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## The Debate on Minimum Income in Spain: Charity, Development or Citizen Right

Arantxa Hernández-Echegaray  
*University of Valladolid, aran.etxe@gmail.com*

Javier Pacheco-Mangas  
*National University for Distance Education, Spain*

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# The Debate on Minimum Income in Spain: Charity, Development or Citizen Right

Arantxa Hernández-Echegaray  
Javier Pacheco-Mangas

*National University for Distance Education, Spain*

*The current retrenchment of social protection in capitalist welfare economies has triggered the expansion of aid-based practices in response to vulnerability, far removed from the ideals of social work. This study analyzes the practices and strategies of social workers that take part in regional minimum income systems (MIS) in Spain, using a qualitative approach that makes it possible to demonstrate leading professional discourses. Findings show a limited consolidation of regional policies on minimum income in Spain, resulting in significant regional disparities. Authors emphasize the need to increase social work's participation in formulating policies aimed at inclusion and consolidation of local and regional MIS. They propose that social work must move away from bureaucratic habits of social control and seek to strengthen citizenship and promote social development.*

*Key words: minimum income system; social work; professional discourses; social interventions; local social policies.*

## Introduction

The impact of the 2008 financial crisis reached a global scale, almost with the same intensity as the Stock Market Crash of 1929 (Piketty, 2015). The structural problems that weighed on Europe were underscored (Del Pino & Rubio, 2013), deepening a regressive tendency in social protection expenditure which began in the 1990s. The welfare systems of EU-28 countries were

transformed, but the negative consequences of austerity policies were especially striking in southern European countries, specifically in Spain and Greece (European Anti-Poverty Network [EAPN], 2105).

The reforms carried out in recent years hold a re-familiarization hidden within the functions undertaken by the State (education, healthcare and basic social services) in the absence of a recalibration of the growing social imbalance (Petmesidou & Guillén, 2015) and a tendency towards the re-commercialization of social protection (Del Pino & Rubio, 2013). With regard to Spain, in 2014, the AROPE (at risk of poverty or social exclusion) rate includes 29.2% of the population, which represents 122 million people (the European average is 24.4%). In Greece, it reaches 36% of the population, and both countries, Greece and Spain, lead Europe in this respect. Statistics show that a sharp increase occurred from 2008 to 2014 (EAPN, 2015).

The 7th Report on social development and exclusion (Fundación FOESSA, 2014) reveals that, in the last seven years, the social divide has widened and the fully integrated population is increasingly smaller. The effect of the 2008 financial crisis has deepened the dualism of Spanish society, significantly impoverishing the middle and lower classes. In Spain, exclusion mostly affects young people and those who, before the crisis, were already vulnerable or marginalized. These include ethnic minority groups such as immigrants and gypsies. The crisis has impoverished the population, and most significantly, the middle class (Tezanos, Sotomayor, Sánchez-Morales & Díaz, 2013). This distinguishes the 2008 crisis from other previous crises. This crisis has affected “heads of households,” including integrated and excluded citizens. The number of the “working poor” increased from 11.7% in 2013 to 14.2% in 2014 due to the increase in the number of part-time employees. This affected 16% of workers during the second quarter of 2015 (EAPN, 2015). Thus, employment is not an effective protective factor against poverty. Poverty has been compounded by a decrease in wage compensation and the freezing of the Multiplier for the Public Income Index (IPREM) in 2010.

The Living Conditions Survey conducted by the National Statistics Institute (INE) shows an increase in the percentage of people under the poverty line, going from 20.4% in 2015 to 22.1% in 2014 (INE, 2016). Poverty in Spain mostly affects families and

children. Thirty point five percent of minors live in relative poverty, 15.7% live in severe poverty, and 9.5% suffer from severe material deprivation (Save the Children, 2016).

These new families have not been targeted for social services and they are becoming a highly vulnerable group because of this lack of institutional protection (Segado Sánchez-Cabezudo, Osca Segovia, & López Peláez, 2013). Such families do not seek institutional support, but rather seek the support of their families and relatives, further impoverishing one another and generating the phenomenon referred to as “family-induced poverty” (Tezanos et al., 2013). Households which include minors and which are headed by women experience double exclusion. The empowerment of these households requires reconciliation and child poverty prevention efforts. Therefore, some authors claim that policies against poverty and social exclusion have been encountering the material and social consequences of the crisis and have not adapted to newly emerging social realities (Alguacil, 2012; Laparra & Pérez Eransus, 2010; Tezanos et al., 2013). Strategies to fight poverty include minimum income systems (MIS). MIS has been inadequate, even though it is supposed to represent a citizen “safety net” when public and private systems of social protection fail (Moreno, 2001).

Civil society efforts to meet basic necessities (soup kitchens, food and clothing distribution, eviction assistance, etc.) have emerged, given the lack of an effective government response. Civil sector initiatives have had a direct impact on social services and models of social work practice. Their strategies go from guaranteeing rights to responding to needs through charity, philanthropy and solidarity (Marí-Klose & Martínez Pérez, 2015; Martínez, Cruz, & Ioakimidis, 2014). This presents a dual reality: (1) The lack of real policies for citizen development; and (2) the responsibility of social work professionals for managing this new social context.

This research study sought to explore this situation by interviewing community social workers managing aid to families in the Spanish autonomous communities of Castile and León, and Andalusia. The first goal of this study was determine if public policies formulated in response to the crisis have been effective in alleviating needs or reducing social vulnerability.

The MIS in Spain has experienced a steady increase in the number of beneficiaries and budgetary resources available to it. In spite of this, there are many inconsistencies from one autonomous community to the next related to regulations and obligations. These imbalances, or substantial differences, undermine social rights by region, in violation of the principles of Article 9.2 of the Spanish Constitution. This article requires citizens' access to full participation and integration in economic life under equal conditions. It also highlights the duty of public authorities to remove obstacles to access this right (Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad, 2015).

The autonomous community of Andalusia is currently debating the modification of these regulations. Because of this, it now has the ability to formulate new policies to effectively guarantee material coverage of citizens and proper social inclusion. Such policies must be consistent with existing laws related to basic income, enacted in response to the financial crisis. Laws in response to the crisis can be observed at the various levels of government in the areas of housing, employment, family and income. The litmus test for the effectiveness of these laws is the extent to which participants believe they solve their problems.

This study also sought to determine if social workers are influencing social policy and contributing to the transformation of the reality of these families. This issue is related to others beyond the scope of this study, such as the professional autonomy of social workers and their role within bureaucratic organizations and in relation to institutional philosophies.

These topics are not addressed in depth in this article, given limited scope of it. Nevertheless, we will discuss them briefly, given their significance to the profession. Let's put these issues in context. Mary Ellen Richmond proposed that social work is based on three pillars: social (social reform), professional (social intervention), and disciplinary (social research) (Berasaluze, 2009). The metaphor of pillars might not be the best, given that, unlike social work, it is associated with a monolithic image of something disconnected from its surroundings. The three components, reform, intervention and research, are three dimensions of the concept of social work that must be balanced and intertwined. Unfortunately, currently there is an imbalance. The components of social reform and development are overshadowed by assistentialist intervention associated with social

adjustment, control, charity and outdated forms of welfare. To solve this we propose social change promoted by a modern state that guarantees social rights. Toren (1969) explains how “in its history, social work has long had a double focus: on social reform, on the one hand; and on facilitating adjustment of individuals to existing situations, on the other (Meyer, cited in Toren, 1969, p. 160). This research study focused on examining the narratives of social work professionals related to their participation with MIS to explore this issue. It attempts to describe and explain the complexities and contradictions the profession experiences in this area. This study sought to understand how the mission and strategy of social work are linked to policies against poverty and exclusion, by focusing on two autonomous communities of Spain: Castile-León and Andalusia. This article analyzes whether MIS and the profession of social work in Spain are fulfilling their goals.

### Ambivalence in social work: Charity oversight and development oriented social change

When discussing exclusion, we almost inevitably make reference to integration, participation and democracy. Individuals suffering from exclusion have experienced many failures and lack almost everything (Sánchez Alias & Jiménez Sánchez, 2013). Social integration or reintegration will enable them to fully participate in society with all the corresponding rights and obligations. Integration involves the exercise of rights as citizens in the civil, political, social and economic arenas (Marshall, 1997 [1949]). The exercise of economic citizenship implies the implementation “of broader and more universal social services (as a fourth effective pillar of the welfare state), of policies that make housing accessible and of social wages or integration income [...]. Our objective should be a general reintegration of economic aspects” (Tezanos, 2008 p. 28).

In that context, social work is “a profession based on an academic discipline and practice that promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people” (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014). Often, social workers engage in welfare and assistance instead of reform. Although social work’s mission calls

for building bridges towards economic development, in practice and in the current environment, making this a reality is complicated. The social reality following the crisis casts doubt on the strengthening of social rights as understood before the crisis (López i Casanovas, 2015), and on the sustainability of the European social model. Neoliberal logic and austerity policies reduce access to social rights by the most vulnerable sectors of society. These measures have hurt social welfare systems and

Table 1. Consequences of the crisis on citizenship, social services and social work.

Citizenship	Social Services	Social Work
Social vulnerability	Lack of social protection	Marginalized social work
Unemployment (sustained over time)	Budget cuts	Aid-based-approach
Lack of money; Depletion of reserves/savings; Expenditure restraint; Family-induced poverty	Immobility	Focus on welfare Alleviating
Coverage of basic	Reduced Stress	Social Control
Loss of housing	Reduced social resources	Traditional responses to new realities
Increase in demand	Saturation of services	Red tape, bureaucracy
Spiral of exclusion	Withdrawal of public protective action	Commitment and action

Source: Compiled by author.

have marginalized the profession. The consequences of the crisis in the three areas are summarized in Table 1.

Decreased access to social rights is caused by neoliberal logic and austerity measures. All of this stems from the existing tensions between social and economic policies and the policy models that derive from both of them. Aguilar Idáñez (2013) has identified four models: (1) social policy as charity; (2) social policy as a guarantee of social control; (3) social policy as a mechanism of social reproduction; and (4) social policy as the fulfillment of the social right to citizenship. Thus, the welfare state as an institution that implements social policies (Fernández García, de Lorenzo, & Vázquez, 2012), takes on a different appearance, depending on the model. Consequently, social work practice also varies from being assistance-oriented, charitable, philanthropic and altruistic, to focusing on promoting of social rights.

## Materials and Methods

This study relies on a qualitative methodology that includes the analysis of narratives, as proposed by Wetherell and Potter (1996). The methodology is based on the concepts of function, variability, construction and the unit of analysis selected for interpretation. The latter represents the main contribution of this method for the analysis of narratives and research. Qualitative analysis seeks to identify key concepts that repeat themselves in patterns. These “can be considered as the essential elements used by speakers to construct versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena” (Wetherell & Potter, 1996, p. 66).

Data were collected from primary sources, including in-depth interviews with twenty-eight social work professionals from Andalusia and Castile-León, who provide municipal social services, autonomous community social services and/or civic organizations working with the poor. Participants were selected according to predetermined heterogeneous criteria (Íñiguez & Vázquez, 2008) from groups of professionals. Participants were required to meet professional experience criteria (at least 5 years) and to be actively involved in their workplace in the implementation of minimum income programs. The study also took into account the variety of names given to primary care



municipal social services facilities in each of the autonomous communities. Thus, for Andalusia, the name used is Centre for Community Social Services (CSSC), while the name in Castile-León is Centre for Social Action (CEAS).

### *Data Collection Procedures*

Data were collected in the months of January and February 2015. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and codified. The interviews included open-ended questions covering eight themes related to the subject of the study. An interview guide was developed to explore different aspects of the MIS and their relationship to the professional activity of participants. The instrument included: (a) definition and objectives of benefits or services received; (b) cash benefits; (c) program duration; (d) definition of potential beneficiaries; (e) mechanisms of inter-administrative coordination for program implementation; (f) collaboration and responsibility of social initiative organizations for program development and implementation; (g) program evaluation plan; and (h) personal evaluation of the minimum income system in their respective autonomous community. Participants were informed about the research project and confidentiality was assured. Participants were also promised a copy of the study findings.

The *Atlas.ti* (version 6) software was used to conduct the analysis, which was divided into two phases: a textual phase and a conceptual analysis phase. In the first phase, the interview transcripts were entered in the program, facilitating the organization and identification of significant text excerpts (quotes) associated with the thematic areas and objectives of the study. Each excerpt was assigned an identifier that briefly described the discourse variations associated with its function. In the second phase, meticulous reading was carried out, observing the relationships between the identifiers obtained, so that it would be possible to observe discourse regularities which reflect the reality studied in similar ways. The five recurring representations used most by all the individuals are the five interpretive schemes obtained.

With regard to methodological limitations, the search for regular discourse patterns should be deepened using group research techniques, both with the professionals interviewed and

with other professionals with similar profiles, with the additional possibility of incorporating other geographical contexts of Spain and Europe, which would enable a study with a comparative policy approach. Moreover, it would also be pertinent to ascertain the perception of the individuals who hold these rights, by studying their relationship with the system itself and with the professionals participating in the process.

## Findings

Several patterns emerged from the narratives in spite of their diversity, the geographic origin of the participants, and the administrative and regulatory variability of each region. Views revolved around the nature and delivery of benefits. As a result, the following categories were created:

- The professional as an agent for stability control versus the professional as an agent for social change
- Resource logic over the logic of need
- Obligation over negotiation
- A constant: insufficient and ineffective policies
- Stigmatization and blame

### *The professional as an agent for stability control versus the professional as an agent for social change*

A popular perception among interviewed social workers is that a guaranteed minimum income is a final solution to the problem of poverty. Often interviewed social workers viewed their role in relation to MIS reduced to paperwork. For this reason, many social workers believe that their work does not come near the ideal of the social work profession in the assessment of family needs. Their role in this process is reduced to assuring compliance with a set of requirements, and processing information about benefits. This makes it impossible to study and evaluate the case in a timely manner. Social workers reported feeling unhappy and outraged about having to implement policies and

practices related to MIS. To escape this situation, professionals use chicanery to contribute to the well-being of families, under the ideal of social justice. This poses an ethical dilemma. On one hand, they have a duty to follow the rules, and on the other hand, they feel an obligation to satisfy the overall needs of the families. The following excerpts illustrate this situation:

We have assumed a predominant oversight function in our professional practice to the detriment of everything else. Because of this and other things, we are unable to establish a relationship based on trust with the people we help. (social worker from CEAS)

The role of community social services in the process is very weak. The committee has the power to grant or deny, and reports or views of social workers contribute very little. Also, the role of the community social worker in awarding benefits is not taken into account. (social worker from CSSC)

In the case of immigrants and minimum income, how will they gain access unless they lie and unless the mafias give them the documentation that they need to apply for the income? (social worker from CEAS)

### *Resource logic versus the logic of need*

Professionals complain about the rigidity associated with the implementation of rules, the need to play tricks and the long delays associated with providing assistance following social emergencies. This means that minimum income, despite the renewal of its legislation, does not respond adequately to the social needs of citizens. In this situation, participants see social intervention as a flexible and creative process, based on a relationship of trust and the alliance between the 'professional helper' and the 'person helped.' They feel it is difficult to put this alliance to work due to the shortcomings of policies and excessive bureaucratization. This forces social workers to focus the process on the resource more than on the person. This problem is made clear in the delivery and the monitoring of social interventions with families, as shown in the following selected excerpts:

Resources are more important than people. The system we have makes it hard. We continue to worship a culture of documents, which is incompatible with our theoretical discourse: person-centered comprehensive care. We say one thing, but in reality we do something else. (social worker from CSSC)

The delay in accessing the benefit is unacceptable, and this corrupts it from the outset. What kind of support, trust and respect can we hope for? It is a form of institutional abuse. How will these people respond to us later?" (social worker from CEAS)

### *Obligation versus negotiation*

The biggest challenge faced by social workers revolves around ethics. Regulations are in conflict with some of the core principles of social work, such as self-determination, participation, respect for others and equality. This scenario suggests a high level of professional arbitrariness, given the diverse nature of resources used as compensation and the lack of common institutional instructions for the design and implementation of client integration pathways. Participants identified the lack of systematization of processes for inclusion of individuals and families in minimum income programs:

We leave a narrow margin for participation of individuals in the development of their personalized integration project. We perpetuate the inherited paternalism. (social worker from CEAS)

Can you force someone to make changes in their life for a six-month benefit that takes nine months to be awarded? (social worker from CSSC)

### *A constant: insufficient and ineffective policies*

Dearth is a common denominator in social services. The amounts of the minimum income are limited and families feel obligated to obtain supplementary non-employment income from the underground economy or marginal activities. Sometimes the combined incomes exceed the amount of the minimum wage, which discourages participation in the labor

market. This situation entails an ethical dilemma for social workers. Moreover, the disconnection from active policies for family protection diminish the opportunities for real social re-integration. The resumption of the benefit, after it has been suspended due to employment, entails a period without income of up to four months before disbursement.

There is a bureaucratic blockade that disregards the right recognized by the legislation and it does not motivate people to accept short-term jobs, because it takes too long to resume payment of the benefit, which is unacceptable in precarious economies. (social worker from CEAS)

It is extremely difficult to work holistically in all affected and vulnerable areas. Work in a network is hard to put into practice. There is no capacity for managing integration pathways either. Sometimes it seems like more importance is given to bureaucratic management or to the requirements of the system than to designing integration pathways or developing a commitment with the beneficiary. Furthermore, choosing to work is penalized. Labor integration is not coordinated. I do not think that this kind of assistance favors autonomy. (social worker from the third sector)

### *Stigmatization and blame*

Professionals believe this social policy conceals the neo-liberal notion of blaming the victim for his/her circumstances throughout the administrative procedure. Several professionals argue, for instance, that these benefits are an instrument for social peace or form of dependence on welfare. The professionals suggest changing the paradigm of this policy to proposals that are closer to the minimum income. Besides being blamed, recipients of income are stigmatized and viewed as excluded or marginalized. This calls for another path to integration:

The applicant subjects himself to the administration under suspicion of fraud. It is an institutional abuse. Thus, the social wage contributes to perpetuating misery. (social worker from CSSC)

There is undue questioning, which encapsulates blame for the citizen who accesses or requests the benefit. How far will

this go, you wonder? You feel like they are violating your limits of privacy through the professional intervention: family aspects, sanitary aspects, relational aspects... Also, by dealing with so many professionals with the assistance, the person loses his dignity counting [how many people he's interacted with]. (social worker from CEAS)

Might it be necessary to redesign how people are divided structurally and economically? More stigmatization for the same people as always? We have to stop penalizing those most vulnerable: immigrants, young people, single-parent families, for example, in the case of the compatibility of the benefit with unemployment subsidies. (social worker from CEAS)

## Discussion

Titmuss (1974) refers to social workers as state workers', and Illich (1977) uses the term "disabling profession" to define professional charity and assistance practices that fail to empower citizens. The discourse of the interviewed professionals shows a pattern of identifying social workers as guarantors and executors of public policies. Social workers assume a supervisory role over mandatory rules, with which they are not comfortable. At the same time, they conform and do not confront or transform the current situation. This has already been documented in the current social work literature (Pacheco-Mangas & Palma-García, 2015). Similarly, De la Red and Barranco Exposito (2014) pose the need to redefine the role of social workers to improve interventions in new realities and increasingly complex scenarios. Social workers should be actively involved in the formulation and implementation of social policies. Both studies redefine the "social" in "social work" as a consubstantial element that has become blurred in the practices of recent decades (Hanssen, Hutchinson, Lyngstad, & Sandvin, 2015).

In this context, social service delivery systems and, by extension, regional minimum income programs embody the paradox of creating mixed systems (welfare mix) that evenly combine public and private action. In other words, the privatization of public services is taking place through private action of non-profit and non-governmental organizations, whose work will significantly impact professional social work practice.

Generally, such privatization takes place when public administration shifts the responsibility for providing social services to non-governmental organizations by funding them (Dominelli & Hoogvelt, 1996, p. 49).

From this study we can infer a significant disconnect between the social reality and the implementation of MIS. Professional interventions in the context of MIS have led to oversight, as opposed to strengthening processes for change and transformation. This process of bureaucratic intervention prevents the social worker from connecting with the consumer and concentrating on intervening based on predetermined scripts (Idareta-Goldaracena & Ballestero-Izquierdo, 2013). This gives rise to numerous ethical dilemmas which hinder the social intervention process (Ballestero, Úriz, & Viscarret, 2012). These practices inhibit creativity and innovation in social intervention and prevent progress in social services. They promote welfare dependence, a client-based approach that generates frustration among professionals, and a “perceived inability to help society achieve its goals and solve its problems” (Schön, 1998, p. 47).

Social intervention in MIS must aim at transformation. On one hand, professionals need to assume their role as agents for change, which they have lost due to their oversight and monitoring roles. On the other hand, they must adopt a proactive attitude towards change, overcoming the resistance to change of social protection systems. They must not engage in practices that deplete the autonomy and the responsibility of citizens. Furthermore, progress must be made in the formulation of social policies. Social work professionals must be represented and actively involved in the policy-making process to reduce vulnerability and social exclusion. To this end, the regulations must be transformed early on. Social exclusion is complex by nature. Regulations must address this complexity and be flexible in their application to avoid generating exclusion.

The views of social work professionals do not vary regionally. However, there are significant differences in the content of pertinent regulations. Progress on state MIS regulations would increase consistency and strengthen the mandate of Article 9.2 of the Spanish Constitution that calls for equality of rights for all citizens. Such equality must be provided regardless of the region of residence when marginalized or at risk of social exclusion. Professionals, in their service-citizen relationship, must

avoid falling into the paradigm of labor activation conditionality characteristic of neoliberal ideology and the capitalist system (Torre Millán, 2014). They must counter biases arising from their personal experiences or social class (Cortinas, 2012a, 2012b) or from their desire to promote acculturation while undermining cultural diversity (Ayala Rubio, 2009).

Our priority should be to prevent exclusion by recognizing the reality of child poverty and the absence of policies for family protection. Spain's economic crisis has highlighted the inadequacy of systems for protecting the most vulnerable groups. This is happening in a context in which family models are changing, moving from extended families to nuclear and single-person families. This puts family members at risk. Thus, our traditional model of social protection is in danger given that it is highly dependent on the family to provide care and support (Sarti, Alberio, & Terraneo, 2013).

Failure to reverse this situation may lead to losing two generations: one made up of qualified and unemployed young people, and the other made up of minors living in homes impoverished by the crisis, where the opportunities to get out of poverty are fewer, consistent with the culture of poverty theory (Lewis, 1972). We must learn from the lessons of the long Spanish charitable history (Aguilar Hendrickson, 2013) and pay attention not only to citizens' needs. We propose a model in which social workers recover their role as agents for change and transformation (López Peláez, 2015).

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