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Policies Against Poverty in Russia – A Female Responsibility

Ann-Mari Sätre

This article analyses how social policies in Russia can give poor people opportunities to improve their life situations given the persisting norms of a moral and practical female responsibility for social welfare. Women working in the social sphere have created their own support networks for helping people to take part in state programmes and to become entitled to support in one way or the other. Their agenda is clearly larger than the directives they might be subject to from above. They use relations to create resources. Analysing the agency of women who are professionally working in the social sphere supports distinguishing their potential roles of empowering the poor from their controlling roles. Empirical data are based on qualitative interviews with social work experts, social workers, social pedagogues at schools, teachers, doctor's assistants, local politicians and deputies of commissions or local village councils in two Russian regions.

keywords: social policies; poverty; Russia; women's work; female responsibility

Introduction

The Soviet ideology defined poverty as a social phenomenon associated with deviant groups. Nevertheless, support was allocated to particular groups, based on social characteristics according to strict centrally set rules (Yates 2004). These groups included single parents, families with many children, people with disabilities, war veterans and pensioners. In the 1990s in the aftermath of the perestroika process, poverty became acknowledged as a kind of new phenomenon related to reforms (Ovcharova 2008). The poor was comprised of the same vulnerable groups as before, but in addition with a vast swelling of working poor and those affected by unemployment (Klugman 1998;

Lokshin and Popkin 1999). Contrary to mainstream discourses in previous research, many of the poor are young people whose situation became worse as a result of their poor adjustment after the global economic crisis in 2008 (Rimashevskaya 2010). Another factor is that there seems to be a rather large group vulnerable to small changes in the economy (Sätre, Ivashinenko, and Teodorovich 2012; 19).

Resources allocated to poverty relief are insufficient when reflected against the fact that social benefits payments are generally too small to cover basic expenditures. The situation where many people living in poverty are employed reflects the imbalance between wages and the cost of living (Rimashevskaya 2010). It has also been argued that there is no clearly formulated state policy for combating poverty and that support is seen as a form of compensation for increased costs (Round and Kosterina 2005). The introduction in 2005 of the National Programmes for Health, Education, Housing and Agriculture (the so-called Presidential Programmes) suggest, however, an increased attention to social policies in Russia.

After the next section, outlining the theoretical and research basis for this article, the following sections highlight the role of National Programmes in reducing poverty in Russia; the interrelation between hierarchical structures and informal decision-making with respect to social support; and the effect of the continuing responsibility of women for social welfare, before the conclusions are drawn. The empirical data are based on interviews from four communities in the Archangelsk region in 2002–2013 and three communities in Nizhegorodskaya oblast in 2011 and 2013–2014.

Theoretical and Research Basis

This article analyses how social policies in Russia can give poor people opportunities to improve their life situations through their own actions. The analytical framework is based on North's (1990) categorisation of four main kinds of institutions which influence the way a society develops: legal rules; organisation forms; enforcement; and behavioural norms. "Institutions" are all the restrictions that humans have created to regulate interaction in society. While formal rules can be changed by political decisions, informal rules, such as behavioural norms that are rooted in society, are not quickly changed.

Although North (1990) highlighted the need for "agency" (action) for change, he did not incorporate the interrelationship between agency and the institutional framework. In this article, the agency dimension is added, drawing on Sen's (1984) capability approach. Sen's analytical framework also connects agency to the issue of empowerment and seeks not only to answer the actual needs for a resource (e.g. money, housing), but also to identify the kind of support needed to transform resources into goods and services (Sen 1984). The core of the empowerment concept lies in the ability of the individual to control her own destiny, that is, the agency aspect. The aim here was to

highlight the role of social workers and others who work with social issues in encouraging the poor to actively use possibilities to improve their own life, through the policies combating poverty in two Russian regions.

The impact of two kinds of informal institutions are highlighted, firstly, the survival of a general hierarchical structure of organisations from the Soviet system, and secondly, the survival of the norm that women are responsible for the organisation of social welfare. It is suggested that, while the first could provide an obstacle to encouraging the agency and empowerment of the poor, the second could promote it.

Poverty Research in Russia

Scientific interest in the problem of poverty in Russia increased at the beginning of the 1990s simultaneously with the radical transformations in Russian society. In the 1990s, poverty research focused on homeless adults and street children (Rimashevskaya 2004). Sociological questionnaires began to be used to identify the poor and to map poor peoples' access to hot food and their purchases of inexpensive clothing (Ivashinenko and Iudin 2000).

There is some earlier research on Russia that associates poverty with informal institutions. A few studies highlight how the survival of a collective spirit (Shanin 1999) or paternalistic behaviour of employers (Granberg 2007) can facilitate the everyday life of poor people. Others focus on how Soviet norms such as connections (*blat*) (Ledeneva 1998, 2008) and inter-family networks can help people to combat or cope with poverty (Desai and Idson 1998; Ioffe and Nefedova 1997; Shubin 2007) and possibly also contribute to entrepreneurship as a tool for change (Såtre 2010). There is also a debate related to surviving norms as to whether the reforms have led to increased activities in the informal economy (Ellman 2000; Kim 2002).

Then, there are those who focus on the surviving negative attitudes towards the poor: that poor people are lazy, incompetent or criminal (Khlinskaya Rockhill 2010; Varyzgina and Kay in this publication). There are those who highlight how poverty is associated with shame which makes people want to hide their poverty (Kay 2011). Some draw attention to the attitudes of politicians and to the relation between the state and poor people (Round and Kosterina 2005). Others focus on the tendency among social workers to distinguish between the deserving and non-deserving poor as a way to cope with inadequate resources (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov 2012; Round 2004). Ashwin (1998) provides experiences of how "forced collaboration" has led to a rejection of general ideas of cooperation to meet common problems.

There is an emerging body of the literature on household strategies, looking either at coping as a way to meet poverty, or at survival for the day (Abbott and Wallace 2009; Clarke 1999; Pickup and White 2003; Ries 2008; Såtre, Soldatkin, and Varyzgina in this publication; Shevchenko 2002; Walker

1998). While it is important to reject the view of the poor as passive victims, it is equally important to keep paying attention to important political questions such as what gives people access to the resources which can enable them to provide for themselves (Clarke 1999). To sum up, although earlier research on poverty in Russia demonstrates that there might be some potential for agency, it provides little guidance as to how agency could advance in the Russian context. There is a body of earlier research that refers to features from the Soviet system that might prevent the kind of agency that would encourage cooperation outside the family. Consequently, although this literature provides information about hindrances to agency which is aiming at overcoming poverty, it also identifies factors, which should be changed in order to make such agency possible. This study aims to provide a contribution in this field.

An Institution Centred Approach to Poverty

An *institution* centred approach to poverty is concerned with the interaction between formal and informal institutions and the processes which link them (North 1990). Attention is paid to the working of a society as a cause of poverty rather than individual failings (Sen 1984). Adhering to North's approach, slow-changing institutions explain why people working in non-priority sectors would be unable to support themselves and their too low salaries would thus be seen as an integral part of the functioning of the economic system (Gaddy 2007; Kornai 1980; Sätre 1994).¹ Soft budgets imply that over-employment has survived, while a large part of Russians live with wages that are barely enough to cover basic expenditures (Remington 2011; Rimashevskaya 2010). In manufacturing many workers had to face a cut in their wages as a consequence of the economic crisis in 2008–2009 due to the fact that management did not reduce the number of employees (Kuznetsov et al. 2011). In effect, some features of the Soviet system have survived the reform measures from the 1990s, which explains why a large part of the Russian workforce is still employed in unprofitable large scale enterprises. Low salaries in certain professions, such as teachers and doctors who are employed in non-commercial organisations, seem to have survived (*Rossiyskiy Statisticheskii Yezhegodnik* 2008). At the same time, privatisation implied that firms are not obliged to secure welfare for employees as in the Soviet time, while individuals have to pay for services that they did not have to pay for previously (Lazareva 2009). Ordinary people have been affected by changes in the rules for the communal infrastructure and housing reform (Round and Kosterina 2005). A new law on the monetisation of social benefits, which converted in-kind benefits into cash allowances and transferred responsibility for welfare from central to local authorities, was introduced in 2005.² This meant that ordinary people lost access to free

local transport and local telephone calls, trips to sanatoria, free medicines and other benefits.

Changes in legal rules have also given rise to a responsibility for self-financing at the local level.³ Although social policy continues to be financed by the state, it is organized in a partly new way (Kay 2011). There are a number of laws that directly or indirectly transferred responsibility from the state to individuals or families (see Kravchenko 2008). The situation some people end up with is chronic poverty where expenses are constantly higher than income (Rimashevskaya 2004). This also means that local authorities have to deal with the fact that the level of welfare remains low for the vast majority of the local population (Wegren 2011).

Federal and Regional Programmes to be Implemented at Local Levels

In 2005, the Kremlin launched National Programmes, focused on healthcare, housing, education and agriculture (Smyth, Lowry, and Wilkening 2007). These programmes, which were to be implemented by provincial governors, were financed by the funds which the Putin administration built up for stabilisation purposes with the help of incomes from oil and gas exports (Appel 2008; Chebankova 2010; Treisman 2010).⁴ Individuals have to apply to take part in these programmes. Although it is difficult to tell to what extent the programmes have actually been implemented, interviews with low income families have revealed that they have benefitted from participating in the foster families programme, young specialists' programme, programmes for building private homes, programmes for young families, programme for setting up businesses, etc. Others have improved their living standard using the grant for building their own houses or used mothers' capital for building bath rooms.

But there are also programmes which a village or a community could succeed in taking part in, which reduce poverty in an indirect way, such as improving roads, renovating houses and building sports centre. A local head tells about how he manages to keep the young in the village by providing them with jobs through taking part in such programmes (interview Urban Village, September 2013). In 2012, a vice-mayor in another community describes how unclear rules from above make any long-term planning difficult (interview Community Centre, May 2012). She likes the idea behind the law on self-governance, but as funding is so poor, hopes are focused on putting in some small money from the community budget and getting ten times as much back from the region.

Another example is that of a mayor in a rural community and the director of the department for cultural affairs, both females, trying to encourage agency by advising people how to apply for funds for projects (interview Community Centre, November 2003). Similar activities are reported in another community, and also at later visits, when officials promote cultural activities, education and local development groups, to make people more self-content,

thus imposing a change in the mentality of people towards seeing possibilities and taking action (interview Community Centre, May 2011, 2012). Local politicians are actively taking part in starting cultural organisations, trade unions and women's clubs. They also promote the establishment of social NGOs, which are used for applying money from welfare funds at higher levels (Sätre 2014).

Interviews reflect how female politicians have initiated social projects, cultural activities and small businesses in villages. One example is the "house of culture" which receives children from distant villages. A vice head reported that she had been able to receive support from a charity fund for a youth project directed towards those from problem families (interview Urban Village, May 2012). Another head told how they try to participate in all the state programmes (Urban Village 2013). Interviews also support the assumption that local authorities are able to mobilize the resources of local entrepreneurs for combatting poverty in Russia. This is about local politicians making use of their own human capital, as well as improving the skills of the local population through projects and educational programmes (see Sätre 2013).

But there are also places which are not doing well at all. A local politician emphasizes that differences on the lowest political level are wide within the same community. "Some do not have any money of their own, due to the lack of firms. This means that they have to live just on subsidies which are inadequate." One head tells me that she uses her own salary if the budget is not enough (interview May 2011). I hear about another local head who is crying over the miserable situation in her villages, and how she already spent her own salary on urgent matters'.

In 2012, the vice-mayor responsible for social policy emphasizes that poverty is the responsibility of the state:

Social services is part of the state, they decide who is entitled to support, who is classified as poor (*maloimushchie*), and thus how to distribute benefits, this money comes from the federal level. The community can pay for transport to the hospital for somebody from distant places or for a pregnant woman, given that the person is classified as entitled to support. We build houses for social living and pay for weak elderly. Then we have programs for preventing infant mortality, and for rehabilitation of mentally sick children, for which we can get support from rich individuals or firms. (Interview May 2012)

A Formal System for Distributing Social Benefits

The financial distribution of social benefits was, and is, the main means of regulating poverty in Russia (Ivashinenko [in this publication](#)). In the 1990s in the aftermath of the perestroika process, the pressure on social welfare provision increased considerably. The poverty phenomenon opened up for social work experts as a new profession along with resources allocated to

social security (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov 2002). Means-tested schemes became the dominant form of social support, which meant that targets for support were diverted from families to general groups (Kravchenko 2008). Rather than targeting the "most needy", support is seen as a form of compensation for increased costs (Round and Kosterina 2005). That subsequently led to a decrease in the number of groups eligible for welfare provision. Efforts are required in the sense that benefit recipients have to apply for benefits themselves from social services.

Interviews at the social services in a few different places in the two regions tell about the formal procedures, what you have a right to if you are classified as poor, a family with many children, handicapped, etc., and there are also many documents telling about the size of the different benefits and about the adjustment of these to compensate for price increases. Social services provide groups entitled to support with information about their rights.

Natalia, a social work expert in one of these places, gives a picture of the situation (interview Urban Village, September 2013). The social services have an office in each main village. Those who get support from social services are families with children and single parents. Their number has not changed, it is more or less the same as ten or five years back. Social services work with those who apply for benefits only. They pay for child care and school lunches, sanatoria, and medicines for orphans and families with many children. Orphans from the children's home get a free meal and also help after they finish school. They get clothes and a flat when they turn 18. They pay only ten percent of the fee for summer camps. Single parents can send their children to the summer camp for free. There is no longer any children's home in Natalia's community. One has been turned into a rehabilitation centre, where the children should be temporary only. Another one had been closed a year ago, as in accordance with the new policy, children are to be placed in foster families. The foster families get a rather small salary, along with a sum for food and petrol, for each child. These children can visit the sports centre for free. They can for example borrow skates there. The children can also go to the arts school for free. The poor can further get help from social pedagogues at school. There is also free advice from juridical experts available for these families.

Natalia tells how festivals, sponsored by private organisations, aim to reach children and youngsters from poor circumstances. Nine operations have been financed by an individual *duma* delegate. She mentions the collections of money that have been arranged to help people who have been subject to some unfortunate happenings. A further method is the exchange of toys and clothes. Social services collaborate with the job centre and the church. Social workers often develop personal relationships with their families, which means that they help privately if the relation is good. On the question of who is poor, Natalia says "it is those who do not have enough to eat. The reason could be that they drink, but also that wages are so low. Salaries within agriculture are not enough to support three children."

Enforcement of Rights

The interviews with aid-seekers indicate that some of the problems they face are related to the functioning of institutions. Maybe the laws exist, but the enforcement of these are not working well. It could also be the case that laws prove to be inconsistent, as was not uncommon in Soviet times (Braguinsky and Myerson 2007). At that time when inconsistent plans were part of “taut planning”, this might have fostered an attitude that it was possible to fulfil only the most important plans, given that they were ranked as high priority (Davis 1989). Another side of this was the attitude among people that you do not expect that you are actually protected by the law (Shlapentokh 2006). Interviews, for example, with a man suffering from epilepsy, provide examples of a low faith in authorities, not seeing any point in applying for support no matter what “rights” you might have on the paper:

Why, me getting help from social services, ha, ha, ha ... (Man 2012)

Unclear rules along with a lack of health insurance or work place insurance are problems related to the working of institutions. This is reflected in sad stories in the interviews by individuals who feel cheated when they are not compensated in cases of accidents, thefts, storms and fires. If people do not believe that they are protected by the law, they blame bureaucrats or individual persons working at the social assistance centre rather than systemic factors (Kay 2007).

Both benefits recipients and social work experts provide evidence of perceived arbitrary treatment and a perception that the poor do not get access regardless of what “rights” they have “on paper” which supports results of earlier research (Round and Kosterina 2005). Many types of support depend on income, “if you happen to be just above the threshold, you are not entitled to support” (interview with Social Work Expert, August 2010). It appears that social work experts devote considerable time to advising people who are asking for help about what rights they have, according to federal and regional laws and legislation. Interviews reveal a view of benefits recipients’ rights to obtain certain medicines for free frequently being violated, presumably contributing to the uncertainty that some of the recipients have talked about. Thus, if enforcement is perceived as being arbitrary this might indicate that the attitudes of social work experts can make a difference.

Hierarchical Decision-making

Rules on benefits are regulated in documents. Interviews give the impression that social work experts try to comply with the legal framework and that they try to follow directives from higher levels. One consequence is that some social work experts devote most of their time to categorizing people with the help of more or less sophisticated calculations of what people are entitled to, rather

than helping people to change their situations. They mention various problems in present work practices (interview with Social Work Experts 2010–2013):

Sometimes there are problems of an administrative nature such as the fact that a husband is registered in another place.

I am ashamed that the child allowances are so low and that the only subsidies we can offer people in need are very low.

There is too much paper work.

The minimum standard of living is far too low.

The shortage of child care is preventing people from earning incomes, as those who work do not get places for their children in kindergarten.

I feel powerless and cannot make a difference.

We cannot help people really in need of help.

Some interviews reflected desperate attempts to cope with a difficult job where resources are inadequate to support those who are entitled to it. For instance, one respondent said she tried to help disabled people and disadvantaged families she visited to change their life situations, but this was only in her free time (interview with Social Worker, June 2012). The resemblance to situations in the Soviet system of having to deal with impossible tasks by means of informal solutions is apparent.

The survival of hierarchical decision-making is likely to impede or slow down developments towards taking social workers' views into account. On the other hand, non-priority in the Soviet system also meant that those responsible for social welfare had to be entrepreneurial in a sense (Sätre 2001, 2012). In broad terms, the Soviet system might be characterized as having prioritized industrial development over social infrastructure.⁵ Concentrating on the formal aspect, while industry was completely integrated in the state system of planning, social services were only partially integrated, leaving social issues partly outside of the planned target system to be dealt with in the informal sphere (Lapidus 1975). Participants were left to look for entrepreneurial solutions outside the hierarchical structures for planning. Social welfare services were likely to have had insufficient resources in the Soviet times and in contemporary Russia they continue to face the same situation (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov 2002). There are examples of staff being innovative and entrepreneurial as their allocated resources have been insufficient to carry out their obligations.

One of the social work experts mentions that income is not the sole basis for deciding about support, but that they also visit benefits recipients' homes in order to get a better understanding of their standard of living. There are cases of children being taken away from their parents as a result of initiatives from a social work expert going to court.

One of the social work experts however mentions that they cannot refuse to give someone moral support. There also seem to be many programmes around to help families, specifically directed according to categories of recipients. Social work experts describe how they work to strengthen families with social problems, and how this work is facilitated if there are educational activities at hand. "A plan for each family" sounds like solutions could be different depending on needs, rather than dependent on what category families belong to. It is suggested that education and sanitary measures to improve health would help families to take care of children. Interviews tell about how letters are written to firms and farmers to ask for material help or money (interview with Head of Family Department at Social Services, September 2013). This is mainly for new year's presents or for other celebrations, she says. Outside of her job she has started a club for families with handicapped children. One social work expert talks about their struggles to allocate services that are in short supply such as child care and housing to the poorest, preventing those with money being first in the queue. "If we cannot afford needed measures, we write projects."

Such examples show that the social work expert has an objective really to help people to help themselves, to find a solution showing how to get out of their situation, at least when they have serious problems and need to get up above the ground. Such an approach, not limiting judgements about support strictly to official incomes, implies a widened possibility, which is compatible with the capability approach.

In any case, the more acute situation in the 1990s was reflected in the fact that social security could give mothers contributions directly into their hands (interview with Former Vice-mayor, October 2008). "This kind of immediate help is no longer given, as people are no longer starving." (interview with Vice-mayor, May 2012). On the other hand, there are new groups who have been able to buy on credit or have lost their jobs or stable source of income in other ways who are in need of material support. One social work expert says she wonders what some people live on!

To conclude, social work experts express disillusion about not being able to help the poorest, that they feel powerless and that they just obey instructions from above, which give them little possibility of coming up with alternative solutions on how to organize their work. What they express is that they can influence the allocation of help, but not its content. Nevertheless, interviews indicate that social work experts might be prepared to take initiatives in order to end up with what they believe are better outcomes. Some of them have ideas, and they even experiment with some ideas, on how to empower poor people, but their own agency and capability is constrained.

Women's Agency to Increase Poor Peoples' Assets

The capability approach to analysing poverty highlights relational aspects rather than incomes or ownership as such (Sen 1984). This means that

exchange entitlements are highlighted. Social work specialists' ability to promote welfare development thus depends on their ability to transform whatever income or assets they have into useful necessities for the poor. As a result of the low priority given to female-dominated sectors in state policy, women had to develop entrepreneurial skills, and these skills have survived from the Soviet system (Sätre 2001, 2010). Women use them in their formal positions as responsible for social policy and in informal positions, when taking responsibility voluntarily in social work. Adhering to North, this is about the survival of responsibilities which take the form of work, of having an ability to find practical solutions to everyday problems. To act they need to have access to some assets, and also to be able to use these assets. Assets are, according to Sen (1984) classified into three categories: resources, including all kinds of capital (also social capital, human capital, cultural capital), rights and relationships. This means that incomes or assets are not enough to overcome poverty; agency in one form or the other is also required.

Interviews show that in practice, many people through their own agency have been able to improve their life situations. But we have also come across those who are not able to improve their situation no matter how active they are. Such families may work more and reduce expenses just to cope from day to day, staying poor and being vulnerable to changes that could start a downward process (Sätre et.al fc). The supporting role of public authorities is especially important when considering the possibilities for poor people themselves to take actions.

That people come to claim what they believe are their rights provides a sign of some form of empowerment. However, this provides little knowledge of actual empowerment processes of poor people in general as previous research also indicates that the poorest and most in need of support might not come to ask for it (Round 2004). These are the ones who local people often describe as alcoholics, incompetent or simply unwilling to work (Varyzgina and Kay in this publication). This opinion is given through the interviews with professionals in the social sphere; those working in commissions, at schools, at hospitals and at the local administrations. Therefore, this article also looks into actions by others who are actively working in the social sphere, how they use formal and informal resources, rights and relations to prevent or combat poverty. In particular, the aim was to show how they through their agency are in fact able to increase poor peoples' assets, by referring to how they create resources, rights and relations, respectively, for the poor.

Head of Commission

Elena is the head of the commission who tells how they work together, both with an NGO which gives psychological help to parents of drug abusers and alcoholics and with a charity fund. I hear about how the charity fund provides social support, for example the woman in charge there arranged that a poor

family got a new roof, by means of sponsorship money she received. She describes how the head of the charity fund always calls to ask if she has some family for the things she has collected; food products, covers. On the other hand, she tells how she calls the head of the charity fund if there is an extreme need for something:

She always finds somebody who is prepared to give something even for those hopeless families. We have to work with both punishment and carrots. First, we try to help as much as possible. Then, we check whether the money was actually used as it was supposed to be. If not, we have meetings. If such meetings do not give the intended results there is the option to sue the parents, which is something we really do not want to do. This is only if nothing else works. (Small Town 2011)

She describes how they work in close connection with the tutor and that she also cheques with the leader of the NGOs about whether a parent is on the list for psychological support. If not, the family is put under treatment. She sets out how they have all known each other since the mid-1980s. She emphasizes how important the social pedagogues are, they work with the families with school children. For the smaller pre-school children, there are the doctor's assistants who work with problem families, they visit those with small children. As the children of problem families do not attend child care, it is especially important that health authorities keep control over the situation in those families. These medical specialists are also members of the commission, she says.

When I asked a vice-mayor about collaboration between the local administration, social security and NGOs, she called in five women, who represent NGOs with roots from the Soviet time. As one of the heads at the lower level put it: "As the state cannot apply for funding from the national programmes we have to mobilize the NGOs. This is facilitated by working in the villages, where everybody knows each other; the same people are involved in all the NGOs" (Village, May 2011).

The School

The head teacher of the school in a small community remembers how difficult it was to work in the school in the 1990s, that teachers took on great responsibilities, and how they were able to get support from the Red Cross "at least they do not die from bad spirits as in the 1990s" (Interview, October 2013). Today, about a third of children are on the list from social services. These are living without running water and toilets, they get help from the school. The head teacher tells how she herself was able to get toilets for the school. The Red Cross gives clothes, also for adults, they can come to the school and give them. For the last eight years, the Norwegian Red Cross has paid for the children's school lunch. They benefit from a programme which provides school children with free milk. The school drives the children to the

swimming hall, if they do not have enough money, they ask the monastery for support, or the head teacher herself applies for project money through the Russian Red Cross. The monastery provides meat and other food products to poor families through the school. In addition, the monastery provides protection for three girls. They have to get a social passport for the children. The head of the school told about two young school girls who became pregnant, and that they were able to receive project money for "bad girls" through the Red Cross. The school tries to follow up the families who are believed to be risk of falling down (Interview Village, October 2013).

Those on the list of social services get a free school lunch, the social services pays. The head teacher tells about how the school tries to provide additional support if both parents are drinking. They have formed an emergency group with the tutor and social services (interview Village, May 2011).

Teachers

Teachers tell about how they observe the children and have to make a list of cases where "it is visible that a child is without a winter jacket in the middle of the winter or of those who just have tea and pirogi for lunch" (interview Village, September 2014). These are the signals, then you go to visit the family, and it is visible right away whether this is a problem family. "Chinese clothes is one sign of poverty, you can see it, it is obvious, the fence of the house, the windows ..., children without their own bed, the kind of job, the housing, how they spend vacation, if they steal, damages on the car" (Village 2014).

The school can perhaps provide families with psychological help, a teacher says. But the school does not have any money, it does not get any financial support from social services; however, they work together with the school board to find solutions to some of the problems. They get a list of the poor families, so that they can pay special attention to them. They get pens and other material needed for school work for free, food three times a day and summer camp for free. The older children from these families are first in the line to earn a little money, if they organize work brigades to clean the town. They collect money if someone dies or if there is a fire, there are parents who pay for those who cannot pay. Some parents help with sports equipment and premiums, for example books. They collect toys. "but many of them do not want to get anything as they do not want to show that they are poor, but it can be seen, the clothes" (interview with Educator at School, November 2011).

Social Pedagogue at School

The social pedagogue is the one at the school who knows about the life conditions of families. According to her (we can call her Tatiana), the situation has improved in the last three years, but there are still villages where people have

never worked, where they live on just potatoes. Since 2011, there has been a regional programme for building new houses for families with bad housing. There are four families with children from the school who benefitted from this programme. These were people without permanent jobs who had been drinking. According to Tatiana, this implies a better situation for the children as they now live close to the school. But they do not pay for electricity, which means that this is closed. Some of the parents have had temporary jobs, but some have been out of jobs for longer periods. Tatiana thinks it is very important to check these families, she has to pay visits regularly to make sure they do not start drinking again. The parents have to go to the job centre. The job centre regularly gets in touch with Tatiana. Low income is a signal, she receives information if someone unemployed gets a job. Tatiana regularly pays visits to the social services. Before school starts in the autumn, she has to contact families to check if they are prepared for the new school year. Do they have clothes for the children, is there a need to for the school to help with documents. Perhaps, they need the school to verify the documents needed to receive benefits. If the children do not have shoes, they can get help through the school. Perhaps Tatiana has to come along to see that they really buy shoes with the money they received. She helped a woman to get treatment for addiction to alcohol, but paid for this from her own pocket. She collected the necessary documents, so that a child could go to a summer camp. For her, there is a problem if those who drink do not register that they just do not care to do it although their children are in real need of all the help the family can get. Tatiana has to interfere. The sole tool she has is to talk, she emphasizes. She tries to talk to these families, she tries to explain, motivate them to do something, at least register. For Tatiana, it is important to involve parents in the school, it is important that they are social, that they do not isolate themselves. She wants to provide them with responsibility, so they take part, that they participate in the work to make furniture for the school, painting the walls to make the school look fine. Tatiana feels that if she loses control, there is a risk that the family will be weakened and that their situation will turn to the worse. It appears that the social pedagogue is an important resource for the poor families. But there are many families for Tatiana to follow, "apart from the 29 families who are classified as poor entitled to support (one-third of the families with children at the school), there are another 16 families who are not even registered, They are so fragile, those with a garden can at least get carrots, onions and potatoes, but some of them do not even have a plot," she says.

The interview with the Social pedagogue at a school in a provincial town of the Nizhegorodskaya oblast gives a similar picture, she describes how she has to teach some families to handle money. She describes how the effects of the closing of plants, or the reduction of work places in her town has hit the school where she is working. The number of families with either the mother or the father working with the "*vakhtovyi metod*" (a form of temporary shift-based work) has increased. Many work from morning to night without being

able to improve their situation, she says. Low wages, minimal wage increases which are far from compensating for increasing costs. In her school, the number of families on the social services list increased in 2011 to 130 out of a total of 337 families, which was 30 more than the year before. But perhaps part of the increase was due to better information from the school about benefits from social services. The work place has to provide information about income, and the first step is to register.

At the same time, there are many families which are not included on the list, she knows them. Those who work unofficially or have temporary jobs and those who drink and do not work at all. She is just about to visit one such family. The mother is a conductor, and the father is a builder. The pattern is often like this, she says:

They have a drinking week, the commission becomes involved, they are then back to work, if they get back to drinking once more, that is, they lose their jobs. Then, all the doors are closed. It is really difficult to get back to work as you have to show both a working book and a health book. Nobody wants to employ somebody who drinks.

The social pedagogue in the college is helping the girls from the children's home, making them capable of managing. "As orphans they are entitled to get a flat at the age of 18. You have to do everything with them; buy clothes and food, show them how to use the stove and the fridge, fill in the forms for applying for a social passport." (Interview Small Town, May 2013).

Social passports are made at the beginning of the school year. The teacher counts how many children with single parents they have in the class, how many with unemployed parents, how many families with many children, if they work. In one of the classes, there is, for example, "seven such asocial families, who everybody knows." The information is passed on from the previous school. But it also shows on the children. She visits these families immediately. Then, she keeps them under control. She sees herself as a link to the social services. She is to keep them updated of novelties from the social services. That they can get certain benefits, subsidy for the rent, new year's presents. They have to fill in the documents twice a year, and they receive money twice a year as well. It means child benefits, money for school lunches, extra money if the families have three children or more and money for the bus. Money for school uniforms, clothes and school books. The school has to report about problems to the authorities. The most difficult are parents who do not take care of their children. Those who stopped drinking, and then start again, she has to check them all the time, she says. "The deserted children. How difficult it is to see all the drinking everywhere." Compensation is paid for the cost of housing, lighting, child care, food, clothes and shoes. But the compensation is too small, only part of the year is covered, no discount is provided, children can only buy tea and pirogi. She focuses her attention on those with the smallest incomes, who barely make it from day to day. She advises them to visit the

social services. But as they do not have the strength to fill in all the documents, she helps them. But it has become really complicated. Nobody wants to talk about their poverty.

Doctor's Assistant

The doctor's assistant is the leading medical worker in communities, a lower level doctor. Marina is a doctor's assistant who also feels that the only real tool she has is to talk (interview with Doctor's Assistant, Village, October 2013). She tries to talk to people, to explain, it is about 20% of the families who have real problems, "those without a head, who do not come to the doctor." Therefore, it is especially important that she visits them, she says. As a doctor's assistant, she can write out medicines. But the poor do not have any money for medicines. She reports to the pharmacy once a month. Sometimes, if the parents do not pay for the medicines, she pays herself. The problem with children of such families is that they are often sick as they generally do not get the nourishment they need, they do not get enough vitamins. Maybe, she can help so that they get treatment at the community centre, a maximum of two weeks based on financing from the state. She also has to report to the commission for social welfare at the local level. Occasionally, they intervene and force the family to leave the child in child care. The commission comes quite often, it could happen after a phone call from a neighbour. Marina can choose whether to take a child to the hospital, or talk to parents if they are sober. If the child is taken to the hospital, it will be subject to a medical investigation and thereafter placed in a temporary children's home. Only if there is no other solution they will be placed in the permanent children's home. The commission only looks into the sanitary conditions of families with alcohol problems. They can help with money and pay bills. It was Marina's own idea to put out boxes for the collection of money for a family under special stress. So, they received money enough to buy curtains. Another idea was to pick berries together, sell them, and buy books to the school with the money.

Marina emphasizes how important it is to talk with the families about how their children could get enough nourishment that they can get food for free from the child care. Neither NGOs nor the church help only relatives and neighbours who help by giving clothes. Marina told about how the commission took a child from a mother who had started to drink, and refused to reveal who was the father. The child was taken to the hospital and then to the children's home for one year. After some talks with the mother, she pulled herself together, and she got her child back. It is obligatory to follow the children's development over the first year. It happens that Marina visits a family every week, if she thinks that it is needed.

A doctor at the hospital in the small town tells about how they actually have a doctor's assistant in all the main villages. In this particular community, there is on average one doctor's assistant per thousand inhabitants. They are

important as they are the ones who know about the pre-school children. As the poor families do not usually have their children in child care, the doctor's assistant becomes especially important.

Deputy

He is a lone father with three sons. He has some sort of disability, it is evident when he is walking. Classified as an invalid, he regularly gets a certain sum of money from the social services. According to the rules, there are many jobs he is excluded from, although he himself thinks he is able. The social services turn to him. He thinks poverty has something to do with mentality. "People do not make a budget. They postpone bills, they think, why should they pay? They just use whatever money they have. The debt just grows, eventually they have to sell their flat ...". He himself was brought up in a children's home, he started to walk only when he was eleven-years old. But the director provided him with books, and he learnt that when he was 18 it was time to leave, but he did not know how to manage, eventually he learnt through his own experiences. Now he is helping others. He is the leader of an NGO for handicapped people. All the others call him, and he tries to answer, he cheques through the internet if he cannot answer right away. He helps with documents, and advises on simple economic matters. He knows the problem families where women started to drink (Small Town 2013).

The Children's Home

Olga has been the head of the children's home since 1997. The children there have become fewer and fewer. Concretely, Olga supports the new policy to put children in foster families. The reduction from 68 residents in 1997 to 28 in 2013 means a better situation for children. In the previous hospital, there is now one building for girls and one for boys. Only four of the children are orphans, the others come from homes where parents are unable to take care of them. The children's home gets extra payment if she finds foster families for the children. Most families prefer girls, as they are believed to cause less trouble. This is reflected in the figures, only eight of the 28 children at this children's home are girls.

Their financial situation is really bad, but they make sure that the children get fruit and milk every day. They get sponsoring money from a local hockey team and from a firm. Olga tells how the director of the firm has been engaged in a number of ways, he sponsored journeys and festivals, clothes, summer camps, boots, pens, etc. He was also Santa Claus. But then he was accused of something, and now, he has disappeared. Students visit now and then, entertaining the children with performances. The governor provides them with money for furniture, library and equipment for sports. The director of the

children's home tells how they won competitions and that they received money through a fund.

The woman who was the director for a children's home for eight years in the 1990s tells about how she took all the children to her home village in the summer, so they could get some fresh air for ten days. She taught them how to cultivate a garden.

Social Service Centre

They are financed by federal money. Also here, I hear about financial problems, and how they have to apply for funds from the regional level. Sometimes they get money from firms or charity funds. This year they have opened a home for homeless youngsters. At the visit in the social service centre, the social work expert Lidia tells how many families are under special control in the community. About a quarter of those who are on the list, entitled to support, are believed to be at special risk. Lidia tells that the doctor's assistant sometimes calls her in acute situations when parents have been drinking several days in a row. Then, she contacts the tutor, who goes and takes the children. Sometimes, she says, children are returned to the families, but only if parents can show that they are capable, and that they have cleaned the home. When I ask how the social services can help, she answers that they provide families with wall paper, and they have provided support for summer camps. They try to help with clothes, they buy school books for the schools who ask social services for help. The social services in turn try to get help from sponsors. They put announcements in the newspaper about special events, with a list of what they need. Firms contribute with either money or products. In the second floor, they have a "*priem*" where people can leave what they want to give to the needy. People can come there to collect things. But they also drive to the villages to leave collected items for the families there.

She talks about the different problem families, and how she tries to help them. She shares the responsibility with the tutor. Upon recommendation from the medical commission, she arranged that two children were sent to the rehabilitation centre for a couple of weeks, as they were undernourished. She goes to the families and tries to talk with them. She suggests treatment, summer camp or sanatorium and provides them with tickets. She collects parcels for distribution, she collects documents and helps families to fill them in. She visited the home of a family where both parents are drinking. As she could not note any improvement the last time, she visited them she had to report to the tutor. Lidia thinks the situation has become worse as many young parents have fallen into heavy drinking. "They do not take care of their children, they do not ensure that they children get proper food," she says.

Lidia confirms the development towards children from problem families being placed in foster families. She refers to the programme which was

launched by Putin in 2008. They have to check these families, so that they do not take the children just to receive money.

The Library

In a small town, we hear about how the library takes a key role in providing information to inhabitants about their rights. This is also through a state programme. Every community library has such a function, but this one is focused on how to increase the social resources of the youth. This library also provides a meeting place for the club for foster families (interview, September 2014).

A woman reported about how the librarian at the community centre told her about the new possibility to take children from the children's home. There was a great interest, in 2006 there were quite a few families who were queuing to take children, but most later cancelled their application, so they were the first (interview with a Foster Family, Village, October 2013).

They had some problems with the boy they had taken from the children's home, they needed a psychologist. From the children's home, they could always get advice on the phone, but the tutor did not help them, he said:

They just follow the party line, they are so hierarchical, they have solely a control function. (Foster Family Village 2013)

When he complained through the library he got help. The librarian forwarded the complaint, and the tutor was directed to change their way of working with families. The librarian is acting through deputies, but she can also call directly to Moscow.

Reflections

It appears that the Russian government has implemented social policies which have given people opportunities to improve their own life situations, implying that it would be beneficial for them to be active. Such policies deal with poverty issues through developing welfare and improving life conditions in a general sense, but are perhaps directed towards certain groups; the young, families with many children or the like. Consequently, actors in the social sphere try to find resources, not only to cope with everyday problems of poverty but also to construct strategies based on participating in state programmes, to reach more satisfying circumstances in the future.

I have been to various authorities and met those who in one way or another work with social policy, striving to prevent or combat poverty. One component has been the introduction of a benefit system aimed at compensating people for increasing costs. This is easily documented in terms of how it should work.

Interviews have provided a fuller picture of problems of implementation. It was possible to reveal certain patterns. Going back to North (1990), this is about the effects of hierarchical structures, low trust in authorities and problems of enforcement. It appears that it is difficult for social services to allocate help to the most needy. The poor have to apply for benefits themselves, but many do not fulfil the requirements.

But informal institutions are also about persisting norms of a moral and practical female responsibility for social welfare. It is about surviving entrepreneurial behaviour necessary to deal with shortcomings resulting from the low-priority status of social issues in the Soviet system and about education. Also, the division of work comes from the socialist heritage, which leaves non-priority sectors as women's responsibility. This is about work that is not clearly regulated in the official documents. In this article, I tried to complement this picture through the help of interviews with those in certain key professions such as social pedagogues at the schools and the doctor's assistants, but also with those who in their profession have a role involving working closely with problem families and assisting the poor in other ways. Interviews tell about how social workers, social pedagogues at schools, teachers, doctor's assistants, deputies of commissions or local village councils, local politicians and others have tried to help people take part in state programmes and become classified to be entitled to support in one way or the other.

Interviews were conducted with directors of children homes, rehabilitation centres, schools etc. to get information about policies. Referring to Amartya Sen's framework of capabilities, I have focused here on the agency of women who are professionally working in the social sphere. This has been helpful as it draws attention to whether they contributed to increasing resources, rights or relations of the poor. It facilitates distinguishing their potential roles of empowering the poor from their controlling roles.

Although social policy in part continues to be financed by the state it is organized in a new way. It is indicated that women who are responsible for social welfare have to find sponsors by themselves, for their regular activities. Being responsible for organizing social welfare, women working in the social sphere have created their own support networks for this. They use relations to create resources. Their agenda might be unclear, it is clearly larger than the directives they might be subject to from above. They are also actively working to increase available resources by for example applying for projects, striving to participate in state programmes and collecting charity. This means, however, that solutions are likely to be more heterogeneous than before. My study provides information about how this happens, how women continue to take responsibility for social welfare, how they react, and about their efforts. The empirical material supports the broad picture and supports the finding that Soviet culture taught people to find solutions which are needed in contemporary Russia.

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Notes

1. The continued dependency on natural resources is reflected in employment patterns as well as in relative wages in the 1990s (Sätre 2001). In the first decade of the new century, average wages continued to be highest in the gas industry and oil extraction, and lowest in agriculture and the consumer industry (Remington 2011, 102–103). State Committee for Statistics 2005, 107–109, 2008, 122–124.
2. Federal law No 122, 22 August 2004. A key task was to divide administrative and financial responsibility for providing benefits (*l'goty*) between the central level and the regions, which means that regions support two-thirds of the recipients. See Wengle and Russell (2008), 743–744.
3. Federal law No 131 "On the General Principles of Organisation of Local Self-governance in the Russian Federation" came into force on 1 January 2006. A key task involved increased responsibility for self-financing of costs along with the introduction of a fourth level of administration (*poselenie*) within each community.
4. According to official figures, the accumulated assets of the Stabilisation Fund were more than twenty times higher in 2007 than 2004 (State Committee for Statistics 2008, 33). The fund, which was established in 2004, was split into a Reserve Fund and a National Welfare Fund in 2008.
5. One sign of this is the low priority in the Soviet time that was attributed to social production and social services in the distribution of budgets (Voronin 2002, 53).

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