

# SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE, EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN THE FEDERATION OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Received: November, 2008  
Accepted: March, 2009  
UDK 364.65 : 364.466(497.6)

Sanela Čekić  
Bašić<sup>1</sup>

University of Sarajevo  
Faculty of Political Science  
Department of Social Work

## SUMMARY

*Despite the fact that the social work profession is considered to be a profession »promoting ... empowerment and liberation of individuals in order to attain greater level of well-being«, the inclusion of the user perspective is a relatively new and still much debated phenomenon. Having in mind that the involvement of service users as experience experts in social work practice, education and research is a very demanding and complex process, the paper analyses a number of challenges faced by social workers, teachers and researchers in their everyday work due to the requirement of inclusion of the service user perspective. The idea of service user involvement in planning, execution and evaluation of curricular contents is a quite recent one in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the social work education reflects the idea on professionals (social workers, teachers or researchers) as ultimate knowledge holders. The author defines two categories of factors obstructing the service user involvement in the education and research process: one is related to education institutions and the*

### Key words:

service user involvement,  
practice, social work educa-  
tion, research in social work.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mr.sc. Sanela Čekić Bašić, social worker, e-mail: basics@fpn.unsa.ba.

***other to service users, i.e. their organizations, and discusses necessary prerequisites for stronger connections between institutions (departments of social work), practice and service users.***

## **INTRODUCTION: DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS**

Considering the nature of cognition in social work, Ife (2001.) analyses the issue of whose knowledge it actually is, underlining that when we talk about knowledge in social work we often imply only expert knowledge of the social worker, forgetting a special type of knowledge which is possessed by service users. He notes that »social work practice ... must value the knowledge of people with whom we work, they have a wisdom and an expertise which we do not, just as because of our professional education, we may have particular knowledge and skills that they do not« (Ife, 2001.). The author concludes that the two types of wisdom and knowledge need to be connected in the form of a dialogue practice, since »this is central for progressive social work, accepting the wisdom of the oppressed and being able to put it alongside the wisdom of professional, so that practice, based on dialogue and action in solidarity, can work towards change« (Ife, 2001.). Although the author speaks from the perspective of professional practice, this conclusion can also be applied to social work education and research.

Certainly, the idea on service user involvement in social work practice, education and research is a relatively new phenomenon which undermines a very wide spread and established supposition in the social work discussions which says that social workers, teachers and researchers are the only and exclusive individuals in possession of valid knowledge in this field.

The service user involvement in practice, education and research represents a new and, we can say, disputable field in modern social work. The discussions on the possibilities and limitations of user involvement<sup>2</sup> in the provision of services have arisen in the last decades of the last century, bringing a »new rhetoric and terminology« (Beresford, 2000.) »service user involvement«, »partnership« and »empowerment«. Furthermore, the introduction of a concept of user involvement had far-reaching consequences for the development of new research methods as well, such as participation and emancipation research or the research conducted and/or controlled by the users (Lyons, 2000.).

At first glance it might seem that there is a logic contradiction in the concept itself, especially having in mind the fact that the social work profession is self-understood and self-defined as a profession which »promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being«, as it is stated in the *Global Standards for Education in the Social Work* (2004.). If this is so, how can

---

<sup>2</sup> Although the term »service users«, is in itself problematic and disputable, it seems that due to lack of a valid alternative it has to be accepted.

we then explain the fact that the users and their knowledge have become important in the international context only in the last two decades and in our local context their introduction is only at the beginning? Should we not expect that the users and their experience-based knowledge are an essence of both professional practice and the ways of mediation and creation of knowledge in social work?

It is possible to give a dichotomous answer. Firstly, the position on service user non-involvement in all three dimensions of social work (field placements, education and research) could be in favour of articulating one of the basic facts for understanding the social work itself. Namely, from its beginnings, the social work has been divided between two conflicting roles that it fulfils in the society: the control function and the help function, as well as modalities in which it is possible to acquire a balance between them. Therefore, it is not surprising that the perspective of service users, although an important aspect of the whole system, has been neglected for such a long time. Secondly, as certain authors stress out (for example Beresford, 2000.), the idea and the concept of user involvement have gained more attention in the academic community and in the public owing to two interrelated developmental moments: on the one hand, the attempts of the New Right<sup>3</sup> to introduce new, market-oriented approaches in the sphere of public policies, and on the other appearance of strong user organizations and movements (Beresford, 2000.).

Both perspectives have developed their own approach to service user involvement, with their particular underlying ideology. The first approach is often called 'consumerist' and its essence is revealed in the attempts to, under the disguise of user involvement in the system of service provision, implement the leading maxim of the New Right: maximization of profitability and efficiency through the »product enhancement«. In that sense, in the framework of this approach user involvement is reduced mostly to the data collection methods and consultation. As emphasized by Beresford, »its use has largely been focused on the planning and management of policy and provision« (2002.:97). The second type of service user involvement is considered to be democratic and its emergence is connected with the activities of organizations and movements of user groups, especially movements of persons with disability. As opposed to the consumerist approach which, in its essence, is managerial and instrumentalist, the democratic approach is based on the principles of redistribution of power and/or control as well as personal and political empowerment and liberation. Furthermore, the democratic approach underlines the need for participation

---

<sup>3</sup> *The New Right represents a novelty in the conservative thought. The ideas of the New Right have developed in the 1970s as a consequence of a failure of Keynesian social democracy. During the 1980s, these ideas gained the form of Thatcherism and Reaganism and exercised a vast influence on general shift from state to market oriented forms of organisation. However, it seems that the New Right does not represent such a unanimous and systematic philosophy but an attempt to combine two different political traditions – neoliberalism and neoconservatism (Milardović, A., 1987.).*

as a reflection of wider political and social philosophies which emphasize involvement, autonomy, independence and realization of human and civil rights.

If we compare our local experience with international developmental tendencies from the beginning of the 1990s, we can simply conclude that the fall of communism and the appearance of new/old right-oriented ideologies in our context have had far-reaching negative effects: they have contributed to disintegration of the former common state, they have resulted in devastating wars and then they have imposed new political, economic and social questions for which some acceptable answers had to be found. Due to all these changes, social work professionals and academic staff needed some time to consolidate and catch up with modern developments in the social work theory and practice. In this sense, in the last two decades of the transition experience it is noticeable that similar tendencies are present in the field of social work in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. There are certain initiatives and efforts to include service users and their interests in the development and design of social welfare policy. We will elaborate on that issue later, and in the next section we will briefly analyse certain provisions of most important documents in the field of human rights, global standards for social work education and Bosnian regulations with the aim of determining whether they include the issue of service user involvement and in what way.

## **SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL DOCUMENTS**

### *SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN THE BASIC DOCUMENTS ON HUMAN RIGHTS*

In this section we will analyse if the key documents in the field of human rights, for example the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* or the *European Social Charter* define the right of the social welfare users to be included in the processes of provision of social services, education or research in social work.

Although the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* from 1948 represents a basic document on human rights at a declarative level, it does not contain a single article related to user involvement. The same is true of the *International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (UN, 1966.) and the *Convention on Human Rights and Basic Freedoms* (Council of Europe, 1950.).

In what way has this issue been dealt with in the text of the *European Social Charter* (1961., revised in 1996.), the most important document guaranteeing social and economic rights within the Council of Europe?

In the Article 14, which guarantees the right to benefit from social welfare services it is stated that »the Parties undertake the obligation to encourage the participation of indi-

viduals and voluntary or other organisations in the establishment and maintenance of such services«. The interpretation of this provision, however, reveals the fact that it only widens the range of service providers, in the sense of including non-governmental and private organizations in the system of service provision, without explicitly mentioning service users or users' organizations.

Furthermore, the Article 15 of the same document guarantees the right of persons with disabilities to independence, social integration and participation in the life of the community. However, although in this article the need for promotion of full integration and participation of the persons with disability in the life of the community has been emphasized, they are still not given an active role in the fulfilment of these rights.

It seems important to mention that the Article 22 stipulates »the right of workers to take part in the determination and improvement of working conditions, organization of work and working environment«, but a similar provision cannot be found in the field of social services. Actually, even the Article 30, which relates to the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion, does not explicitly mention the participation of persons affected by these situations, but it underlines the possibility that the signatory countries »review (undertaken) measures with a view to their adaptation if necessary«.

The mentioned facts reveal that the analysed documents do not contain provisions by which a user's right to be included is guaranteed. A possible explanation, but by no means a justification, could be related to the fact that the user involvement as it was already mentioned, gained the significance only in the 1990s, and the analysed documents were drafted several decades earlier. Certainly, this fact should not be understood as a justification for not including these issues, especially if we take into account that some other similar concepts, as for example the idea of social inclusion, were already widely accepted.

## *SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN THE DOCUMENT GLOBAL STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND TRAINING*

The *Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training* were adopted in 2004 by the IASSW and the IFSW, and they contain several provisions related to the users involvement, especially in the social work practice. For example, in the section on standards regarding the schools' core purpose (education institution, faculty), i.e. its mission, a need for the schools of social work to strive to attain the core purpose, i.e. the mission which, among other things, »respects the rights and interests of service users and their participation in all aspects of providing programmes and services«. Furthermore, in the framework of these standards which relate to the curriculum, including field placements, it is determined that the schools should reach »a partnership between the educational institutions and the agency (where applicable) service users in decision-making regarding field education and the evaluation of students' field performance«. We can conclude that the idea of the user involvement

though clearly articulated in the *Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training* is at the same time limited to the provision of social services and field placements.

## *SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF NATIONAL REGULATIONS, WITH SPECIAL CONSIDERATION OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA<sup>4</sup>*

The process of reforms in the social sector in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina began with the adoption of a new legislative framework in 1999. The main characteristic of the newly adopted regulations is reflected in the fact that, although it contains certain provisions from the old, socialist system, especially related to the number of categories of service users and the volume of proclaimed rights, the new act introduces certain innovative and progressive provisions, for example inauguration of a mixed model of social welfare which allows for the possibility of inclusion of private, profit and non-profit sector in the provision of social welfare services.

As far as participation of users in planning and providing of social care services is concerned, the act is very scarce. The provisions which are indirectly related to the concept of users involvement mention only the possibility of establishing an association of persons with disability (Article 51), and the following provision (Article 52) stipulates that "the authorities at the level of Federation and canton-county should cooperate with associations of the disabled in the creation of policies for implementation of social care programmes".

It is interesting to note that the Act neither mentions the user involvement as one of the basic principles underlying social welfare programmes nor it guarantees the users' right to participate. The mentioned provisions foresee only a diffuse and undefined concept of »cooperation« between public organizations in the field of social work and organizations of persons with disability.

Enumerated provisions can be interpreted in various ways, having in mind certain limiting factors which were present when this Social Welfare Act was prepared and passed. In the first place, at that period the experience of the war was still recent and it resulted in different

---

<sup>4</sup> *It seems to be necessary to mention here the political and administrative organization in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the signature of the Dayton Peace Agreement on 14 December 1995., the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was formally stopped. By the Annex IV of the mentioned peace agreement a new constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, determining the future legal and administrative system of the country was promulgated. According to the constitution, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a decentralized state composed of two ethnically based entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the majority of Bosnian and Croatian population and the Republika Srpska with the majority of Serbian population. After the decision of international arbitration, a third unit, Brčko District, is formed as an independent administrative local government under the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but with international monitoring.*

priorities. Also, the fact that there was no knowledge of the examples of »good practice« from the transition countries needs to be taken into account. However, it seems necessary to note the hidden policy of non-recognition, which is, probably unintentionally, at work here having double negative effect on the service users: on the one hand, it is discriminatory toward the right of the users to be included on the basis of (social) citizenship, and on the other, a partial and limited involvement of persons with disability is discriminatory in relation to a wide spectrum of other categories of service users who were not given a proper position in the regulations in the framework of formal social work environment.

## **POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES OF SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN THE FEDERATION OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

It is certainly interesting to note that the service users, despite the unfavourable legal framework in relation to the design of policy and practice, found their »voice«, and are *de facto* included in the process of creating policies and regulations and even in the creation of everyday social work practice. It was underlined in the introduction of this article that the question of service user involvement in the (west) European context gained importance partially due to a strong pressure of numerous user organizations<sup>5</sup>. In the context of social work practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it can be concluded that the issue of service user involvement gained public attention due to certain developmental tendencies which are directly correlated with post-war and transition processes. As far as experience in (the Federal) Bosnia and Herzegovina is concerned, this process is characterized by the creation of powerful non-governmental organizations devoted to human rights protection. Within their mandates, these organisations also protect the rights of certain marginalized and excluded groups in the society of Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example persons with dis-

---

<sup>5</sup> *It is necessary to have in mind the fact that there is a smaller number of service users included and organized through user organizations. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the exception are organizations of the persons with disability which date back to the period of socialist Yugoslavia and today they exist at different levels (municipality, canton, Federation). Other categories of users mostly do not articulate their interests by associating or creating of separate organisational structures. The appearance of the web portal otac.ba which agitated both the public and social work organizations (centres for social work) indicated that the passive role of service users is about to change, at least as far as the issue of the relation toward the social welfare institutions is concerned. Namely, it is an informal organization of fathers who consider themselves discriminated by legal and social welfare institutions (and the wider social environment as well) in the fulfilment of their parental rights after the divorce, and they formed an e-mail network with the aim of informing the public on the rights and problems of fathers in Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to change the social attitude toward (divorced) fathers and the relation with the authorities, especially legal institutions and centres for social work.*

ability, women or Roma population. The fight for the inclusion of these groups in the process of development of policies and practice seems like a logical continuation of their social struggle against omnipresent discrimination, marginalization and exclusion in the society of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Having in mind that fact, it is important to underline that the process of democratization, which formally began in the early 1990s, and was then interrupted by the war, finally gains its substance. This position is reflected best in the attempt of governmental organizations to create, strengthen and deepen the cooperation with non-governmental organisations active in the social domain, on the basis of partnership, and mutual respect and all in the best interest of service users. From this perspective the question of whether these processes take place under the influence of user organizations themselves or the organizations which fight for the inclusion of the user perspective and interests based on their civil status and human rights seems less important. Crucial is the fact that these processes, although fragmented and unsystematic, are taking place and that they can be identified at three different levels: the level of policy creation, legal framework and professional practice itself. In the following section we will briefly present the most important initiatives in all three areas.

When we talk about the creation of policies, it is important to underline that the key documents related to the policy of social inclusion at the state level and the levels of entities have been adopted in the cooperation of the public and non-governmental sectors, and in certain cases even users' associations and in that sense they can serve as »good practice« examples. For the purpose of this article, we will present some of them:

- *Strategy for Solving Problems of the Roma Population*, adopted at the state level in September 2005., was created largely due to an active participation of a great number of Roma organizations which have closely cooperated with the authorities in finding optimal solutions for the issues of education, unemployment, social welfare, exclusion etc.
- *Gender Action Plan*, adopted in 2006. was adopted after intense consultations and harmonization with many women's non-governmental organizations throughout the country. The contribution of these organizations, from the perspective of social work practice, is extremely important in the fields of family violence and disability.
- *Disability Policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, adopted in August 2007. also at the state level, were prepared through the project *Support to the Disability Policy Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, in the cooperation of the authorities at the state and entity level and the Independent Bureau for Humanitarian Issues which in time has become a leading and most influential non-governmental organization in the social sector.

We can say that a similar process is in progress in the field of the development of normative standards related to social protection/social politics. Here are some examples illustrating the application of the principle of user involvement: the adoption of a cantonal *Law on Social Protection, Protection of Civil Victims of War and Protection of Families with*



*Children* in Sarajevo Canton was preceded by intensive consultations with the Association of People with Disabilities, whose members were included in the working group. Moreover, the users formally have the possibility of participating in public discussions on offered solutions and propositions. These organizations have been included in the revision of the federal *Law on Social Protection, Protection of Civil Victims of War and Protection of Families with Children* which is underway.

Finally, it seems that these developmental processes influence the everyday practice of social work organizations as well. The introduction of a mixed model in the social welfare system at the end of the 1990s resulted not only in the de-bureaucratization of the social work practice, but also in the development of the culture of cooperation between the formal social work environment and non-governmental organizations in the field of provision of social services. It seems that, owing to these processes, the position of the user groups has also been strengthened. Due to lack of relevant empirical data, this remark can be considered as a mere speculation. However, as Habul (2008.) notes analysing the experience of the pilot-project on the sustainability of the newly introduced mixed social welfare system in two Bosnian communities, the advantages of this model reflect also in the enhancement of the process of »user involvement in planning and implementation« (Habul, 2008.).

Based on the aforementioned observations, we can conclude that in the framework of modern social work practice in (F)BiH certain changes spontaneously take place with regard to user involvement in the process of social work service development. Also, it can unambiguously be concluded that these developmental processes in practice anticipate the development of theoretical notions. In other words, they are not related to the development of theoretical knowledge in social work nor are they a consequence of an active engagement of users themselves and/or their organizations, but they appear as a result of a general process of democratization in the society. Certainly, although it is important to perceive and raise awareness on the sources of these developmental processes, we consider that the crucial issue is the importance of inclusion of the user perspective and the users due to the following reasons:

- Dignity and civil status: receiving help, although necessary, can in the long run jeopardize the feeling of self-value and self-respect as well as the relations with other people in the user's environment. Furthermore, it undermines the feeling of a civil status or, in other words, the feeling of affiliation to a community on the basis of mutual respect;
- Efficiency from the perspective of governing social welfare services: the user involvement represents an important enhancement in all phases. In the phase of service design, the user perspective for example helps to harmonize the goals of the intervention with the needs and expectations of the user; in the implementation phase, they help the work of professionals and in the final phase they help to ensure a better framework for evaluation which cannot be complete or perhaps relevant without the opinion of service users.

- The individual. The user involvement can be an important and a unique instrument toward the achievement of a higher level of social inclusion in general, since direct and active engagement valorises the user's expertise based on the direct experience, and contributes to the strengthening of self-esteem.

Certainly, the process of service user involvement is not a simple one and it does not take place without problems. Namely, it will be interesting to observe possible ways of enabling the users to have more rights so that newly created space and possibilities contribute to their empowerment instead of co-opting, i.e. to their consent instead of control, even more so, having in mind the fact that the service users are usually not voluntarily included in the social work/social welfare system. Examples of this claim represent legally defined rights and obligations of custody authorities in the inspection of completion of parental rights. Or the dilemmas in the work with people with mental health difficulties. If we look at these examples through a perspective of the user, we will come to a conclusion that for the social work practice they represent very delicate challenges on the one hand but at the same time reveal an urgent need to reconsider the existing practice. There are other numerous aspects which make the process of user involvement even more complex and complicated. We will here present one more example related to the question of how it is possible to encompass the user perspectives in all their diversity, without discrimination.

It is important to remember here why we talk about the need of user involvement in the system of service provision. The user involvement is not important so that we can offer »more choice«, as it is often assumed. The user involvement is important since today we are more conscious and sensitive of the existence of unequal »asymmetrical relationship between service providers and service users« (Forbes and Sashidharan, 1997.: 484). The cited authors also underline the fact that users are often in an unfavourable position at both the society level, so they are directed to the use of social work services, and the level of service providers (Forbes and Sashidharan, 1997.). Therefore, one should be very careful with conclusions which suggest that higher level of user rights will result in higher level of influence on their situation. Although it seems that the concept of user involvement in the social work practice is accepted based on the principles of professional ethics and human rights, social work professionals have the right to be sceptic and/or careful, not to say afraid of the more equal division of power presumed and advocated by this idea, and strived for as the outcome of the entire process<sup>6</sup>. We will see later that the same pattern can be applied to individuals included in the process of education of social workers.

---

<sup>6</sup> *The issue of power relationship between service users and providers in social work is in itself a delicate and multidimensional one. Although power relationships between service providers and different categories of service users, and even within the same category of users, can be different, the user experience is often considered equal and identical and the differences related to gender, ethnic background, religious beliefs,*

## POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES OF SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN THE FEDERATION OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Due to numerous reasons service users should and must be included not only in the process of service provision, but also in the process of education and research in social work. In his article *Service Users' Knowledge and Social Work Theory: Conflict or Collaboration?* Beresford (2000.) elaborates on three key arguments due to which the service users need to be included in education and research in social work. First, the practical and methods-based argument underlines that service user involvement can, on the one hand, contribute to better identification, consideration and enhancement of users' needs and interests while at the same time it enables the development of relevant participation research. Then, the philosophical and methodological argument relates to the need of acknowledging the users' experience and knowledge since their exclusion undermines the values of social work and social inclusion. Finally, the political argument suggests that service users need to be involved because they are often closer to centres of political power and decision-making than social workers and in that way they can take more adequate steps for implementing the adopted policies as well as because their involvement assures a higher level of support and more efficient action in the process of realization (Beresford, 2000.: 498-450).

Due to the fact that we participate in the education process of social work students, we would like to add two more, equally important, reasons why the education institutions should open their doors to service users and introduce their knowledge into classrooms.

First, the students need to experience that the service users are human beings, and not only the cases or (social) problems. In the education process they are often referred to at a very abstract level and treated as abstract objects. The fact that behind our scientific elaborations there are individuals with real lives and untold stories is often forgotten. Therefore it seems imperative that in the process of education for the social work profession the students are presented to the experience of who own it, i.e. people with disabilities, mental health difficulties, addictions, those who were victims of violence etc., hoping that the students will remember the users' experience and the feelings that were awoken by the confrontation with

---

*level of education and similar are often forgotten. The answers to this challenge can perhaps be found in the experience of the feminist movement, which in its first wave understood the female experience as unique for all women regardless of their race, colour of their skin, class affiliation, education etc. The criticism that came from feminist women who were not white, as well as that of the women with disability, whose experience of oppression and discrimination was significantly different than the mainstream experience of white middle-class women, resulted in more subtle and comprehensive analysis of modalities in which different societies manifest oppression over women (Magezis, 2001.).*

them and apply it as a corrective to their own professional engagement. Such an approach to education of future social workers would lead to a higher level of students' awareness and responsibility toward both the users and the social work profession.

Second, the establishment of a personal contact between service users and students would contribute to widening the students' perspective in the sense that they would be able to experience more closely what it is like to be service users, i.e. as Beresford states (2000.: 493) »how it feels to be on the other, receiving end«. On the basis of the experience of someone who has been »treated« by the social worker in a real life situation, the students could learn which mistakes to avoid, what to do and what not to do in the approach to certain users and/or their situations. The establishment of student-service user relationship is also important because service users have an opinion of the type of service they have experienced and they possibly can critically analyse the quality and the type of the received service. Furthermore, the users can possibly have their own opinion on the ways in which the new generations of social workers should be educated, which skills and attributes they should possess and how they should perform their duties and obligations.

If we include in this discussion the issue of factors limiting the service user involvement in social work education and research in our context, it is possible to differentiate two types of obstacles: those related to education institutions and those related to service users, i.e. their organizations.

Analysing the current position of university institutions where the social work students are being educated, the reasons for the lack of user perspective in the education process could be found in the following:

### **1. The lack of sensitivity to the possibilities of social work education quality enhancement by user involvement in the development and implementation of curricula**

The consequence of the existing organization of higher education system in (F)BiH is the fact that departments of social work are not independent units. On the contrary, they are usually a part of a more complex structure which is rigid, resists to changes and is not sensitized for a special position which should be attributed to departments of social work, due to special features of the profession for which they educate the students. A recent experience of the implementation of Bologna process reform in general leads to a conclusion that the changes, even when they occur, occur at the formal level rather than at the level of substance and actually inhibit the user involvement. Taking into account the fact that the departments are often trying to gain a better position and status within already established and more prominent scientific disciplines, the chance to enhance the education process through user involvement is left aside.

**2. The academic staff has not publicly acknowledged the service user as equal, or at least equally important in expertise or academic knowledge in the process of preparation of social work students for their professional work.**

Although this issue is present in our academic debates and discussions, an attempt to publicly accept and advocate the user involvement in the education process has not been made. There is a generally accepted rhetoric that the participation of users in the development of practice and education is a »good idea«. However, the implementation of this idea is more time consuming and complex than the accepting of the idea itself.

**3. The lack of necessary conditions for the academic staff to constantly follow current trends and developmental tendencies in social work and/or research**

Recent developmental tendencies in social work at the international level have a very limited, and usually late, impact in the social work in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is best illustrated by a very strong affiliation to a rigid, positivist nature of knowledge and research which refuses user involvement due to a position that teachers and researchers hold the knowledge. There are various reasons for this situation. The following are the most evident: we do not participate in the global/European/regional knowledge exchange, which is possible by means of different programmes of academic staff exchange, due to exclusion based on (procedural) issues since we are not yet a candidate country for accession to the European Union; a department is not institutionally subscribed to any international reference journal from the field of social work, not even to those published in the neighbouring countries; the possibilities of translation of key texts, books and articles on current developmental tendencies in social work are limited.

As far as limitations related to service users and their organizations are concerned, it is possible to underline the following:

**1. The lack of independent and strong user organizations which could advocate their involvement in social work education and/or research**

In previous chapters we have underlined the fact that the main driving forces of user involvement in the system of social work service provision, education and research in the countries which made significant steps in this sense, for example Great Britain, were actually the movements and/or organizations of service users (movement of the persons with disabilities or mental health difficulties), which have placed this issue on the top of the political agenda. There are two main features of these organizations: their independence from the formal social work environment and existence of sufficient financial resources which enable scientific activities and research.

If we analyse our context, it should be said that, although the number of civil sector organizations has risen after the war, a very few of them are active in the civil sector. Furthermore, they are faced with sustainability problem as well as lack of secure financial resources and are thus more oriented toward the donors (and constant changes in their priorities), instead of service users and their original needs. There are also numerous user organizations from the previous system whose main features are the following: a high level of closeness with the public sector, their work is partially or entirely financed from (municipal or cantonal) budget, they are passive and not oriented toward the change. It is in a way related to a general passivity and apathy in the Bosnian society. The reasons for this situation can be found in the specificities of cultural and historical heritage but also in the totalitarianism of a communist regime which favoured a passive dependence of citizens on state decisions in all the aspects of their life. Despite an enormous knowledge by experience in certain aspects of social work theory and practice, the user organizations, even the most influential ones, have not yet seized a unique chance to make the accumulated knowledge noticeable and important?

## **2. The lack of initiatives in the sense of empowerment of user organizations so they become recognized and respectable partners in the social work education and research**

So far neither the academic community nor non-governmental organizations have recognized the need for the capacities of user organizations to be strengthened with the aim of becoming an equal partner in the field of social work knowledge transmission and creation. On the other hand, a prerequisite for a success in this field is the empowerment of users themselves, since many of them face different forms of marginalization and exclusion and they are not in the position to actively participate and work on the changes. How to encourage service users to take action? It is necessary to mention a systematic approach to participation developed by Simmonds and Birchall (2005.), which can be useful in finding answers to the question why individuals opt for participation. The authors have developed a concept of »participation network«, suggesting that individuals participate in order to achieve different personal and collective goals. For example, it is more likely that they will participate if they feel that they have the necessary resources, like the required skills, free time and self-esteem; they are more prone to participation in times when they feel mobilised for action, for example when they feel injustice in a certain situation etc.

Simmonds and Birchall (2005.) have also indicated that if the users feel motivated and mobilized, but they lack mechanisms for participation they will not engage themselves. It can, thus, be concluded that the organizations which really wish to encourage the inclusion of a wide spectrum of service users need to take into account all three aspects of the network (motivation, mobilization and mechanism of engagement) and work on the aspect which represents the weakest link.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the previous chapters we have elaborated on the fact that, despite being faced with numerous difficulties, we witness initial attempts of service user involvement in the social work in (F)BiH. After the end of the war, the voices of those advocating the concept of the service user involvement have become louder. These developmental tendencies are especially prominent in the field of disability and family violence. However, it seems that similar tendencies in the field of education, and especially in the field of social work research, will not arise for a long time. With the aim of providing positive impulses, it seems appropriate to present a partnership model developed by Forrest and collaborators (2000.), which places a so called 'continuum of involvement' in its focus. Namely, in a five-level continuum (Figure 1), the authors have described a partnership as the most developed level of cooperation between service users and academic staff which is in place when the academic staff and service users work together on the identification of issues and problems, when there is an open approach to user involvement in all phases of the planning process, when the decisions are made together etc.

**Figure 1.**

A Continuum of involvement of social welfare service users in the curriculum  
(Forrest et al., 2000.)

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level 1: Closed Model – No involvement</b></p> <p>The curriculum is defined and delivered with no consultation or involvement of users.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level 2: Passive involvement</b></p> <p>Based on professional definitions of the issues or problems. Ad hoc users views gathered, e.g. through feedback from students and clinical staff.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level 3: Limited Two-way Communication (Organisations Centred)</b></p> <p>Consultation with users through non decision-making forums. Occasional sessional teaching input to organisationally defined curriculum.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level 4: Listening and Responsiveness</b></p> <p>Educationalists listen to user accounts of issues and problems and these form the basis for decisions. Users involved in testing the success of subsequent actions, i.e. curriculum planning and student assessment.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level 5: Partnership</b></p> <p>Educationalist and users work together to identify issues and problems. Open access and involvement of users at all stages of the planning process. Decisions made jointly. Review and changes undertaken jointly, e.g. assessing students in clinical areas, and involvement in research and development projects. Users working as lecturers.</p>

As it can be seen, the first level is characterized by the lack of user involvement, then there is passive involvement and occasional engagement of users in the realization of educational content, up to the Level 4 in which the academic staff becomes more attentive and responsive toward the service users as experts by experience included in the education process.

If we applied the presented model to the current relation of the departments of social work and service users in the process of social work education and research in (F)BiH, we have to admit that the level of current cooperation corresponds to the Level 1, i.e. that the user perspective is not present in any way. We have extensively presented the reasons of this situation in previous chapters. Therefore, it seems unrealistic to expect express changes but it is worth putting in appropriate effort in order to achieve the set goal in the near future. Possible steps in attaining higher levels of cooperation between departments of social work and service users (or their organizations) in the process of education of future generations of social workers in (F)BiH would be the following:

- Strengthening of the capacities of existing user organizations so they can become an equal partner in the process of education of future social workers
- Creating partnerships and networks of user organizations with the aim of creating connections, providing support, exchanging information, common representation etc.
- Organizing training session in order to raise awareness of academic staff and professionals on the issue of service user involvement
- Organizing training session in order to raise awareness of user organizations on the issue of service user involvement
- Advocating the idea of service user involvement in the contact with the authorities at different decision levels.

Having in mind the aforementioned issues, it is extremely important to insist on the fact that a space should be created for service users so they can be in a position to express their own preferences related to their involvement and participation in the process of education and research. It is crucial that the issue of inclusion of the user perspective and the modalities of its realization be recognized and valorised by users themselves not as an obligation imposed by teachers or researchers in the field of social work, but as a chance for enhancing the quality of the teaching process and the knowledge in social work.

## REFERENCES

1. Beresford, P. (2000). Service users knowledge and social work theory: Conflict or collaboration. **British Journal of Social Work**, 30, 489-503.
2. Beresford, P. (2002). User involvement in research and evaluation: Liberation or regulation. **Social Policy and Society**, 1-2, 95-105.



3. Vijeće Europe (1950). **Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms**. Available online at: <http://www.coe.int>
4. Vijeće Europe (1961; 1996). **European Social Charter**. Available online at: <http://www.coe.int>
5. Forbes, J. & Sashi S. (1997). User involvement in services – incorporation or challenge? **British Journal of Social Work**, 27, 481-498.
6. Forrest, S., Risk, I., Masters, H. & Brown, N. (2000). Mental health service users involvement in nurse education. **Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing**, 7, 51-57.
7. UN (1996). **Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training**. Preuzeto sa: <http://ifsw.org>
8. Habul, U. (2008). **Socijalna zaštita u Bosni i Hercegovini. Tranzicija, zakonodavstvo, praksa**. Sarajevo: Fakultet političkih nauka.
9. Ife, J. (2001). Local and global practice: Relocating social work as a human rights profession in the new global order. **British Journal of Social Work**, 14 (1), 5-15.
10. International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Preuzeto sa: <http://www.un.org>
11. Lyons, K. (2000). The place of research in social work education. **British Journal of Social Work**, 30, 433-447.
12. Magezis, J. (2001). **Ženske studije**. Sarajevo: Magistrat.
13. Milardović, A. (1987). Neokonzervativizam, nove desnice, desni radikalizam i stranci u zapadnoj Evropi. **Migracijske i etničke teme**, 3-4, 261-274.
14. Simmons, R. & Birchall, J. (2005). A joined-up approach to user participation in public services: Strengthening the »participation chain«. **Social Policy and Administration**. 39 (3), 260-283.

