Practice and Policy

Social action in Portugal

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Practice and Policy

Social action in Portugal

by Maria Joaquina Madeira

Understanding the concept

The Portuguese social security system comprises two axes: social security schemes and social action.

The objectives of the system are to:

- protect workers and their families in situations of incapacity or reduced capacity for work, unemployment and death;
- ensure the payment of family allowances;
- support individuals and groups in socio-economic need (directly related to the non-contributory scheme and social action).

Social security schemes include contributory schemes, the most important being the general scheme for employees and self-employed people and the non-contributory scheme that provides means-tested benefits for those that fall below a certain income.

According to our basic social security law, the main *aims of social action* are to:

- *prevent* situations of need and social exclusion
- *protect* more vulnerable groups
- *promote* community integration

Social service provision is an important component of social action. In other words, the traditional understanding of social action is that it should ensure special protection to vulnerable groups, namely children, young people, people with handicaps and elderly people, as well as to other people in situations of social or economic need.

This is perhaps one of the basic problems in the understanding of this sector of social protection. In the eighties the system was in a subsidiary position as it was taken for granted that social action was needed only when individuals or groups found themselves in a position of deprivation. This paved the way for an understanding of social action as a way of solving individual needs, mostly financial needs, without ever attempting to bring about changes in the attitudes of those in need. The fact that access to social services is not a right (and therefore, clients cannot claim statutory access to benefits as against benefits which can ultimately be claimed in court) has been another reason for the lack of legislation in the field of social action.

Providing access to social services is certainly the main modality of organized social action and is therefore indispensable, but the system is meant to be much more than mere service provision. Hence, in the nineties, new ideas of what the system should be have led the way to a different concept of social action, ideas which take into account not only national but also European principles and standards.

Given the fact that the term social action is associated with different conceptual perspectives in different countries, it is important, at this point, to clarify the concept as we now understand it in Portugal.

Social action is the system that promotes social inclusion through services, programmes, projects and activities to improve the quality of life of individuals, families and groups. As social action professionals, we consider the human and social dimension as our fundamental concern.

The system is oriented towards developing a framework for individual and collective initiatives that ensure the autonomy and the social inclusion of disadvantaged groups. Our preferred fields of work are people and their living conditions, the processes that lead to exclusion and its social reproduction, and the adequate measures necessary to bring about change and to increase autonomy.

Organization and administration

Social action is carried out by *public departments, private (non-profit) social solidarity institutions* promoting *social solidarity* and *private for profit institutions* as service providers.

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