

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE IN ROMANIA: CASE STUDY FOR BUCHAREST DISTRICT 5

Oana SABIE

*The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Piata Romana 6, Bucharest, Romania
oanasabie@amp.ase.ro*

Abstract

This study aims to identify the employees' opinion regarding the quality of the social assistance services that they provide and also to show how efficient the activity in General Direction of Social Assistance and Child Protection District 5 (DGASPC S5) is. The paper is based on a survey on current academic and policy debates on social assistance, which is undoubtedly a necessity recognized by most governments of the world, an important social service for community development along with other public services.

The methodology used in the first part of the paper was the study of a range of published materials (articles, strategies, reports, policies, research studies, laws), which provide a theoretical and practical research on social assistance and, in the second part we used a qualitative survey method. The tool we used to know the employees' opinion was a questionnaire, which contained closed questions, and was addressed to the 49 employees of DGASPC S5.

The value of this paper resides in the fact that it identifies the main ways in which public institutions of social assistance could act to increase the quality of public service delivery and that it summarises developments in the field and provides a context-setting narrative within which the other papers that comprise this special issue can be situated.

Keywords: social assistance, quality, public service, efficiency

1. INTRODUCTION

In our days, social assistance is undoubtedly a necessity recognized by most governments in the world, an important social service for community development alongside other public services. In the absence of such services, the consequences would lead to an increase in social disparities between different categories of citizens, a continuous increase in the poverty level of the population, and in the absence of a public institution in the field of social assistance, we believe that it would not be possible the integration into society of the various categories of citizens who are disadvantaged from one point of view or another.

The issue of social services, both at national and international level, is topical, present to the attention of the authorities. The utility of these services is felt by all categories of people. From this point of view, the possibility to obtain the information necessary for carrying out the research was raised.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the main ways in which public institutions in the field of social assistance could act in order to increase the quality of this public service. The efficiency of public social assistance services should be a priority for local and national public institutions, which must constantly improve the social welfare

legislation and the legislation in place to allow these categories of citizens to live a normal life and not to face a rejection from the rest of the population.

Elliott (2008) argues that each country faces poverty. What varies from one country to another is its level. A person is poor if he can not afford his basic expenses or if he can not live a decent life. In other terms, at the European Union level, a person is considered to be poor if his resources are so limited that he can not have an acceptable standard of living in the society he lives in.

The current global interdependence has created new areas of responsibility and international opportunities for social assistance. International Social Assistance is a complex concept comprising of: comparative analyses, global social issues, international practices, public and private international assistance, specialized intergovernmental relations, standards and global vision. Moreover, Buzducea (2011, p. 3) states that the globalization process indicates the tendency towards a new social and organizational architecture of the institutional arrangements, namely the restructuring of the social welfare state imposed by the new type of society that calls for the involvement of local communities in solving social problems. Currently, economic issues and budgetary constraints show that it is time for a new analysis of the economic theories that govern world politics and a rethinking of the need for collective action to achieve social welfare, with researchers who believe that only by doing this, social policies can remain a part of the global movement to restore social justice. This type of concerns about the role of local communities in developing community programs and projects to solve or alleviate social problems at a local level are not recent (Buzducea, 2011).

According to Scârmececi (2011, p. 64), in Romania, social assistance research is dealt with briefly. This is evidenced by the very small number of books translated into Romanian which deal with the methodology of social assistance research, as well as the very small number of Romanian authors' articles or books on this topic (compared to the number of papers published at the international level, of research projects addressing issues specific to social assistance).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Romania, public social services are represented by social structures accessible to citizens, mostly free of charge, and offering non-discriminatory support (Abraham and Fîrţală, 2002, p. 244). Also, according to Law no. 292/2011 - Article 27, social services are activities of general interest designed to meet all social needs, for individuals or groups, in order to overcome the situations in which these persons are in difficulty, by promoting social inclusion and increasing quality of life.

Social assistance is clearly defined in Law no. 292/2011, which is in line with European principles, values and strategies in the field of social protection. The main task of social assistance is to protect and help those who are

in a deadlock without degrading their personality or access to social life in any way (Abraham and Fîrţală, 2002, p. 249).

The human capital, represented by the specialists in the field, is an important factor because the efficiency of the system is given, for the most part, by their expertise (Nica, 2012; Gheorghe, 2015). Social assistants make their appearance in beneficiaries' lives when they are in need or when they find themselves in difficult situations. Most of the time, their mission is to counsel beneficiaries on their rights, to engage actively in solving individual or community problems, to improve the quality of life of vulnerable people, to reduce discrimination and to increase their inclusion in society.

Vocational training among social workers is made up of initial training, which is carried out within higher education institutions, and continuous training, which involves further developing their capacity by participating in trainings, conferences, thematic workshops and courses. Regardless of the role that the social assistant has, he or she is at the intersection of the four sub-systems of global society (Bocancea and Neamţu, 1999, p.89): the organized social assistance system, the general institutional environment and the legislative system, the informal social system and the client system.

In literature there are numerous studies on the quality of social services, but there have been no studies to clarify what kind of attitude a social manager must have in assessing the quality of customer service and how important that quality is as part of the development of its managerial activity.

According to Lillrank (1988), it is the task of the organization's leadership to encourage the whole institution to engage in increasing the quality of the services provided. In addition, managers must show through their behaviour, that social services are able to serve customers, and, by their own example, managers need to encourage employees to actively and systematically discover the needs of individuals. When the management allows experiments to be conducted and identifies the need for social assistance, it will be easier for the entire institution to engage in customer-oriented quality assessment.

For a service to be effective it must produce the expected outcomes, and these results must meet the quality standards imposed by the legislation in force. Quality control, based on the theory of management of scientific affairs (Taylor, 1947;1911), first took place in the industry sector in 1920 in the US and was later adopted in the public sector. After quality assurance had become a stable objective, in 1960 it came to Europe by strengthening the link between a welfare state and the services it provided. Quality assurance means that the services provided will have to rise to a higher standard, especially from a technical point of view (Pollitt, 1997).

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a need to introduce Total Quality Management, which focuses on quality assurance through a continuous process and the avoidance of mistakes (Pollitt, 1997; Androniceanu, 2012).

National governments in all countries have looked for ways to streamline public services and, as Evers says (1997), there is a link between increasing productivity and the increase of quality.

Changes have also been made to the general view of social services in all European countries, and we have a reason to believe that these changes have occurred in response to customer needs that have been considered in the assessment of the quality of social services (Aaltonen, 1999, p.132).

2.1. Different perspectives of quality in social services

Quality can be considered a multi-faceted phenomenon. It can be depicted in the common language, as De Bono (1991) called it a "collection tray" that gathers in its emotionally loaded center all possible interpretations, or how it was described by Rajavaara (1995, 1997) - quality is an "umbrella" that brings together various political, administrative and organizational approaches, as well as development and insurance activities. If we want to describe the quality more precisely, we can do this by dividing visions into: the individual's perspective, the perspective of the organization, the perspective of the goals and outcomes, and the perspective of the process (Table 1). This classification is not categorical, the individual's perspective can be found in other variants, but this approach helps us understand the different aspects of quality evaluation (Aaltonen 1999, p. 133).

TABLE 1 - PERSPECTIVES ON SERVICE QUALITY

| Individual perspective | Organization perspective | Perspective of objectives and results | Process perspective |
|--|--|---|---|
| Quality must meet needs and expectations | Quality is viewed from the organization and the employees' perspective, who have set a certain desired quality level | Quality is the continuous measurement of defined objectives and results, by monitoring and assessing them permanently | The process itself is important, not just achieving goals and results |

Source: Aaltonen, 1999

Numerous studies have considered individuals' opinions when describing quality. According to Gorwin (1988), quality must meet an individuals' needs and expectations (this is a common approach). Murto (1995) described quality as "the compatibility of social services offered to people's needs" and that "it can be measured by asking the individual for a subjective opinion on the service he has received". This is the opposite of Culyer's view (1976, p. 16), which takes into account other third parties in distinguishing the needs of a client. Quality was also defined using the word "expectation", but not as much as the word "need".

Pollitt and Bouckaert (1995) define quality as the degree of alignment between users' expectations and perceptions of the service they have benefited from. Grootenboer (1987) regards the quality of a service as being in line with expectations and says that the quality level of the same service may vary according to the expectations of different clients.

Although quality assessment is an important part in providing a social service, it is often done without taking into account service recipients. The opinions of social assistants have been neglected, and there are at least three possible explanations for this: (1) organizational structures and professionalism, (2) problems on how to define needs and (3) problematic attitudes towards the individual (Aaltonen, 1999, p. 132).

Wirth (1986) found that it may be difficult for social organizations that are bureaucratic to understand and accept the needs and responses of the people. According to Wirth, people in this scenario do not have the possibility to control public services, or those who have it, are usually the most involved in the field.

Foster (1983, p.19) argues that, even though needs are the basic criteria for social services allocation, there is a great difficulty in defining these needs. Defining a need is a problem because some people may ignore the fact that they need help, while others may think that their needs are greater than they really are. Pollitt (1997) distinguishes two categories of people: (1) clients who do not see their own incapacity and have a desire to express their needs and respond as soon as the authorities consult them; and (2) people who benefit from social services but are scared, elderly, or have a disability and can not easily express their needs.

Satisfaction as a concept has been widely used as an evaluation variable as there were problems in pinpointing a person's needs, which were usually overestimated or even mixed (Pollitt, 1997).

Many researchers have stated that "satisfaction" is a problematic concept in quality assessment. According to Speedling and Roses (1985), overall satisfaction can be high, but when people are asked to answer more specific questions, the amount of negative responses begins to increase.

Salmela (1996) considers that the use of "satisfaction" as a concept is problematic because it is difficult to find a common understanding of this notion. According to it, the concept of quality in social assistance services was derived from general quality interpretations, and this meant that concepts such as client orientation or customer satisfaction were not explored properly. By using the concept of customer satisfaction, Salmela believes that the validity of research can be influenced.

In scientific literature we come across more researchers who prefer different approaches for measuring service quality. Parasuraman (1985) argues that most clients prefer tangible goods, reliable services, human resource responsiveness, competence and empathy. These criteria are being related to staff or environmental factors. Tangibles refer to physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials. Reliability implies the ability of staff to achieve the promised service, independently and accurately. Receptivity means the availability of staff to help customers and provide prompt services. Competence is given through the knowledge and courtesy of staff, and their ability to convey confidence and security. Empathy equals with the care and attention that employees offer individually to their clients. For customers, the most important criteria seem to be those related to the staff.

In a summary, it can be argued that different studies (Androniceanu, 2014) have demonstrated that the quality criteria that customers value most are related to either the client-customer relationship, the client-service relationship, or the environmental factors of the service provided (Table 2).

TABLE 2 - CRITERIA FOR QUALITY IN SOCIAL SERVICES

| Staff Criterion | Service Criterion | Environmental Criteria |
|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Empathy | Good character | Comfort |
| Competence | Partitioning in space | Location of the institution |
| Continuity | Availability | Tangible goods |
| Interplay | Independence | Instruments |
| Reliability | Individuality | |
| Receptivity | Safety | |

Source: Aaltonen, 1999

In conclusion, we realise that defining the concept of quality in the field of social services can have different perspectives and it is difficult to establish an attitude to be addressed by a social manager in order to assess the quality of services provided and to determine future directions of action. The necessity of a social service has always been based on the needs, but there are great difficulties in identifying and defining them. Thus, in order to better understand quality, we can say that it differs from the point of view of the perspective approached and we sum up to an evaluation of it only from the position in which we, as people, have had a certain degree of satisfaction from the supply of the necessary service.

Over time, there has been a link between increasing productivity and the increase in service quality, so governments have been concerned with identifying ways to streamline public services. We can say that this change at the central level took place after considering customer responses about their needs, as well as evaluating the service quality they benefited from.

We believe that Romania should also take more steps to improve the efficiency of services provided, not only to improve the relationship between the results obtained and the resources used, or to increase the citizen's satisfaction, but also to adequately fulfill its needs in real time.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Description of the methodology

In the present paper, we chose to use the opinion poll (Chelcea, 2001; Şandor, 2013) as a research method, being an indirect method of gathering data from individuals who are involved in offering useful information for validating research assumptions. The tool used for data collection is the questionnaire, a qualitative research method for data collection, applied to a number of 49 respondents. The questionnaire aimed to substantiate the general objective of research and illustrate the influence of the variables. The questionnaire contains closed questions, with only one required answer. The period of application was between 25.05.2017-04.08.2017. The sample consisted of 49

employees of General Direction of Social Assistance and Child Protection District 5 (DGASPC S5). As a result of completing the questionnaires, a number of 33 were validated. The sample is a probabilistic one, the selected members are known (DGASPC S5 staff), so the answers will ensure the representativeness of the statistical data. The questionnaire was distributed online, the respondents could access it and the responses were centralized in the Google Forms application. We considered that by deploying an online questionnaire, it will have a positive effect on the answers, as respondents will not be influenced by direct action (face-to-face) and will be able to respond in a favorable environment. Another method of research used in this paper is document analysis which is a qualitative method of processing information. The documents analyzed were: official documents, normative acts, statistical data, scientific articles and books, as well as press materials.

3.2. Research objective

This research aims to identify of the employees' opinion regarding the quality of the social assistance services that they provide and how efficient is the activity in DGASPC S5.

3.3. Research hypotheses

The hypotheses formulated will reflect the most important aspects of the literature study, making the research an explanatory type.

TABLE 3 - RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

| Crt. No. | Hypothesis Formulation |
|-----------------|---|
| 1. | The quality of social service activity depends on decisional transparency |
| 2. | The quality of social service activity differs depending on the work / infrastructure environment |
| 3. | The quality and efficiency of social service activity depends on the human resources of the institution |

Source: Author

Hypotheses can be influenced by certain factors such as: skills and competencies of staff in solving activities; the effort made by staff in their work; working environment through: tangible goods, comfort, devices, utilities, etc.

4. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

As a result of applying the questionnaire, we found out useful information for our study. Thus, for the identification and description of the sample, we centralized the following information: all respondents are employed by DGASPC S5, thereby making the sample a representative one with the exact knowledge of the respondents, so the interpreted data will not suffer changes caused by certain external factors. This in turn facilitates the achievement

of the research objective, to identify only the opinion of the employees regarding the quality and efficiency of DGASPC S5 activity.

Most of the responses were from the female staff of DGASPC S5, the female respondents who completed the questionnaire were 23, and male were 10. The gender of the person can influence the overall outcome because the female perspective is different from the male perspective. Simultaneously with gender differences, some changes may occur in institutional decision-making, with the managerial style varying according to the managerial staff.

The age of most respondents ranges between 26-40 years (22 responses), a variable that can influence the degree of novelty brought in the institution. This variable will define the institution's concept of entrepreneurship, as young people have a high degree of openness to the new and want to bring innovation to the environment in which they work, being more receptive to institutional change. 11 of the respondents are between the ages of 41 and 60.

The seniority of employees in DGASPC S5 falls predominantly between 6-10 years (21 responses). We can deduce from these answers that the higher the age of the employee, the less flexible the activities of the institution will be, since long-time workers within the same institution want stability and continuity in their work as well as job security. More attention may be paid to early-stage employees, who fall within the 3-5 years of service at the institution under review. They can bring a high level of innovation to the institution and lead to a more efficient work done by all staff.

The variation in the professional training of human resources influences the quality of the work that the staff performs within the analyzed institution. From the centralization of responses, we can see that 94% of employees have a form of higher education. The majority of employees of DGASPC S5 are civil servants. The Romanian Government approved the norms regarding the professional training of civil servants by Resolution No. 1066/2008, so the institution is compelled by law to employ personnel with studies corresponding to the job requirements.

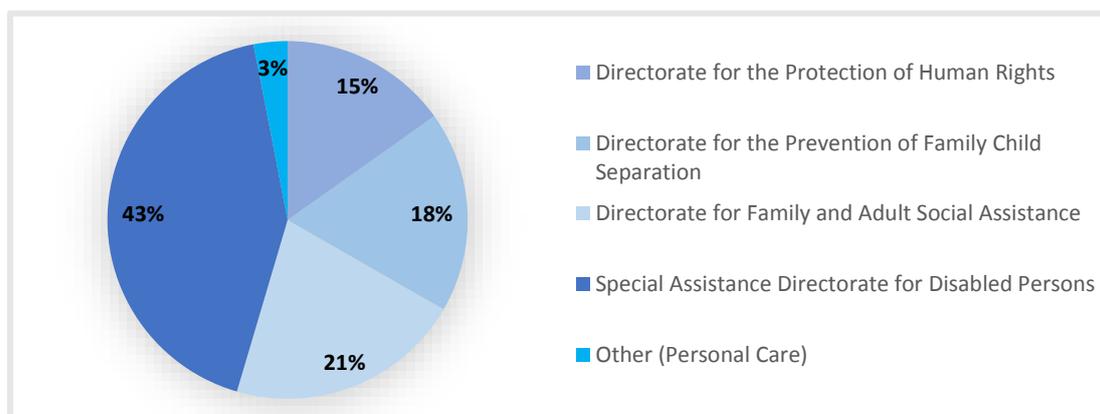


FIGURE 1 - EMPLOYEES MEMBERSHIP OF DGASPC S5 DEPARTMENTS

Source: Author

In Figure 1 we can see which Direction of DGASPC S5 provided most of the answers. From the Department of Special Assistance for Disabled Persons, we had 14 responses, representing a share of 43% of the respondents. Staffing of the Institution's Directorates is relevant to research because the work environment and infrastructure available to the employee within the DGASPC S5 are different for each Directorate. Therefore the answers to questions regarding to employees' perceptions of different aspects of the organization may vary depending on the resources (infrastructure, work environment, etc.) provided by the employee division.

The above information shows and determines the type of sample and how certain variables influence the analyzed institution activities. They describe and systematize the following aspects about respondents: gender, age, distribution of DGASPC S5 employees by departments, staff experience and training. The representative characteristics of the sample are given by the large number of female respondents aged between 26-40 years who worked in the institution for 6-10 years, and the majority (94%) have higher education. All these characteristics will influence in one way or another the answers regarding the activities of the institution, which will be presented and detailed in the following figures.

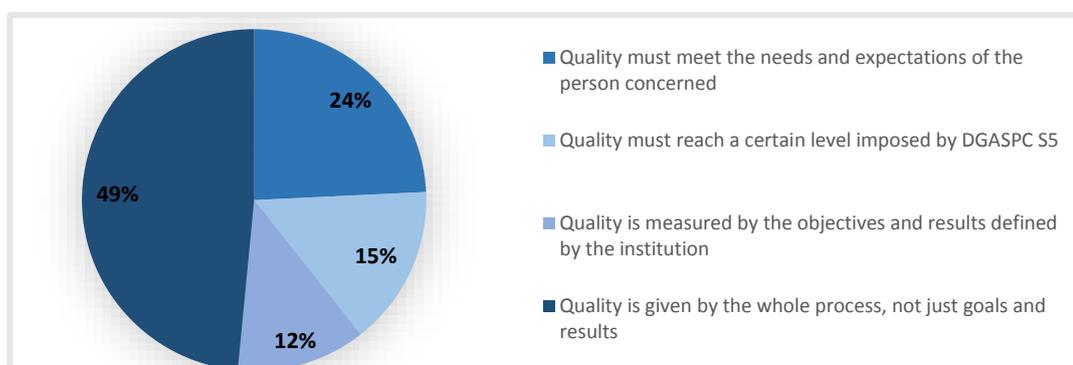


FIGURE 2 - QUALITY OF SERVICE IN THE EMPLOYEES' OPINION

Source: Author

Figure 2. demonstrates that 49% of the institution's employees perceive quality from the perspective of the process, perspectives formulated by Aaltonen (1999). These quality ratings are not categorical, but help us to identify what the vision of DGASPC S5 staff is focusing on. According to the answers, 49% emphasize with the entire process of providing the service, provided that its quality and evaluation must be present from the beginning of the process to its completion and, of course, bring satisfaction to the person in need of social service. Also, more than 24% of staff believe that evaluating and offering a quality social service must meet the needs and expectations of the person in question. They focus more on fulfilling the client's requirements, but considering what is presented in the literature, people with needs sometimes do not realize or accept the idea that they need help, so for those who emphasize, only the client can make it harder to work with him because of the assistant confusion.

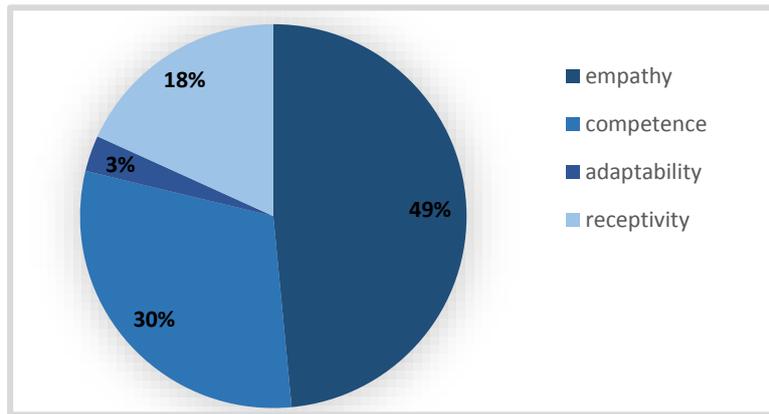


FIGURE 3 - THE MAIN FEATURE THAT DGASPC S5 EMPLOYEE MUST HAVE
Source: Author

Figure 3 shows that the institution staff considers empathy in the provision of the social service, as being the main characteristic that each employee must have, according to answers (30%). Dex defines it as a form of emotional knowledge of another person or of reality through intuition. DGASPC S5 employees believe that they need to empathize with assisted people in order to provide an efficient and quality service. Taking into account that they provide a social assistance service to people in need, and that the female genre was representative of the sample, we can argue that in carrying out the social activity, the staff must also empathize with the person in need. Greater proximity to it can make employees better understand the need of the assisted person, and this can lead to a more effective solution (for him or for her).

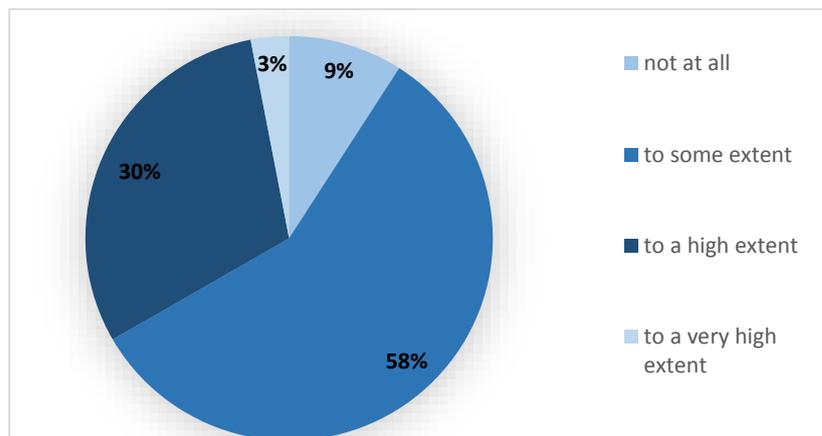


FIGURE 4 - INNOVATION BROUGHT BY EMPLOYEES
Source: Author

From the employees' answers, Figure 4 shows that they bring low innovation in the institution, which also influences the results shown in Figure 5 where DGASPC S5 has very rarely designed and implemented an innovative idea. We can say that this low degree of innovation of the institution is also due to the fact that the institution staff does not contribute with new ideas, does not have solutions, recommendations for increasing the quality of the service, or if they do, they are either not allowed to express them, or they do not want to do this (are aware that nobody

would take them into account). According to theory, there is little public entrepreneurship in DGASPC S5 because there are no people who can generate it and be able to increase the capacity to provide services and create value. This phenomenon may be caused by the median age of DGASPC S5 employees.

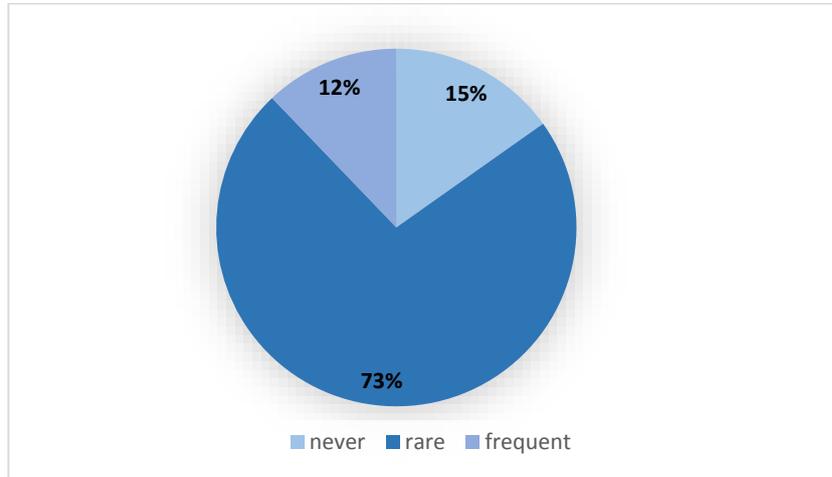


FIGURE 5. INNOVATION IMPLEMENTED WITHIN DGASPC S5
Source: Author

In conclusion, the institution needs a new way of thinking to design and apply solutions that will bring innovation and change, in order to improve the efficiency of the activity.

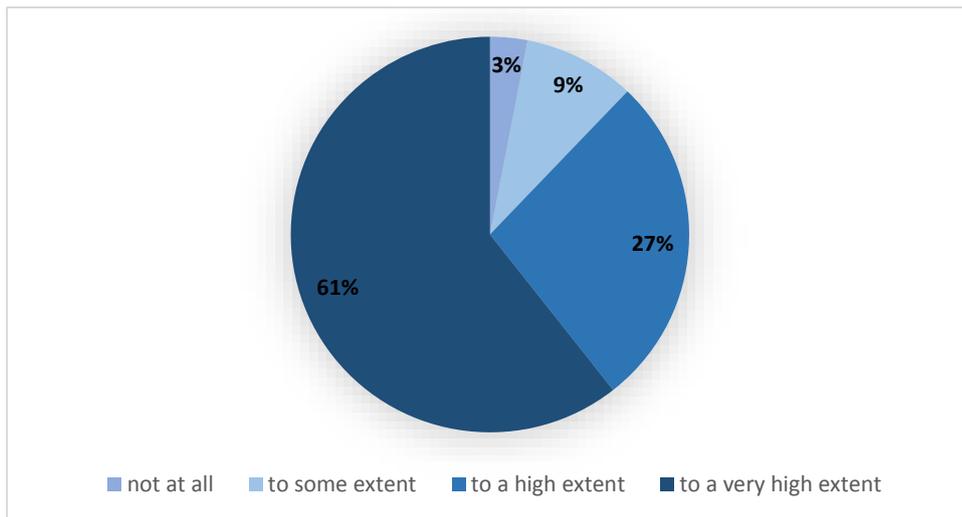


FIGURE 6 – INFLUNCE OF BUDGET CUTS ON STAFF ACTIVITIES
Source: Author

Analysing the data from the questionnaire we can say that a decrease in the budget (Figure 6) will affect the personnel's activity to a great extent, a decrease which can lead to insufficient funds (Figure 7), which in the opinion of 70% employees will lead to an increase in the individual workload. If this downward trend in funds rises, given that DGASPC S5 is not making profit, the institution's employees believe the workload will increase. If it increases

considerably, we can expect a decrease in quality of service, as there will be no optimal ratio between quantity and quality, the balance hanging more heavily on the quantity.

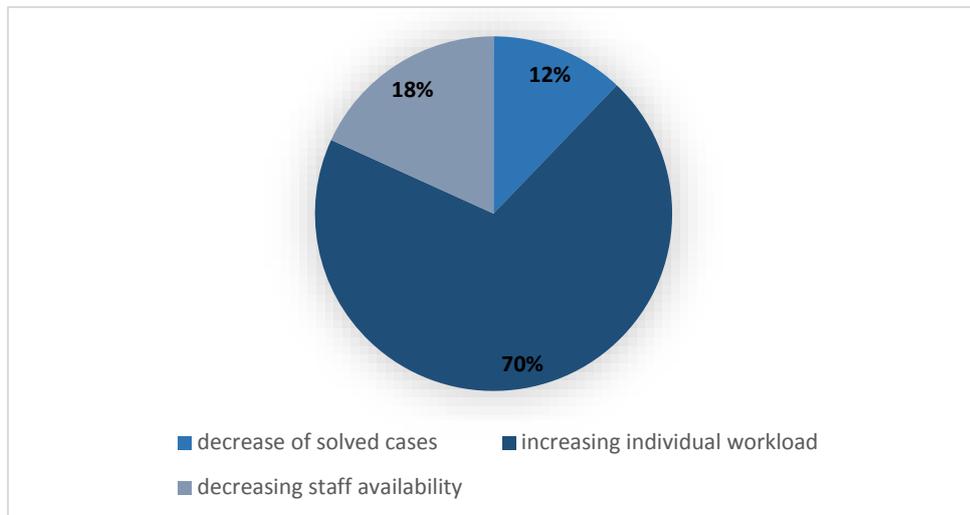


FIGURE 7 – IMPACT OF INSUFFICIENT FUNDS ALLOCATION
Source: Author

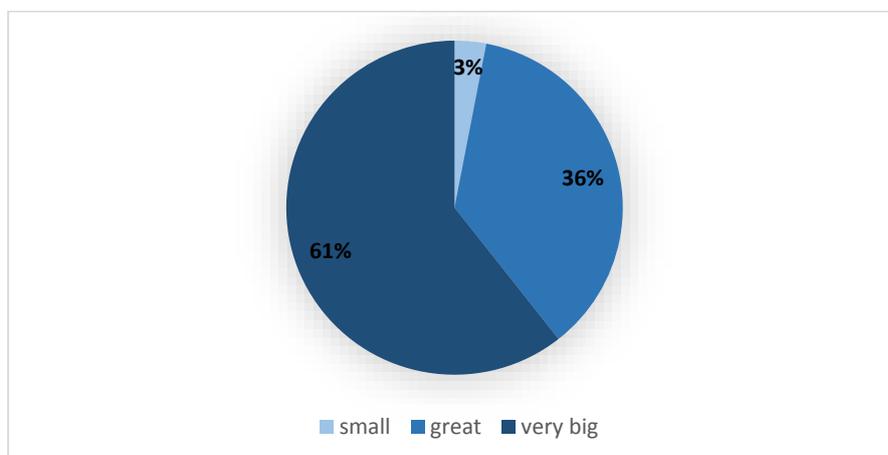


FIGURE 8 - THE INFLUENCE OF CASES VOLUME ON EMPLOYEES' EFFORT
Source: Author

Figure 8 shows the employees' opinion about the influence of the volume of applications (cases) on the effort they make. 61% of the respondents consider that this variable has a great influence on the effort they have to make. If we also take into account the increase in individual workload due to the insufficiency of funds (Figure 7) and a large volume of cases (demands) that lead to the greatest effort on the part of the employees, we can strengthen the idea that the quality-quantity ratio will suffer.

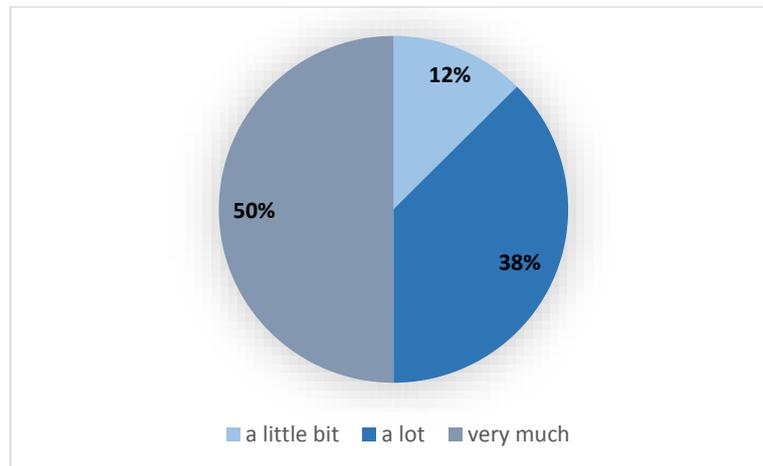


FIGURE 9 - INFLUENCE OF INFRASTRUCTURE ON FACILITATING EMPLOYEES' WORK
Source: Author

In figure 9, 50% of employees argue that the material infrastructure made available to them by the institution, facilitates their activity to a great extent. We can assume that this data is influenced by how staffing of Directorates within DGASPC S5 (Figure 1) are distributed; as we have stated above, each Directorate provides material resources in varying proportions.

Considering that only 12% of employees believe that the infrastructure and facilities available to them do not improve their activity, but the rest of respondents are satisfied with what the organization offers to carry out their activities, we conclude that this variable does not affect the effectiveness of DGASPC S5 activities in a large measure.

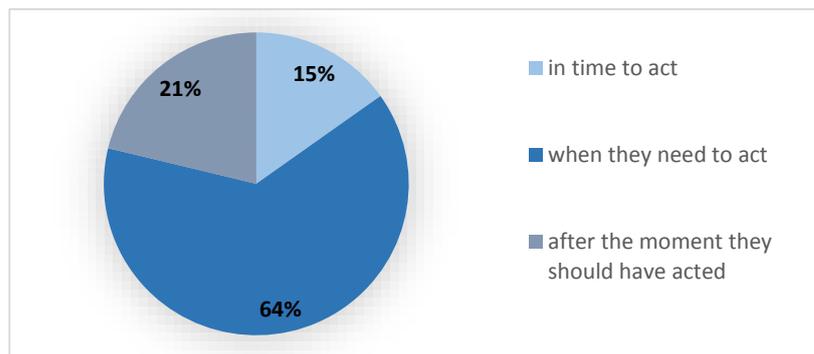


FIGURE 10 – HOW MANAGEMENT DECISIONS ARE COMMUNICATED
Source: Author

Regarding managerial decisions and their communication to staff (Figure 10), the majority of respondents (64%) consider that decisions are received when they need to act. These results show a problem of the institution's managerial staff in relation to the personnel and the work carried out. Poor coordination and an inefficient management process can lead to a decline in the organization's performance. Employees will feel pressure to apply decisions made by superiors if they have not been communicated to them in a timely manner, resulting in an entropy ("disintegration") effect within the organization.

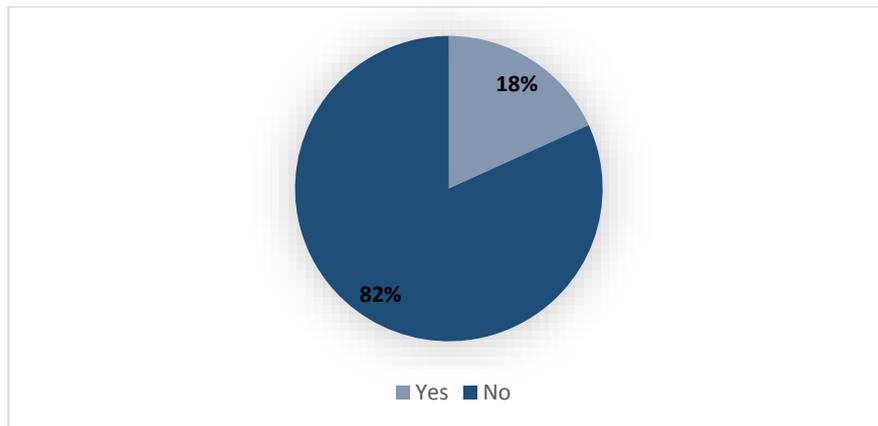


FIGURE 11 – DGASPC S5 STAFF IS SUFFICIENT TO MEET ITS OBJECTIVES
Source: Author

Systematization of the data in Figure 11 shows that institution employees believe there is not enough staff to achieve the proposed objectives. Taking into account the results and interpretations of the previous graphs, we can strengthen the claims of 82% of employees in terms of staff shortages. First of all, DGASPC S5 requires a fresh way of how staff thinks and acts in order to increase innovation, a greater number of employees to solve a growing demand / case volume and lower individual workload for each employee, balancing the ratio that must exist between quality and quantity.

The deployed effort, considered to be high by employees, will diminish, probably due to an increase in the quality and efficiency of the activities, which leads to a better performance of the institution.

In the analyzed data we can say that 2 of the 3 hypotheses are confirmed, one being null. The assumption that the efficiency of social service activity differs according to the working environment is null, most of the answers have shown employees' satisfaction with the facilities they have, so variables such as infrastructure and work tasks do not affect their work.

The hypothesis regarding the efficiency of social service activity that depends on the human resources is confirmed by respondents. Age variables, gender and professional training are affecting the quality and performance of the social service.

The hypothesis that follows the quality and efficiency of institution activity that depends on decisional transparency / managerial quality is confirmed in Figure 10, responses of 64% show a managerial inefficiency, as well as poor communication between top management and employees. There is a low level of trust in the top management of the institution and a low level of employee satisfaction.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The main problem of DGASPC S5 is the poor functioning of the managerial apparatus. The decisions adopted are being communicated late to the staff. The employee's professional experience and resilience to physical and intellectual effort makes it possible to carry out the work in good conditions, but in order to streamline the process, a change in the top management of the institution will be necessary. The top management of the institution takes decisions that affect all the work done and is entirely responsible for the performance of DGASPC S5. Employees' opinion showed that the decision-making process goes bad and this has consequences for the efficiency of DGASPC S5 officials' activities. Another problem of the institution in the employees' opinion is the lack of staff. DGASPC S5 does not have the human resources it needs to achieve the proposed objectives, which leads to an increase in the individual workload of the personnel, and it resembles the effort shown.

In direct relationship with the staff shortage, we can appreciate that there is also a low degree of innovation brought by them to the institution. DGASPC S5 adopts the new or changed processes, but this action is influenced, as I said, by the weak public entrepreneurship found in the institution. The factors identified for the occurrence of these problems are: professional training of top management, reduced number of human resources, weak impulse for the design and adoption of innovation, and fluctuations in workload relative to the effort made by employees. Finally, we recommend to social public service providers to improve management, coordination, planning, service and staff development, in order to improve service quality, access to services; also, to be more open to innovation and experimentation, to develop partnerships and to involve the user by allowing him to participate more in the process.

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