s) of gravity for the life of the Network itself (for example “projects” don’t absorb all the energy to the detriment of reflection on the meaning of social work and the building of a sense of belonging; on the contrary, the projects form a “concrete gateway” which breathes life into the Network and makes it increasingly indispensable, which in turn means that its leaders feel that its very existence is part of their calling)?
- Are roles equally distributed between management (running and controlling the projects people are involved in) and participation (life within the network outside of the Progress programme itself)?
- Is there a sufficient degree of “Communalism” (here we are referring to the policy which could be considered as a model for “street government”, the Paris Commune) with the members not covered by Progress funding? How do we show solidarity towards them? Another way of looking at the question is: how are each person’s private interests connected to collective interests.

Questions relating to policies that we adhere to or challenge

Earlier we set out the burning questions regarding the orientations which follow on from today’s European social policies. It is certainly not by disengaging and withdrawing that we have a chance to wield influence on a trend. Nonetheless, we are left wondering if we are forced to “take sides” excessively **compared to/in relation to the building that makes up the network**. A crucial indicator comes into play here: can we be heard by the funding authorities given that this is what **underpins our identity** (are they open to it?) or are we restricted to taking too many short-cuts for the work we do?

From another viewpoint, forming alliances with other sector-players is crucial. A list of possible strategic investments in the area could be informative: are we targeting other networks which deal with similar issues? Are we forging links with other players capable of influencing structural policies (such as a European trade union)? A collaboration/group of alliances?

Questions relating to the environment

- environment which influences us and which we basically help to mould.

Here it would appear appropriate to refer to René Lourau’s concept of “negative cross-

functionality". This institutional analyst demonstrated that institutions could, above and beyond their official purpose, fulfil unofficial roles that they tended to deny even existed. Just as schools in the sixties could have the unofficial function (and therefore practising a denied or "negative cross-functionality") of preparing future citizens to obey the established order.

In general, we no longer live in excessively ordered societies, but rather in societies with imposed change, imposed movement (the Roma population in Europe is the best case in point). The dominance is more subtle and more complicated but no less striking.

In this light, social work bodies are affected by a new kind of negative cross-functionality: they have to pass on the new standards on "freedom": take hold of "one's" own destiny, set "goals" (as if that's what the world has been waiting for and that all it took was to express it for it to become possible). In other words, social institutions must fulfil an unofficial (and denied) role of disseminating the standards of "free" enterprise and that "all you need to do is get down to work".

Young people and families put on the scrap heap of a crumbling society could therefore feel accused of not having done enough to "get themselves out of it".

One of the pillars of this negative cross-functionality is the introduction of, as we saw earlier, a managerial approach to non-profit work, acting like a true Trojan horse. We could, for example, look at the "social marketing" module planned for 2012 in order to gauge the Network's "sensitivity" to the sirens of neo-management.

Questions concerning the Network's theories

Membership of the network and the sharing of a common "identity", faithfulness to it and its founding commitments (set out in the Charter) is a measure of the clear commitment and adoption to a greater or lesser extent, consciously or not, of common theoretical points of reference.

Now we are not suggesting that theory guides action, but we simply want to suggest that the capacity of Network members to together express the initiatives taken up by various members could be a determining factor to extending or stabilising the network and will not dilute the sense of belonging.

Amongst the theoretical aspects that could be examined, now when the Network has adopted its 2012 programme, what comes to mind is the concept of the national and supranational State, the operational components of a mobilisation network, the controversies that determine the very concept of social problems, such as the issue of poverty (we will focus on this matter in our last 2011 evaluation paper, to give an example of this type of work).

Conclusion

By setting out this framework of questions to help facilitate an evaluation, we are not assuming that these issues have not already crossed players' minds. Quite simply, we believe that all members collectively and simultaneously taking on board these "policy" issues will help regulate the life of the Network by placing the meaning of our work at the forefront. We hope that this framework, which may be amended, can be used for data collection in the coming years so that the Network ensures it is able to self-define its centre of gravity and direction, by investing in taking a reflective and critical approach to its work, operation, relationship with public authorities and contribution to building society.