

## THE SKILL TO WORK WITH DATA OF SOCIAL WORKERS: REALITIES VERSUS THE NEED TO STRENGTHEN IT

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### Abstract

The article analyses the results of the sociological study carried out by the Department of Sociology and Social Work (Moldova State University), in 2022, to determine the particularities of training of the competence of data use among professionals in the field of social work. The study highlighted the weak capacity of professionals in the field of social work to operate with data and use it in decision-making; the use of registers in letter format and poor digitization of the system affects the generation of reliable data and the lack of effective management of human resources and others. The results of the research allowed the identification of the need for interventions in the coming years, which would focus on reducing the gaps in the professional training of social workers and the integration of technological innovations in the system.

**Keywords:** data, social work, data using, evidence-based policy.

### Résumé

L'article analyse les résultats de l'étude sociologique réalisée par le Département de Sociologie et d'assistance sociale (Université d'État de Moldavie), en 2022, dans le but de déterminer les particularités de la formation et de l'apprentissage de la compétence à utiliser les données chez les professionnels du domaine de l'assistance sociale. L'étude a mis en évidence la faible capacité des professionnels du secteur de l'assistance sociale à travailler avec les données et à les utiliser dans la prise de décision ; l'utilisation de registres au format lettre et la mauvaise numérisation du système affectent la génération de données fiables et la gestion non efficace des ressources humaines et autres. Les résultats de la recherche ont permis d'identifier la nécessité d'interventions dans les années à venir, qui se concentreraient sur la réduction des écarts dans la formation professionnelle des travailleurs sociaux et sur l'intégration des innovations technologiques dans le système.

**Mots clés :** données, travail social, utilisation des données, politique fondée sur des données probantes.

### Rezumat

Articolul analizează rezultatele studiului sociologic desfășurat de Departamentul Sociologie și Asistență Socială (Universitatea de Stat din Moldova), în anul 2022, având drept scop

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determinarea particularităților de instruire și formare a competenței de utilizare a datelor în rândul profesioniștilor din domeniul asistenței sociale. Studiul a evidențiat o slabă capacitate a profesioniștilor din domeniul asistenței sociale în lucrul cu datele și utilizarea acestora în luarea deciziei; utilizarea de registre în format letric și slaba digitalizare a sistemului afectează generarea de date fiabile și neadministrarea eficientă a resurselor umane și altele. Rezultatele cercetării au permis identificarea nevoii de intervenții în următorii ani, care să se focalizeze pe diminuarea lacunelor în formarea profesională a asistenților sociali și integrarea inovațiilor tehnologice în sistem.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** date, asistența socială, utilizarea datelor, politici bazate pe evidențe.

## 1. Introduction

Social work as a field of intervention through public policies, requires an innovative approach, based on evidence. Beneficiaries of social work represent distinct social categories, the profile of which encompasses diverse needs that involve an individualized approach. At the same time, there is a need for continuous monitoring and evaluation of interventions carried out through social work measures, to identify the laconic aspects and those that contributed to the achievement of the objective pursued. In this context, the approach regarding the use of data in the development of social policies is topical.

The movement around the use of data in policymaking developed in the late 1990s, driven by the application of evidence in medicine in the UK. A contribution to the development of evidence-based policies was made by Tony Blair, who launched the idea of replacing ideologically developed policies with policies developed based on rational decisions, using the conclusions of scientific studies (Sutcliffe & Court, 2005).

At the national level, the need to use data in the development of policy documents is established by Government Decision No. 386/2020 regarding the planning, elaboration, approval, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of public policy documents and in the "Methodological Guide on the Integration of Provisions The national development strategy in planning documents, public policy documents and normative acts at the national level" (2021). In this sense, the need for analysis of the situation to be addressed by the public policy document, through the use of quantitative and qualitative data, is emphasized.

In the case of social work, the data of scientific studies and administrative data can facilitate the identification and understanding of the common factors of different risk situations, the root causes of social problems and the development of effective interventions, including prevention (Griffin, 2020). Thus, practitioners in the field can use data obtained by applying scientific methods to improve performance at different levels (Cariceo et al., 2018). In this way, the data can support decisions, which can also lead to changing the focus of the intervention in a situation where its poor efficiency is attested.

In this context, data literacy is a key professional competency. This fact is also determined by the situation in which the activity of social workers

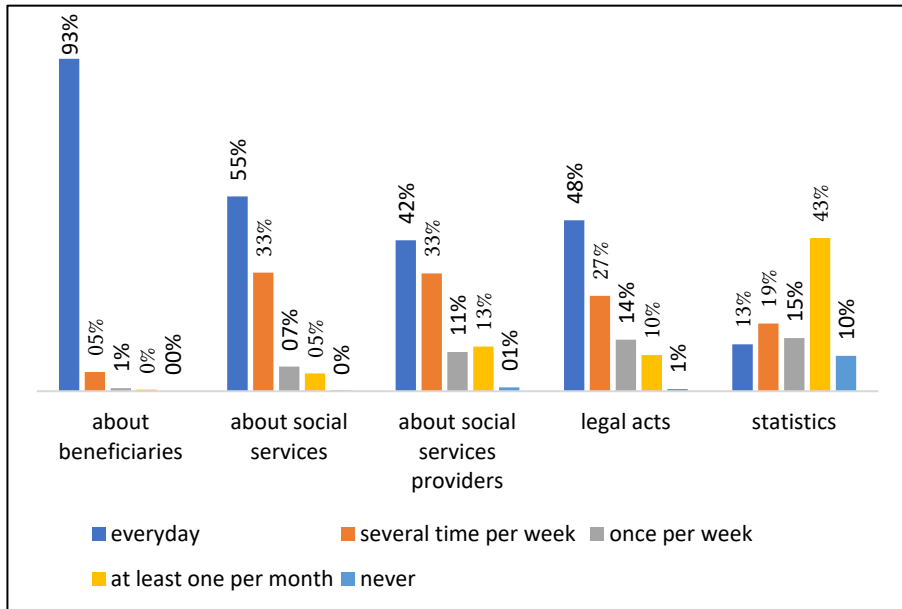
involves working with various data and information, which need to be thoroughly collected, processed, analysed, and made available to decision-makers (Oceretnii et. al., 2022). The quality of the data collected in the system, but also their use, is influenced by the level of qualification of the professionals. According to the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection data, less than 1/3 of community social workers employed in the public social assistance system have higher education, and among social services employees, only 19% have higher education. At the same time, only approximately 40% of employees have professional training in the field of social work/related fields or have benefited from initial and continuous training in the field of social services in which they are employed (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2023), that problem being a systemic one (Raportul Social Anual, 2019). In this case, the skill to work with data could be affected due to insufficient professional training.

## **2. Research Methodology**

The practices and difficulties in using data in the field of social work were analysed in the sociological study, carried out by the implementation team of the Moldova State University (Department of Sociology and Social Work) within the „Data for Impact” Project (USAID project implemented by Palladium International). The research is argued by a problem reported, including in the Annual Social Report of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (2019), in which the mismatch of the professional specializations of the staff employed with the specifics of the position, the lack of professional training, etc., is noted, in the conditions of a high fluctuation of professionals in the field of social work. The sociological study included a combined research methodology, an online opinion survey was carried out among 463 people employed in the social work public system from 27 territorial-administrative units and three focus group (FG) meetings were held, with the participation of community social workers, teaching staff, heads of territorial social assistance structures, representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and the associative sector. The study was conducted in April-May 2022. The sample for the online survey was 463 persons, being nationally representative, with  $\pm 3,5\%$  survey error. The average age of the respondents was 41.2 years, the youngest respondent being 21 years old and the oldest - 66 years old. The average working experience in the social work field was 7.3 years. The results of the research substantiated the decisions related to the revision of the education plan and the university curriculum in the field of social work training. Research limits: several issues affected the research, including (1) the relatively short period, making it difficult to apply other research methods (individual interview, observations, etc.), to ensure full data triangulation, (2) the involvement of territorial social assistance structures in assisting refugees from Ukraine, (3) the effect of social desirability among teachers.

### 3. Results

The research data reveal the use by social work staff of a diversity of data. Beneficiary data is used more frequently (93.3%), and more than half use social services data daily.



**Figure 1.** Frequency of use of different types of data/information by social work staff

Statistical data are used to a lesser extent, a fact that can also be explained by the poorly developed skills of working with data and the lack of understanding of their usefulness for social work practice.

The vast majority of the professionals participating in the study (about 90%) use the collected data/information for evaluation, monitoring, and drafting documents and reports. A smaller part uses the data/information for other purposes as well, such as planning services (79.9%), developing presentations (71.2%), calculating indicators (62.3%) and calculating performance gains (42.9%). During the group discussions, areas of data use were highlighted, such as the presentation of the situation at the local level, and information that is requested by various structures at the national (ministry) and local (local public authorities) level.

*"We make different reports for the Ministry or the local APL so that they know the situation in the locality: what categories of beneficiaries we have, what services are provided to them."* (FG\_1)

*"At the request of the directorates (n.a. territorial social assistance structures), social workers present reports with the number of cases. We collect, calculate, and pass on the data. There is no possibility of calculations at the territorial level. The situation is vulnerable."* (FG\_1)

*"The data are used according to the management's requests to report, and make different statistics by categories of beneficiaries or services." (FG\_1)*

Another purpose of the data use is to support the planning of activities for the following year, including the establishment of activity objectives within the territorial social assistance structures.

*"To plan our activities for next year based on the data we have." (FG\_1)*

*"We use the data in the reports to qualitatively and quantitatively analyse the evolution of the services or what we set out to do so that later we can see what strategic objectives we need to set." (FG\_3)*

In the field of social services, the data are used in their evaluation or in planning the development of new social services. Data collected on services is also used in the budget planning process.

*"We evaluate the impact of services to see if we need to develop them or see their trends." (FG\_3)*

*„When we want to create new social services, to justify the need for this service." (FG\_1)*

*"To create a statistic per service: increase the number, for which category of beneficiaries - so that in budget planning we draw more attention to this category of beneficiaries, which service is more in demand, where it is necessary to plan more financial resources." (FG\_3)*

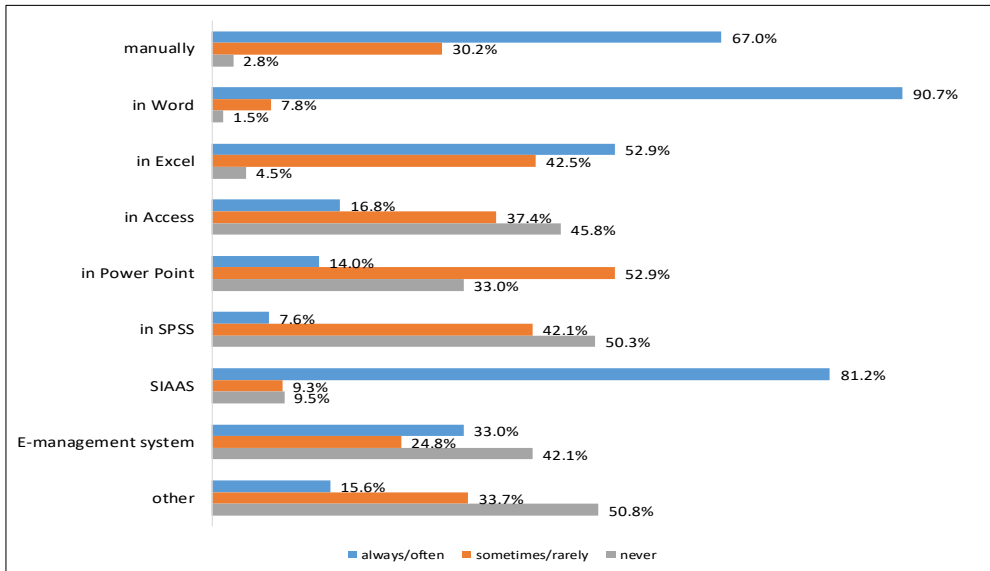
In the same way, practices were established for the use of data in the development of projects to access financial resources, by arguing the need for interventions: *„For different projects and to win them, but also for other statistics." (FG\_1)*

The research data establishes the fact that approximately 9 out of 10 respondents process the data/information in Word format, and 81.2% operate in the Social Assistance Automated Information System (SIAAS). Just over half of the sample (52.9%) process the data through Excel files. The high share of those who operate with data in Word format and the low share of those who process data through Excel can be explained by the lack of knowledge and operating skills.

*"There is a problem: how many of the social workers know how to use Excel? because their number is very small, I'm talking about simple Excel files...Not every social worker knows the real situation. I noticed that many social workers duplicate data, figures, and indicators" (FG\_2)*

Worrying is the fact that 67.0% of the respondents process the data manually, which reveals either the lack of skills in using operating systems or high-performance equipment or the different format of the information applied in the system, etc. Additionally, approximately 64% of respondents believe that the social work system in the country is poorly digitized, even if the vast majority (98.1%) agree that information systems make work easier. In this context, we note that in the coming years the automated information system in the field of child protection needs to be developed to centralize and digitize the processes of collecting disaggregated data regarding the situation of children at risk, children separated

from their parents, adopted children, repatriated children and abducted children, to facilitate the registration, recording, assistance, referral, monitoring and reporting of child cases, data quality assurance and the calculation of national indicators useful for decision-making, which is established by the National Program for child protection for the years 2022-2026 (action 16, Specific Objective 1.2.) (Programul național pentru protecția copilului pe anii, 2022-2026). Currently, data on children at risk are collected through two forms approved by the National Bureau of Statistics (CER 103A and CER 103).



**Figure 2.** Data processing methods used in the social work system

The objective of digitizing the social work system is a key object of the reform of social work system RESTART (launched in 2023) with the following areas of intervention identified: the unification of current information systems on a single platform for access and data analysis based on the auditing of current information systems from the point of view of compliance the normative framework, technologies, interoperability, human resources; developing an ecosystem governance strategy; implementation of an information register for social services and benefits implemented by territorial social assistance agencies and social assistance territorial subdivisions; modernization of the Social Assistance Automated Information System; the development of a unique platform for access to social aid and compensation for citizens ajutor.gov.md, based on the best practices recorded in the implementation of the compensatii.gov.md platform; implementation of a single register of social assistance beneficiaries (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2023).

The digitization of the domain is also determined by the large volume of data that is operated in the system. The sociological study highlighted that social workers work with a great diversity of data - 84.0% of respondents agree

with this aspect. About half of the respondents believe that the collected data are not processed and analysed, which highlights a faulty management of the activity and a waste of human resources and time, while every third respondent disapproved of this fact.

The activity of data and information processing in the field could also be hampered by the large number of registers completed in written format (84.7% agree with this fact), which influences the large number of respondents who declared that they process data manually: *„Paper registers are also used, but a greater volume of work is received. Beneficiaries are entered in the databases we create, but also in the registers” (FG\_3).*

The implementation of information systems would facilitate both data collection and processing, as well as storage. The poor application of information systems would be determined by the lack of equipment, poorly qualified human resources, limited financial resources, etc. In these conditions, pressure is placed on the activity of social workers, by duplicating information (letter and electronic format): *„Manual registers are still used for two reasons: we do not have efficient technology and the human resource does not have the skills to work in the information system. Now we also work with paper registers, but also with electronic ones.” (FG\_1)*

The process of using data by social work professionals is influenced by several difficulties. Approximately 62.9% of respondents are not trained to develop a data collection form, especially those who have 6-10 years of work experience (10.6% are not trained at all) and those with a work experience of more than 16 years (9.5% are not trained at all). More than a fourth (26.8%) do not know exactly what kind of data to collect, which explains the data by which 29.0% do not understand their usefulness for professional activity.

More than a third of the respondents (37.5%) fail to identify the data necessary for professional activity, and approximately every tenth (11.3%) faces difficulty understanding the data, especially this being a difficulty for those with less than 2 years of experience or with more than 16 years of experience. Approximately one in ten needed the support of a colleague in working with the data.

In the same vein, more than half of the sample (53.9%) do not apply verification methods to the collected data, which could influence the accuracy of the data.

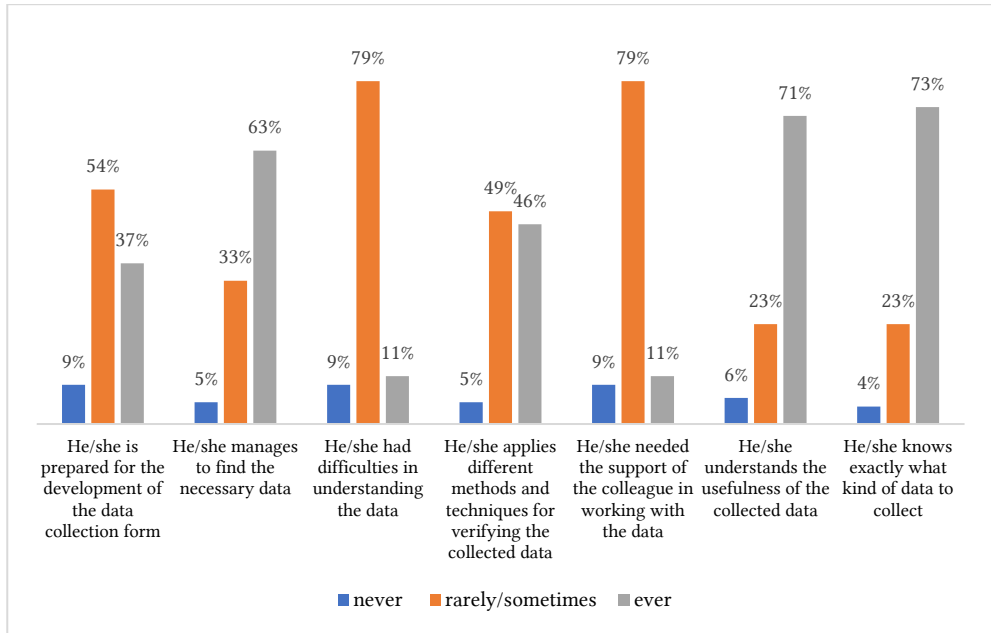
During the group discussion with professionals in the field, the following difficulties were identified:

- the lack of interoperability of information systems, which creates deficiencies in the collection and use of data.

*„There is no interconnectivity at the bases of different institutions, each institution if it needs other data must request it through an interpellation.” (FG\_1)*

*„We do not have access to such bases, and we continue to make requests to the guardianship authority to obtain some details about the case. If there were*

some databases with complex data about the beneficiary and we had access, we would identify which services needed to be developed.” (FG\_3)



**Figure 3.** Situations faced by professionals in the social work system when working with data/information

- lack of unique data collection models, approved at the national level  
*”They are not unique models that would be general throughout the republic. We invent here on the spot, within the directions. In the given chapter, an improvement is required, something that would make our work easier” (FG\_3)*
- making calculations manually, based on the lists generated by the information system

*”The extraction of data on different categories is done manually, the cases are counted from the lists generated by the computer (n.a. from the information system)” (FG\_1)*

*”There are no other programs (n.a. apart from the information system), we work with the old tools.” (FG\_1)*

#### 4. Conclusions

Social work is a field in which a series of data is collected daily, which needs to be collected in an organized, systematic, and correct way, and through processing and interpretation to be able to help identify the best solutions for social work beneficiaries and the communities they belong to. The poor professional training of professionals in the use of data and the poor digitization of the system lead to the difficult development of evidence-based policies. In



this sense, in the following period in the Republic of Moldova, the need is imposed to be:

- integrated innovative technological solutions in the field of social work,
- expansion of scientific research in the field, the results of which will be used by political decision-makers in decision-making,
- strengthening the capacities of professionals in the field by developing continuous training programs and adjusting the university curriculum, to ensure the training of the competence to use data in decision-making.

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