



The mediating role of social workers in the implementation of regional policies targeting energy poverty



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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to provide a socio-political reflection of the role played by social workers in regional policies and of the real needs of households affected by energy poverty. The paper also examines the impact of technical-specialised training on the ability of social workers to prevent and mitigate conditions of household energy poverty in Europe.

The adoption of a research-action-participation methodological framework and a training research approach has permitted the opinions of social workers to be collected through surveys, and their central role in implementing regional policies to be highlighted. The conclusions obtained have made possible the construction of a self-diagnosis and data-collection tool which increases the ability of social workers to mediate and implement urgent mitigation measures for energy poverty.

Finally, regional policies which aim to mitigate household energy poverty are examined from the professional perspective of social workers.

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, the European Union (EU) has adopted different initiatives to evaluate energy vulnerability at local, regional and national level, in an attempt to protect citizens from energy poverty (Bouzarovski et al., 2012) and prevent social exclusion by guaranteeing access to energy for reasonable and stable prices (European Economic and Social Committee, 2013). These issues were recognised in the Third Energy Package in 2009 (Eikeland, 2011), in which EU member states are directed to adopt the appropriate measures to protect consumers, and partially addressed in the so-called “winter package” at the end of 2016 (European Commission, 2016).

As pointed out by Bergasse et al. (2013), when households have to spend an excessive proportion of their income on energy, they are considered to be in a position of energy vulnerability, which may lead to a deterioration in living standards and have a negative effect on overall socioeconomic development. National public policies among EU members are, however, fragmented, both in terms of the definition of energy poverty and of the assessment and definition of prevention and

mitigation measures.

This fragmentation is also linked to the different incidence of household energy poverty in different European countries. Energy poverty is a much more serious problem in Southern and Eastern Europe (Healy and Clinch, 2002; Sergio Tirado Herrero and Bouzarovski, 2015), especially in the Mediterranean region, where it is estimated that 16.6% of the households do not generally live in conditions of thermal comfort. The European average is approximately 4% lower (Bouzarovski, 2011).

European policies on the matter are patchy, owing to the fact that specific measures have been implemented by individual member states; this has limited the scope of EU-wide policies. Furthermore, a comprehensive understanding of energy poverty in each country depends on the availability of primary data, and some authors pointed out that a holistic perspective on everyday energy practices in low-income households that are undergoing energy poverty is needed at local and national level (Howden-Chapman et al., 2012; Brunner et al., 2012).

The first obstacle to analysing energy poverty is related to defini-

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tion: there is no unanimously accepted EU-wide academic definition of household energy vulnerability or energy poverty.

The earliest European definitions, which follow pioneering publication of Boardman (1991), established that a household suffered from energy poverty if it had to use over 10% of its income to meet basic energy expenses, which were those conducive to maintaining a temperature at home that varied between 18 and 21 °C (BERR, 2001; Rudge, 2001). This definition was later challenged and revised by different authors, who distinguished between electricity consumption and the use of combustion-based heating systems (Morrison and Shortt, 2008; Rudge, 2012; J. Hills, 2012) suggested that a household is in a situation of energy poverty when the costs of attaining sufficient thermal comfort are above average, provided that household income is under the poverty threshold (60% of the median income after deducing non-energy related housing expenses).

The International Energy Agency (IEA - IEA - International Energy Agency, 2011) established that a household is in a situation of energy poverty when the energy-related costs bear too heavily on the total income. This definition is very similar to that put forward by Tirado-Herrero et al. (2012) in one of the earliest Spanish publications on this subject. On the other hand, the report 'Energy Poverty in the EU' (Thomson and Snell, 2013) incorporated the concepts of the 'cold home' and household 'energy debt' into existing definitions.

Based on the relative definition of energy poverty provided by Grevisse and Brynart (2011), it seems appropriate for this study to adopt a definition according to which a household is in a position of energy poverty when it cannot afford the services conducive to satisfying recognised household needs. The definition, therefore, introduces the need for a mediating agent which can 'classify' households in terms of energy vulnerability on behalf of the relevant public social services (Scarpellini et al., 2015).

Given the differences in definition, we may question what model is accepted by public agencies in a European context, what role is being played by social workers involved in detecting, certifying and mitigating energy poverty in households, and finally what methods are being used for the detection and assessment of energy poverty in households. The results presented in this article are based on these three research questions, and are focused in the context of a Spanish region characterised by the presence of active cooperative movements for energy poverty prevention (Scarpellini et al., 2014).

In general, energy poverty in Spain is being addressed through the implementation of emergency measures which aim to avoid households being cut off, and through the provision of necessary financial resources to those households who cannot afford to pay their energy bills. Data indicate that the problem is increasing in Spain (S. Tirado Herrero et al., 2014; S. Tirado Herrero et al., 2016) because the effects of the economic crisis have been particularly severe among the most vulnerable social groups (OECD, 2016).

Based on this premise, and after the next section, which will provide the background for the research presented in this paper, our aim is to analyse a regional energy poverty-policy model from the perspective of the social agents responsible for certifying energy impoverishment. These agents are key to ensuring that the model is efficacious, flexible and capable of responding to urgent energy-related needs. The empirical results obtained and the training scheme which was designed for the relevant social workers led to the development of a self-diagnosis tool, which was used in the certification of energy impoverishment; this will be presented along with our discussion of the regional policies currently in place. Finally, the main conclusions will be summarised.

2. Background

Energy poverty should not be interpreted in isolation from the overall processes of impoverishment and growing inequality that can be observed presently in countries such as Spain (Moretón, 2015;

Bellver, 2015; García Escalera, 2015). In fact, during the last decades, the poverty characterised by the progressive, and chronic, impoverishment of the middle layers of society has increased specially in Latin America (Kliksberg, 1995; Barbeito and Lo Vuolo, 1992), but also affects European middle classes (Laparra and Casado, 2013). For this reason, this paper is focused on the role played by social workers in dealing with poverty (Laparra and Casado, 2013), and the problem is addressed using an interdisciplinary approach which incorporates a socio-political perspective.

An examination of the relevant literature in this field reveals that energy poverty is often identified on the basis of the proportion of overall income used to meet energy costs (Boardman, 2012), or other measurements based on comfort criteria (Roberts, 2008; Walker and Day, 2012), and the identification of households that are suffering energy poverty (Dubois, 2012; Li et al., 2014) is considered relevant to the design of appropriate mitigation measures (Chaudhuri and Ravallion, 1994).

The macro-analysis of energy poverty on a European-wide scale (Liddell et al., 2012; Moore, 2012; Rosenow et al., 2013; Heindl, 2015) and regional scale (Fahmy, Gordon, and Patsios, 2011; R. Walker et al., 2013), has received a fair amount of attention in this decade. In recent years, more attention has been paid to the measurement of the phenomenon (Morrison and Shortt, 2008; Pachauri and Spreng, 2011; Waddams Price et al., 2012; Rudge, 2012; Heindl, 2015), as well as to possible solutions (Boardman, 2004; Darby, 2012; European Economic and Social Committee, 2012; Guertler, 2012; Saunders et al., 2012; Sergio Tirado Herrero and Úrge-Vorsatz, 2012), subsidy policies (Dartanto, 2013) and the efficiency of public funds earmarked to help households living under conditions of social exclusion (Copiello, 2016).

In the recent years, the household-focused studies are increasing among the academics (Roberts, 2008; Devalière, 2010; Mathew Santamouris et al., 2013; Mathew Santamouris et al., 2013; S. Tirado Herrero et al., 2014; Scarpellini et al., 2015). In this field, some authors have identified the lack of uniformity among European and national statistical data as a limitation, as well as a shortage of data and a lack of surveys and specific methodology for measuring the phenomenon (Heindl, 2015). According to Santamouris et al. (2007), energy consumption is directly related to the socioeconomic profile of the household and the habits of its members. Energy tariffs has been pointed out as well in determining energy costs in energy poverty situations (Yu et al., 2011; Majcen et al., 2015).

When we look closely at the analysis of preventive or palliative proposals, Grevisse and Brynart (2011) provide a synthesis of the measures undertaken in the European Union, differentiating between the activities aimed at consumer protection and those designed to avoid disconnection of energy supply. The inadequate building features of dwellings has been analysed as a relevant factor in increasing the relative degree of energy poverty in households (Bahaj and James, 2007; Sdei et al., 2015; Terés-Zubiaga et al., 2013; Jenkins, 2010). Additionally, social housing has been a subject of some authors because it may be particularly related to energy poverty (John Hills, 2012; Li et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, despite growing interest of academics, there are still many aspects to be explored about energy poverty in households as the dissemination of information, which has recently been analysed by Bartiaux et al. (2016), or the role of social workers dealing with energy-impoverished households in the EU, that is the main subject of this paper. It means to discern what role social workers – regardless of whether they work for a public social service or a private NGO – play in the mitigation of energy poverty and the management of the specific funds available in some regions for the palliation of this problem.

In this context, the analysis presented in this paper is based on a regional case study and also aims to propose a specialised energy training initiative specifically designed to advance the results of the mediating role played by social workers, with the ultimate purpose of improving institutional responses to the needs of impoverished households.

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