

ACCESS: Cottonera Community Resource Centre

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1. Relevance of the policy to Cyprus

In Cyprus, the primary responsibility for providing social services rests with the Social Welfare Services which operate under the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance. The Social Welfare Services provide services to families and children in need and target primarily vulnerable groups providing allowances to low income individuals and families as well as those who live below the poverty line. The Social Welfare Services provide both preventive services as well as support services which are aimed to help children and families address the various problems and challenges they face.

Services are offered through the district offices (one in each of 6 districts). In this sense, the direct services offered could be described as centralized. The Social Welfare Services are currently carrying out a research study to evaluate the extent to which their provision of services meets people's needs at the local level and whether more decentralization is necessary.

Currently, various NGOs and Community Welfare Councils are provided with financial and technical support through the Grants-in-Aid Scheme for providing at the local level a variety of programs and services that are identified as meeting policy objectives. Programs supported include day-care centres for preschool and school-age children, day-care centres and residential care for older persons and persons with disabilities, home-care, group support services to persons with a mental or physical illness, programs for persons who abuse substances, programs for persons who are victims of family violence, etc.

One centre for family counselling and therapy currently operates in Nicosia, independently from the District Office of the Social Welfare Services, and there are plans for another one to operate in Limassol. In addition, the Social Welfare Services channel, through the European Social Fund, funds for the expansion and improvement of services provided to dependent family members such as children as well as for the promotion of training and employment of individuals who receive public assistance. However, State-run, integrated, community-based services in the model of ACCESS do not exist in Cyprus.

One of the key policy objectives of community work in Cyprus is the encouragement of local stakeholder participation and collective identification of needs as well as the provision of more flexible and decentralized services that can more effectively meet the needs of local communities. A program in the model of ACCESS could therefore meet this stated objective and facilitate the effective implementation of service provision at the local level, thus helping the decentralization of services.

Another key policy objective which could be met with a program that utilizes the model adopted by ACCESS is the need to increase women's participation in the labour market. One of the ways through which this policy objective is currently supported by the Social Welfare Services is

through the establishment and operation of day-care centres for children. The Services currently operate 11 public childcare centres but also provide support, both financial and technical, to local communities and NGOs which take the initiative to establish childcare centres.

2. Similarities/differences of the policy with the experience of Cyprus

As stated above, NGOs and Community Welfare Councils provide a variety of services to local communities through State funding. In some cases, NGO-run centres provide local populations with multiple services under one roof (e.g., services catering to the needs of children, families, old people, the disabled, etc). However, unlike ACCESS, NGOs and Community Welfare Councils do not provide housing and employment services to local populations.

Similarly, the State provides a variety of services to local communities which include among others: *Citizen Service Centres* where people can take care of a variety of needs they have in relation to the State at convenient locations and times; local health centres; programs for promoting the employability of young people, women, and the disabled; programs for life-long learning; the establishment of *Educational Priority Zones* whose aim is to help the integration of poor and socially excluded children; programs of functional literacy; the provision of support for children with special needs; preschool education; all-day school; training in information technology (provided at the secondary school level); programs to prevent the early drop-out from school through the modernization of apprenticeship training and of secondary vocational schools; intercultural education; programs for the prevention of substance abuse; the provision of public assistance to poor families; counselling and support to families in need; home care; etc.

In sum, though a large variety of services are offered by the State to local communities, the absence of integrated, community based programs offered by the State under one roof is an attractive option for Cyprus to more effectively meet the needs of local populations. By integrating the range of services currently offered with the addition of housing and employment services, the State will be in a much better position to meet the multiple and often overlapping and complex needs of its local populations. Moreover, by adopting the philosophy of ACCESS in providing high quality services to the community which is open to all residents the potential stigmatization of service users which might otherwise exist is largely overcome.

3. Potential transferability of the policy to Cyprus

Though communication between the different government units exists and specialized committees with representatives from different units are being set up to tackle specific overlapping problems, the processes are bureaucratic with significant delays in the delivery of services. This problem is further intensified by the fact that local authorities, in general, only play a restricted role providing a narrow range of services to local communities. Added to this is the fact that most local services are provided by NGOs whose services depend on how successful they are annually in securing funding from the government something which limits the impact that this system of welfare provision could have.

The hindrances encountered during the implementation of the ACCESS project in Malta and which revealed, among others, problems in communication and information sharing, diverse interpretations and viewpoints, a sense of competitiveness and possessiveness and which ultimately made cooperation a real challenge are problems that could very well be faced in Cyprus if a similar policy is implemented given that the existing approach is one where the different government departments and organizations customarily address problems independently of one another. On the more positive side, the current emphasis of both Malta and Cyprus in encouraging the provision of social services in local communities through a collaboration of state, non-governmental, and local councils makes the successful transferability of the given model more likely given that the overall philosophy of coordination and integration will be readily recognized by the Social Welfare Services as a very important and needed one. Note here that during 2006, a study was commissioned by the Social Welfare Services evaluate the preventive services offered to families and to make recommendations for program improvements.

Other potential problems in implementing such a policy could also come from the general lack of resources, especially in the staffing of the various government departments that offer services, which would make the provision of local services a challenge, at least following the model adopted by ACCESS where, for example, each child is supported by one carer who is directly responsible for overseeing the progress of the child. Similarly, though families on public assistance do receive an allowance for rent, there are no services available to help people identify adequate housing so that the particularly vulnerable ones such as immigrants often end up living in housing with very inadequate amenities and hygienic conditions. What is necessary is to find mechanisms for better coordination and collaboration between all the services involved.

Areas in Cyprus which are particularly marginalized and which could benefit from programs following the model of ACCESS include rural communities, communities adjacent to the Green Line (i.e., the buffer zone in Cyprus) and the old city centres.

Two particularly deprived (both socially and economically) areas in Cyprus are the old city centres of Limassol and Nicosia which are largely inhabited by ethnic minorities and immigrant populations. Because of the multiple social problems many of which stem from the poverty and social exclusion experienced by the residents of these areas (e.g., low academic achievement and high drop-out rates of children; high rates of unemployment among adults and low rates of women's participation in the labour force in particular; domestic violence; racism and discrimination; poor and inadequate housing, etc), the Ministry of Education and Culture has designated these areas as *Educational Priority Zones* and aims to address inequalities faced by school children through the principle of positive discrimination. One of the aims of this educational policy is to integrate the services and support provided to children and families in need so that they are better integrated in the school system and their communities at large something which could potentially be expanded to encompass the range of services provided under ACCESS.

Both of these communities lack safe environments and healthy forms of informal education programs for children to engage in during their free time. The lack of a positive self-image by residents, the overall negative view of schooling by parents who do not see how education can benefit their children, unemployment, and the inability of people to know their rights and to claim public assistance and social benefits that they are entitled to, are other problems that these communities face. Providing people in these communities with a one-stop service facility will allow them to

get the support they need without having to refer them to another service something which might increase the likelihood that they fall out of the process.

In short, the multiple problems faced by children and their families in these communities make them ideal sites for piloting a program along the lines of the ACCESS program and having as a goal the provision of social welfare services locally through centres which provide integrated services.

4. Questions raised and debated in Cyprus

The most significant current debate in Cyprus is how to establish mechanisms for the provision of high quality social services to all vulnerable groups given the multiple challenges that Cyprus is facing today such as demographic changes and immigration in particular, social exclusion and poverty, and new and emerging forms of family.

5. Potential contribution of such a policy to Cyprus' National Strategy Reports on social protection and social inclusion

Cyprus' national strategy for social inclusion aims to reduce the percentage of those who live below the poverty line, to integrate vulnerable groups in the job market, and to prevent the social exclusion of children. Measures for realizing these aims include a focus on single parent families (which have a high risk of poverty) as well as inclusion in the job market of vulnerable groups such as women and people who live on welfare allowance. Cyprus, like other EU members, stresses the importance of employment as an important means of preventing poverty. According to the National Action Plan, employment policy will address social exclusion through the provision of professional and vocational training, education, and equal opportunities for women so as to decrease the current inequality between men and women in terms of participation in the job market. The National Action Plan's aim is to raise women's participation from the current 58.5% to 63% by 2010. Child poverty, according to the Plan, is addressed through the role of the Social Welfare Services and the continuous upgrading and development of a range of services used for prevention and treatment. The aim of the NAP is to reduce the risk of poverty among the general population of children to below 11% by 2010. The need to meet the above objectives in a coordinated, effective and decentralized manner highlights the utility of using in Cyprus programs like ACCESS which can further strengthen the existing co-operation of local authorities, non-governmental organizations, and government services which already exists.

6. Key issues and main questions proposed for debate at the review meeting

The following are some questions we would like to raise for discussion in the meeting:

- What can the ACCESS example teach us about successful ways to actively engage citizens who are mostly marginalized and socially excluded? What worked and what did not work in getting people to participate?
- How do you create loyalty to the mission of a project like ACCESS given the sometimes disparate demands and obligations of people who work for different agencies? How do you change the culture of working independently or only within one agency to one where people collaborate and set common goals across different departments?
- How successful are the parent-to-parent seminars operated under ACCESS?
- Given the lack of statistical information how is ACCESS monitored and evaluated?
- What can ACCESS tell us about the need of integration at different levels, from the lowest to the highest levels?

7. Measure success of policies in Cyprus

One of the biggest challenges of the current welfare system in Cyprus is the lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation procedures so as to follow the implementation of policies, record their results, and measure their specific impact. The State does not collect systematic data on how social welfare policies meet the needs of people and ultimately fight poverty and social exclusion. The absence of periodic data collection and clearly defined indicators that would measure the effectiveness of the policies implemented makes monitoring, evaluation and the adjustment and re-adjustment of policies difficult. A notable exception to this situation is the monitoring of the implementation of standards on child care which is carried out by the Social Welfare Services. What is imperative is to built in evaluation and monitoring procedures during the planning stage of particular programs so that policy development is evidence-based and re-evaluated on a constant basis.