

## DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION IN SOCIAL WORK IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: PRACTICES AND DIFFICULTIES

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**Abstract:** Professional supervision in social work in the Republic of Moldova is a relatively new field, the first mechanism in the field being approved in 2008. This article presents the results of research carried out on the subject of professional supervision in the field of social work in the Republic of Moldova, which allowed highlighting the implementation practices, needs met by these meetings and some gaps. The supervision activity is carried out in the form of a cascade, especially applying internal supervision. Also, studies have established that group supervision sessions are most often held, which also serve a reporting function.

**Keywords:** beneficiary, social worker, supervisor, supervisees

**Résumé :** Supervision professionnelle dans le domaine de l'assistance sociale en République de Moldavie est un domaine relativement nouveau, le premier mécanisme dans ce domaine ayant été approuvé en 2008. Cet article présente les résultats de recherches menées sur le thème de la supervision professionnelle dans le domaine de l'assistance sociale en République de Moldavie, ce qui a permis de mettre en évidence les pratiques de mise en œuvre, les besoins satisfaits par ces réunions et certaines lacunes. L'activité de supervision s'exerce sous forme de cascade, en appliquant notamment la supervision interne. En outre, des études ont établi que des séances de supervision de groupe sont le plus souvent organisées, qui remplissent également une fonction de reporting.

**Mots-clés :** bénéficiaire, travailleur social, superviseur, superviser

**Rezumat:** Supervizarea profesională în asistența socială din Republica Moldova este un domeniu relativ nou, primul mecanism în domeniu fiind aprobat în anul 2008. Acest articol prezintă rezultatele cercetărilor realizate la tematica supervizării profesionale în domeniul asistenței sociale din Republica Moldova, care au permis evidențierea practicilor de desfășurare, nevoile satisfăcute prin aceste ședințe și unele lacune. Activitatea de supervizare se realizează în formă de cascadă, în special aplicându-se supervizarea internă. De asemenea, studiile au stabilit că cel mai des sunt desfășurate ședințele de supervizare în grup, care servesc inclusiv funcție de raportare.

**Cuvinte cheie:** beneficiar, asistent social, supervisor, supervizați

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## 1. Introduction

The field of social work in the Republic of Moldova is subject to multiple challenges in the context of recent transformations and the connection to international standards. The professional activity of social workers and those involved in the provision of social services is directly determined by the level of knowledge and practical experience in the field. At the same time, the precarious situations of social work beneficiaries directly impact the professional activity and mood of social work professionals. In this context, professional supervision, as an important component in social work, is intended for all categories of staff directly or indirectly involved in the provision of social services. In the case of those directly involved, supervision is of particular importance by participating in supervision activities it is possible to avoid professional burnout and leaving the field of activity. In the Republic of Moldova, the concept of supervision entered the practice and theory of social work relatively late, through the institutionalization of the mechanism in the field of child and family services, and later also for other types of services. Through the consolidated effort of civil society (A.O. Partnership for Every Child) and the authorities, the „Supervision Mechanism in Social Work” was approved in 2008, being applied in the Community Social Work Service and the Home Social Care Service. In 2017, the supervision mechanism was revised, extending to other social services, and in the period 2021-2022 with the support of development partners (Global Initiative Changing the Way We Care) the process of analysis and adjustment to the needs of the system was started of the supervision mechanism. Currently, as a result of the reform in the field of social work, it was not possible to develop new procedures regarding professional supervision, the field being less addressed within social services, but it remains an evaluated component in the context of the accreditation of social services.

## 2. Research Methodology

The analysis of the research methodology applied in the studies carried out at the international level allowed the outline of the methodological research framework of the influence of professional supervision on the activity in the field of social work in the Republic of Moldova. The research design included a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods, as follows:

- The quantitative study „Opinions and practices of professional supervision in social work”, based on a survey, on a sample of 105 supervisors (period 2021-2022),
- The quantitative study „Evaluation of supervisee satisfaction following supervision sessions”, based on a survey, on a sample of 514 supervisees (period 2021-2022),
- The qualitative studies „Supervision in social work: difficulties and opportunities” (6 supervisors) and „Evaluation of the opinion of experts regarding professional supervision in social work” (8 experts) based on in-depth individual interviews (period 2023-2024).

In this article, some of the research data carried out are analysed, especially those that allowed the identification of practices and difficulties in carrying out professional supervision.

### 3. Results

The process of professional supervision in the Republic of Moldova involves several categories of professionals. According to national standards, these are the supervised employees, supervisors and managers within the territorial social assistance structures or social services within them, each having specific roles and responsibilities. At the same time, in the Republic of Moldova, professional supervision is carried out in the form of a „cascade”, carried out on functional levels, as follows:

- The head of the territorial social assistance structure supervises the service managers within or subordinate to the structure, including the structure's specialists,
- Managers of the services within or subordinate to the structure carry out the supervision of the supervisors at the service level,
- Supervisors carry out the supervision of employees by occupational category (community social workers, members of the Social Service Mobile Team, etc.). This type of supervisory performance is more closely associated with administrative supervision.

Even if the normative framework currently applicable in the country establishes the way of conducting supervision in the form of a cascade, some experts believe that it is carried out formally, outside of a procedural approach. At the same time, supervision is more associated with control, in the context in which it is carried out by managers whose main goal is to ensure the functionality of the institution.

*But let it be a continuous process, I think the supervision should cover all levels, but let's not talk only about the supervision of community social workers. Because they need supervision, even the heads of departments at the ministry. And why not... the minister should also be supervised from the outside, which I pray would contribute to improving the system. (I\_E\_4)*

*So apparently, the mechanism is not very functional, because it is not very clear at the national level... But when they hear the word supervision, they think of control, verification and not the support, guidance component... (I\_E\_5)*

The implementation of the supervision activity is usually carried out through supervision meetings. These can be organized in different ways, including their combination: individual supervision, group supervision, dyadic supervision, reflection teams, remote supervision using electronic communication equipment. A typology of supervision is made (Cojocaru Ș., 2005, p. 135) starting from three reference systems: the relationship of the supervisor with the organization (1), the

form of organization (2) and the perspective of approaching reality (3). Depending on the first reference system - the supervisor's relationship with the organization, it can be:

- *internal supervision* carried out by a designated person within the institution, specific to non-governmental organizations, especially international ones. This type of supervision would be expensive and would create certain problems if the designated person has a management position. However, among the positive aspects of this type are: the guarantee of the quality of the services provided, the achievement of the educational function in a short time, it is more accessible to the customers, permanent feedback, permanent monitoring of quality standards and performance objectives, etc. This type of supervision is also applied within the national social work system, the supervision function being assigned to a professional within the system.

*Yes, on the inside, exactly, because I have to have access... For example, if a question came up and I don't know how to handle it, because we often have cases that are urgent and cannot be postponed... (I\_E\_5)*

*On the part related to internal supervision, I would see it as useful, necessary, to appoint supervisors from the system anyway, because they know very well the specifics of the work. (I\_E\_7)*

- *external supervision*, provided by people outside the institution at its request, or is supervision that takes place between a practitioner and a supervisor who does not work for the same employer (Beddoe L., 2012, p. 199). This type of supervision is considered to contribute to an objective assessment of staff, reflective learning, critical and constructive confrontation, quality service delivery, etc.

*Someone from the outside, who would guide them and help them see differently, because the supervisor must be impartial, he must not judge, he must not give solutions, if you go by the book. And I think that the outsider would be the most suitable, experienced and works only on this and knows how to do this very well. (I\_E\_2)*

However, among the limits of external supervision are: limited access to staff supervision, offering „templated” solutions within supervision, poor conflict prevention, etc.

Corresponding to the form of organization of supervision, two types can be identified: individual supervision and group supervision. According to the third frame of reference - the reality approach perspective, they can be identified:

- *classic, problem-centered supervision* that aims to establish the problems faced by social workers in solving the case, through diagnosis, analysis and identification of solutions. The supervisor focuses especially in working with supervisees on the causes that generated a problem. But in situations where the causes can no longer be identified, then the supervisor has the mission of supporting social workers to identify solutions to the current situation.

- *appreciative supervision*, focused on appreciation, which includes several stages that put in the foreground the positive vision, focusing on strengths and successes assumed and realized by professionals.

Regardless of the type of supervision adopted, this is an intervention whereby the less experienced social work professional is supported by the supervisor to develop professional skills and competencies in a more or less formalized setting. During the supervision sessions, their content will focus on the methods and techniques applied, the discussion of difficult cases and the identification of solutions, the exchange of experience, the emotional state of the supervisees and the strengthening of team spirit.

The mechanism of professional supervision in social work, applied in the Republic of Moldova, indicates two types of supervision, including individual and group supervision, which can be carried out in a planned way, both in a formalized and informal way, as needed or ad hoc. Within the mechanism, it is indicated on the need for social assistance structures to promote informal supervision, by creating collegial teams/pairs to offer support to young people employed in the system.

In the specialized literature on the approach to individual supervision (Milicenco S., 2023) it is mentioned that this represents an opportunity for the supervisee to benefit from systematic individual support, focused on individual professional needs. The central point in individual supervision is the analysis of the quality of the services provided by the specific employee. Cojocaru St. (2005, p. 137) considers individual supervision to be a case supervision, focused on casework analysis. The supervisor must ensure that the supervised employee applies standardized work methodologies: case management, specific assessment and intervention tools. In the view of some supervisors, this kind of supervision is carried out in work situations that present difficulty for professionals, which represents a broad and vague understanding of the activity of supervision.

*Individual supervision, this is when the social worker reaches an impasse and he does not know what to do next. (IA\_supervisor\_2)*

Compared to individual supervision, group supervision offers the group of supervised professionals the opportunity to meet to review the work and find effective solutions together and to transfer knowledge and best practices in a common learning environment. In some bibliographic sources (Getzelman D., 2003, p. 19), group supervision is defined as „the regular meeting of a group of supervisees with a designated supervisor in order to improve their understanding of themselves as practitioners, of the beneficiaries with whom they work and/or about service delivery in general, who are aided in this endeavour by interacting with others in group processes' or 'a form of supervision in social work which is based on interactions within the group of social workers supervised” (Milicenco S., 2023). This type of supervision is applied in cases where the supervisees have sufficient experience of providing services, in the situation where the group is sufficiently consolidated and when the presence of the supervisor is accepted by

the group members. Group supervision is a professional meeting, planned and organized, with the objective of evaluating specific situations that social workers encounter in practice, learning from their own experience and from the experience of others, resolving conflicts within the group. The group supervision process can only be applied if there are at least 3 people in the group, the first of whom is the supervisor (presenter), the second - observer and the last - supervised (consultant) (Muntean A., 2007, p. 217). Through these aspects, group supervision differs from dyadic supervision, which involves the activity of the supervisor with two supervisees at the same time.

Furthermore, group supervision can also be an activity to strengthen the employee team. In the case of territorial social assistance structures, which have employees in geographically distant localities, group supervision can offer more opportunities in this regard, compared to individual supervision. During group supervision sessions, more difficult cases can be discussed, best practices can be discussed, employees can be informed about new trends and work methodologies. Some supervisors participating in the qualitative study mentioned that both types of supervision are useful, highlighting the fact that group supervision presents advantages from the perspective of opportunities to exchange opinions between group members and examine cases.

*Both types of supervision, individual and group, are useful, but in group sessions colleagues can express themselves, for example I have my opinion, but it may not always be correct and then colleagues can express themselves opinion and let us reach a common denominator. As far as individual supervision is concerned, I can tell them the ways to go in one case or another, where they have to file, who to turn to, how to visit the family. But cases are best examined in a team. (IA\_supervisor\_1)*

The choice of any professional supervision practice is a management option, bearing in mind the goals of the supervision, the necessary resources and the profile of the supervisees.

The quantitative study among supervisees reveals that group supervision sessions are carried out in a higher proportion (97.9%) compared to individual ones (85.6%). More than 14% of supervisees stated that individual supervision sessions are not carried out, especially community social workers and those from services (16.9%) and those from the South area mentioning this aspect (23.5%).

Every second supervisee (50.4%) believes that they received the type of supervision they wanted, and another 44% - generally yes. Less than 4% of the supervisees consider that they did not receive the supervision they wanted, these being among community social workers.

Studies conducted among supervisors and supervisees revealed a different periodicity of supervision sessions. The individual ones are organized to a greater extent when necessary (64.8% of supervisors and 53.9% of supervisees), while group supervision meetings are held more often every month (57.1% of supervisors and 57.2% of supervisees). The practice identified in the qualitative study refers to the

organization of group supervision meetings towards the end of the month, the meeting also being used to report on the activity carried out.

*I try to organize a group supervision session once a month. I am preparing a topic that we debate at these meetings. We organize the group once a month at least or twice, and the individual ones as necessary. 2 supervision sessions can also take place daily. I try to organize the group supervision meeting at the end of the month when we do the monthly tally. Each social worker presents his difficulties, which files he has under examination, at the end of which we set the date for the next supervision meeting. (IA\_supervisor\_1)*

*The group meeting needs to be held once a month, but it doesn't always work out. Individual meetings can also take place at least once a month, but as a rule, they can also take place as needed. (IA\_supervisor\_3)*

A share of 4.5% of supervisees said that they had never attended supervision sessions, of which 3.5% attended individual sessions (3.9% of social workers, 4.9% of those with 1-5 years of work). A 2007 study of 675 social workers in Australia found that 84% of them had benefited from supervision, but not all (Manthorpe J., Moriarty J., Hussein S., Stevens M., Sharpe E., 2013, p.1-17), such differentiated involvement also being identified in other countries (for example, Great Britain).

The disaggregated analysis of the data reveals that individual supervision as needed is performed more often by supervisors with 4-6 years of supervisory experience (69%) and those with up to 5 supervisees (75%). Supervisors who supervise between 6-10 people, compared to other categories of supervisors, more often organize individual supervision meetings weekly (21.9%), and those with more than 11 supervisees in a larger proportion hold individual meetings monthly (14, 3%) or quarterly (19%). However, it cannot be said that work experience and the number of supervisees determine the frequency of individual supervision sessions.

Concerning group supervision, the study among supervisors highlights that the larger number of supervisees implies the organization of monthly group meetings in a larger proportion: 59.4% of supervisors who supervise 6-10 people and 57, 1% of those who supervise more than 11 people, compared to 50% of those who supervise fewer than 5 people. Instead, these supervisors to a greater extent organize these meetings quarterly.

*They share their opinion; we take one more case for examination and try to find the solutions together. (IA\_supervisor\_1)*

This fact was also revealed in the study „Evaluation of the situation regarding the initial and continuous professional training of the person in the field of child and family protection in the Republic of Moldova” (year 2021), in which it is indicated that the professional supervision of specialists within social services has a fragmented character and the main focus is on providing methodological support. However, the periodic holding of supervision meetings, by outlining a

systemic model, contributes to the promotion and creation of a supportive environment for professionals in the field of social work, allowing them to reflect on their professional activities.

The results of the research allowed the identification of the duration of the supervision sessions. Thus, based on the data presented by the supervisors, the average duration of an individual supervision session is 49.21 minutes, with a maximum time of 180 minutes and a minimum of 10 minutes. Data collected from supervisees indicates an average duration of 54 minutes, with a maximum duration of 240 minutes and a minimum of 1 minute. The minimum duration seems unrealistically small to successfully conduct the meeting according to the established protocol. In such cases, it can be considered that a consultation of the supervisee takes place for quick action.

The results of the study conducted with the participation of supervisors show that more than half of them conduct individual meetings lasting up to 30 minutes, mostly supervisors aged up to 45 years, with more than 4 years of supervisory experience and supervising 6-10 people. The data also reveal that the duration of individual sessions also differs depending on the frequency of this type of supervision: those who conduct weekly indicated a shorter duration (up to 30 minutes) of supervision sessions, and those who conduct quarterly – the duration increases up to 61-90 minutes. In the opinion of some supervisors, the short duration of the supervision sessions is determined by the multitude of tasks of the supervisor, which lead to the reduction of the duration of the supervision sessions.

*Half an hour, I tell you we don't have time, doing supervision like this along with the basic function ... it's not right. (IA\_supervisor\_2)*

*Depending on the length of the sessions, it can be one hour, three hours, but on average an hour and a half. (IA\_supervisor\_4)*

The qualitative study revealed that the duration of the supervision sessions could also be influenced by the issue being discussed by the supervised staff.

*The duration of an individual and group session is different. An individual session can last about 30 minutes, depending on the situation and the problem the social worker is facing. A group session can last from one to two hours. (IA\_supervisor\_3)*

The frequency/amount of supervision received satisfies 39.1% of supervisees very satisfied and 55.4% are partially satisfied. The most satisfied are the professional personal assistants and parental assistants and those with 1-5 years of work experience and from the Center area. Slight or total dissatisfaction was expressed by a small number of supervisors - 3.3%, mainly social workers.

Comparing the two types of supervision, a good proportion of supervisors consider that individual supervision (35.2%) is more adapted to the needs of the supervisee than group supervision (21.9%). Individual supervision is also easier to achieve (33.3%) than group supervision (25.7%). Individual supervision is



considered more effective in achieving the outcome (26.7%) than group supervision (20%).

In the opinion of the supervisees, 40.7% of the supervisees considered that the supervision sessions fully met their needs, with a higher share of those who indicated that individual supervision is offered in the institution and with up to 5 years of work activity.

Many of the needs of the supervisees were met for half of them (50.6%), with a higher proportion of social workers and other specialists, those with 6-10 years of work experience. Approximately 7% felt that some or none of their needs were not met by the supervision they received, these being mainly community social workers.

When asked to nominate the **needs met** during the supervision sessions, the supervised respondents encountered some difficulties in giving answers. Around 11% (11.5%) had the need for guidance and support and the need for knowledge of the application of case management covered. Around 8% indicated that they were informed about accessing social services (8%) and gained new knowledge (7.8%). 5% of the respondents' needs were covered by the need for knowledge of how to prepare case files (5.3%) and social assistance legislation (4.9%). The need to develop communication skills, planning of activities, working with data and others gained statistically insignificant weights (sub 3%).

The **unmet needs** in the supervision meetings are: quality provision of social services (5.1%), application of case management (1.6%) and discussion of social inspection results (1.4%). Other unmet needs have accumulated less than 1%: information on monetary support, file processing, working conditions and salaries, community social worker's duties, assistance to vulnerable persons, involvement of multidisciplinary team, etc.

In order to determine the level of satisfaction of the supervisees with the supervision they received, the author developed the **supervisor satisfaction scale**, consisting of 9 items from the Questionnaire for Supervisors, as follows: Appreciation of the quality of individual supervision, Appreciation of group supervision, Getting the desired supervision, Matching the supervision to the needs of the supervisee, Recommending the supervisor to another supervisee, Satisfaction with the supervision received, Satisfaction with the amount of supervision received, Influence of supervision on the professional activity of the supervisee, and Likelihood of choosing another supervisor. As a result of the score calculation, three levels of supervisor satisfaction were established: low (score less than 24), medium (score between 25-30) and high/high (score 31-36).

**The highest level of satisfaction** was recorded by half (50.8%) of the supervised, mainly those from the Chisinau municipality (61.1%), professional parental assistants (87%), with 1-5 years of work experience (54.1%) and with a weekly frequency of participation in individual (75.5%) and group (68.8%) supervision sessions.

**The average level of satisfaction** was identified among about 2/5 of the supervisees (39.1%). Their group is made up of supervisors from the North area

(45.7%), professionals (44.4%) and social workers (42%), with more than 15 years of experience (50%) and who attend group (66.7%) or individual supervision sessions annually (60%).

Every tenth supervisee (10.1%) showed **a low level of satisfaction**, mostly supervisors from the South (17.6%), social workers (11.6%) and heads/managers of services (10.7%), with up to 1 year of work experience (17.2%) and those who attend supervision meetings, regardless of their type, organized annually (20% - individual meetings and 33.3% - group meetings).

These data confirm that the frequency of the organization of supervision meetings has an influence on the supervisors' satisfaction with the supervision activity.

#### 4. Conclusions

The studies conducted in the Republic of Moldova show that the field of supervision is in the process of development, and interventions are needed in terms of regulation, organization and implementation. The replacement of the function of supervisor by a community social worker or the exercise of the given function by the manager does not allow to achieve the expected results, even though more than half of the supervisees declare themselves satisfied with the supervision received. At the same time, the development of the field implies the need for professionalization of those who will exercise this function, in order to increase the performance of the supervisees.

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