European Policy Brief

■ *Trust and Distrust at the Street-level of Public policy*

Improving trust relations between citizens and social service administrations

Trust is of high value for modern democratic governance, particularly in our current times of crisis. While scepticism and distrust are partly functional in democratic systems, enlightened forms of trust are of particular importance in order to guarantee inclusive, balanced and peaceful forms of governance. This is not only true for the level of political deliberations and decision making, but also for the level of policy implementation and public service delivery. The EU-funded project EnTrust devoted a part of its work programme to investigating the relations between citizens and state authorities, by focusing particularly on disadvantaged families and frontline workers within the social service administrations in seven countries (Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Serbia). Additionally, an expert policy dialogue was set up following the research work in order to discuss research findings, identify core implications and policy recommendations.

The EnTrust research and expert policy dialogue showed that trust and distrust are highly relevant with regard to granting public services and benefits to vulnerable families, but sensitive to various challenges and problems that call for corrective measures and policies. In fact, while citizens' relations with social workers are often marked by trust, citizens perceptions and opinions about welfare services and institutions are governed by distrust, in part open mistrust. At the national level, this institutional distrust is related to deficiencies in the coordination among services and bodies, as these are often lost in translation due to the overcomplexity of the system. Information about the system, citizens' rights and avenues for assistance is not sufficiently available, which means that the process of benefit and service granting is not fully transparent, as these are often open to interpretation by different services. Citizens are confronted with repeated requests for the same information, while frontline workers do not have enough time to devote themselves to clients, since they are overburdened with bureaucratic work. The assignment of frontline workers to clients needs recalibration, given that staff changes affect the continuity of the relations, while, simultaneously, clients may fear negative consequences if they express a desire to change their assigned social worker.

In the light of our research and policy dialogue, we urge policymakers to find ways to improve the relations between citizens and public authorities, particularly for the sake of vulnerable groups in dire need of public support, by developing remedial measures and programmes at the national and European levels. In this context, we have identified an initial set of three evidence-based recommendations.

#1: Guaranteeing transparent, rights-based and client-centred public services to vulnerable citizens

We urge governments and public authorities to increase the transparency of information and improve communication with citizens, in particular with vulnerable groups of the population.

Although social assistance systems in EU countries are very complex and entail some degree of discretionary measures, policymakers and public institutions' managers should strive to provide **understandable, thorough and specific information to citizens about their possibilities of receiving public help and gaining access to public services**. Our research indicates that this information should be accessible, free of legal jargon, should be explicit **regarding citizens' rights** and should indicate which exact criteria are taken into account in case of discretionary measures.

The creation of **a one stop point** is a good practice that would help to facilitate transparency and the consistency of information on benefits and procedures, improve coordination and access to different services, and ensure greater personal interaction with the relevant institutions.

Setting **limits on the number of documents which need to be submitted** by social welfare claimants and providing prior information about the required documents in order to avoid overstraining claimants with constant requests for duplicate information prior to their receiving help. **Requirements and procedures of granting benefits and services should be coherent within a given institution.** Experience that being granted or denied access to welfare depends on an individual caseworker's judgements and significantly differs

within institutions, as our research shows, leading to citizens' perception that access to social welfare is contingent on the randomness of "being assigned a helpful caseworker." This in turn undermines citizens' trust in welfare systems.

Additionally, in highly fragmented social assistance systems, in particular, there is a need for **increased coordination among all services** to avoid endless referrals of people applying for help from one institution to another, and citizens' feelings of "being lost in the system".

In this regard, **digitalisation** is to be taken more seriously. However, we urge a nuanced implementation of digitalisation, as it has both potential, but also implies risk. Digitalisation should contribute to reducing bureaucracy, facilitating the workflow for social workers and increasing process transparency. It should also create a trustful interface with citizens, enhancing knowledge and communication. Yet, digitalisation should be limited as much as possible in direct encounters between social workers and vulnerable citizens. A stronger digitalisation of direct relations would contribute to a further exclusion of disadvantaged families; it would increase anonymity and affect the building of long-term relations with social workers.

Subsequent inquiries about beneficiaries' situations should be limited to updating or verifying information, and **repetitive inquiring about past, traumatic situations should cease**. In fragmented welfare systems, upon claimants' consent, the information about their situation should be exchanged to avoid repetitive inquiries.

Governments and public authorities should reduce the **structural barriers** that disadvantaged families face **in gaining access to**

services such as the lack of accessibility for persons with disabilities. Measures should be developed to tackle the limited knowledge of the local language and the way institutions and services work, by providing more accessible forms of **communication and information**.

Empowering clients of social services and involving them in the review of the effectiveness and gaps in the system is also an effective way to build further trust in the system, for instance through users' councils where clients and representatives of public services meet together to address problems and build solutions.

#2: Recalibrating administrative procedures and supporting and valuing social workers

Policy makers and institutions' managers should improve social workers' conditions of work. This entails necessarily limiting the bureaucratisation of social work to guarantee **frontline workers' time for casework and individual contacts with clients**, as a lack of time turns out to be one of the major obstacles to developing trust within relations between caseworkers and citizens. To address these mechanisms of distrust, we also recommend **decoupling means testing and controlling procedures from social assistance work**. Frontline workers should focus on identifying needs and solutions and put clients in contact with the relevant services. This would also contribute to increasing the quality of those services.

Better **working conditions of social workers,** including appropriate salaries and psychological support, should be provided to decrease the risk of burnout, high staff turn-over and understaffing in social assistance institutions.

Improving the perception of frontline workers is a prerequisite to increasing public trust in the system. Social campaigns focused on making the general public aware of the importance of social work, and the media's refraining from nurturing mistrust and attributing responsibility for social problems to frontline workers, should be supported at local and national levels.

Training and support tools should also be provided to frontline workers. One of the challenges that they face is dealing with people from different social backgrounds who face discrimination. Training to address bias and stigma in dealing with clients' needs should be considered a priority. And in this context, knowledge and tools should be provided to social workers to overcome intercultural, language or accessibility barriers when dealing with clients.

#3: Stepping up the contribution of the European Union

The EU is called on to develop a more proactive attitude in policy deliberation, social dialogue and supportive measures that could assist member states in improving public service delivery, particularly among the most vulnerable groups of citizens. First of all, the EU should actively contribute to improving public services within their member states as a measure to increase trust relations at the street level of public policies between public authorities and disadvantaged families. **The EU** should **support reforms leading to the simplification, transparency and the reassertion of citizens' rights to social services** through the semester process, and its funding instruments (ESIF, Recovery Package).

The EU should also contribute to **the professionalisation of frontline workers and the recognition of their work** by fostering **social dialogue**. Likewise, the EU should promote **mutual learning and exchanges of good practices on the development and assessment of reforms to improve the quality of rights-based services**. It is recommended that dialogue and learning make use of existing networks and platforms. Beyond these networks, however, more needs to be done to ensure user involvement, at the European level, to promote mutual understanding and exchanges among public authorities, frontline workers and clients.

Finally, the European Pillar of Social Rights principles and its Action Plan provide important opportunities, notably regarding the implementation of the rights related to social protection and inclusion. The proposal for a Council Recommendation on Minimum Income expected in 2022 is also a positive step forward to support disadvantaged families, as well as the European child guarantee which aims at preventing and combating social exclusion by guaranteeing the access of children in need to a set of key services: early childhood education and care, education, healthcare, nutrition, housing. However, it seems essential **to analyse and evaluate (in further research) how mechanisms of trust and distrust have been addressed in the European Pillar of Social Rights**. A topic that would require critical examination is the involvement of social partners and civil society organisations, as well as partnership with local authorities, which is foreseen but not systematically addressed with concrete tools.

Research background: supportive evidence

Policy recommendations are based on comparative research findings and an expert policy dialogue.

Research findings are the product of coordinated fieldwork and analysis in the seven countries of the EnTrust consortium. The work package was led and coordinated by Maria Theiss, from the University of Warsaw, and her team, and has generated a rich data set comprising **115 individual in-depth interviews with frontline workers of social welfare institutions and 117 interviews with citizens who receive social assistance.** These interviews were carried out between **March 2020 and February 2021** in seven countries (Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Serbia), during times of the Covid19 pandemic and national lockdown measures.

Researchers strived to grasp the interviewees' subjective understanding of dis/trust, the cross-country factors that contribute to dis/trusting attitudes of citizens and frontline workers, to identify the role of welfare systems and policy design in shaping (dis)trust relations at the micro level, as well as examining the role of national (dis)trust cultures. As regards frontline workers, the focus was on available (limited) resources, relations with supervisors, access to scientific knowledge, levels of autonomy and their own values. In the case of citizens, we were looking at the role of experiences with frontline workers, local cultures of dis/trust, including contacts with populist attitudes and individual traits.

As a follow up to the completion of research on the mechanisms of building trust and distrust in relations between citizens and street-level bureaucracy regards support to disadvantaged families, an expert policy dialogue took place on 10 December 2021 to review findings from the perspective of practitioners at the EU and national levels. The debate with experts representing an array of organisations of users of social services (people experiencing poverty and families), public service providers, representatives of municipalities and one NGO providing social services, provided an important opportunity to confront the findings and recommendations of the academic research with the views of those involved in work on the ground. Moreover, it helped to further understand the mechanisms of trust and distrust, and refine possible solutions or identify best practices to disentangle these complex relations, and to reflect on how best to address them at the EU level (see #3).

Key findings

The EnTrust research findings and the expert policy dialogue both highlighted the complexity of trust and distrust relations between beneficiaries and social service authorities. Although researched countries significantly differ in terms of trust levels between social welfare users and frontline workers, as well as regarding social assistance models, some mechanisms turned out to be widespread. One of the most astonishing and consequential findings resides in the fact that **personal relations** between clients of social assistance and social workers on the ground **are generally based on trust**, while users' **attitudes towards the social assistance institutional systems are rather based on distrust**. Both

citizens and social workers also tended to agree that the trustful relations on the ground were essential to help social workers and citizens navigate their way through an unfriendly, opaque and unjust system.

This general finding shows that there is a solid basis for trust at the personal and professional level, even though this trust does not necessarily spill over to the institutional level. However, research findings and experts' insights highlight that it is important to capitalise on this sound ground. Findings show that both citizens and social workers **understand trust as a mutual relation that is based on truthfulness, the possibility of revealing and opening up, and confidence in a specific person**. Social workers linked trust with a transparent and honest attitude from clients, while for citizens, confidentiality of conversations with case workers was a key precondition, as was being treated as a person, in addition to understanding, helpfulness, reliability (the ability to keep promises) and professionalism.

Distrust was not absent from the interviews, as distrust is part of a sceptical attitude that citizens and social workers share in a situation marked by institutional requirements and professional relations. In this context, distrust seems to be linked to the fact that social workers are not only responsible for assisting vulnerable families, but also for checking and controlling eligibility, compliance and performance. Hence, social workers are placed in an ambivalent situation of trust and distrust that imposes itself on encounters with clients. An additional problem is that representatives of disadvantaged families interviewed highlighted that they often perceive more outspoken forms of mistrust from caseworkers. In part, this mistrust was related to experiences of discrimination based on ethnicity,

citizenship and migration status. **For both citizens and social workers, mutuality of the relations is a crucial factor affecting trust** and that such relations are dynamic, with the balance of trust and distrust evolving over time, and based on parties' experiences. Consequently, our findings provide evidence for the need to provide social workers with a more enabling working environment, one in which they can devote themselves more fully to vulnerable families (see #2).

Before this backdrop, we were confronted with the astonishing paradox that **the prevalence of trust on the level of personal encounters** is often contrasted with **the prevalence of distrust towards the system**. Personal trust is thus not automatically transferable to institutional trust. The institutional system is perceived as **overcomplicated and bureaucratic,** in some countries also as excessively **fragmented**, due to the existence of several social assistance institutions sharing responsibilities for vulnerable families. In addition, **a low level of benefits, strict means testing and controlling practices** are a factor of distrust. In addition to time-consuming procedures, or a lack of transparency and inconsistency of procedures, there are a number of **practices that citizens feel to be unfair and unjust** such as benefit denial due to marginally exceeding the benefit thresholds, involving distant relatives in resource assessment, or threats of children being taken away into foster care, or over benefitting some groups/people who take advantage of the system. Trust is also linked to the obtention of benefits. Improvement of communication on the process, and the responsibilities and rights of citizens is therefore critical (see #1). The fragmentation and over-bureaucratisation of the system also **affects social workers who reported being overburdened with very**

complex tasks leading to high levels of staff turn-over**. The decoupling of administrative means testing procedures from social assistance seems to have worked well in some countries to increase trust and relieve social workers from stress.

Transparency and more proactive communication seem necessary also to address public perceptions in the media. A **negative media image of social assistance** was also reported by frontline workers in some countries as a factor responsible for decreasing citizens' trust in social welfare. Examples that were given included children being taken away from their families, or cases of abuse being overlooked. Institutional distrust among vulnerable families has also to do with the fact that **these families very often have little or no interest in politics, which they feel as remote from their daily life and unable or unwilling to fulfil their promises**. Inversely, citizens interviewed were in general quite positive about the European Union, but maybe only for the fact that they perceive it to be rather distant, and thus not associated with the failures of the welfare system.

Research parameters and project information

The EnTrust project is funded by the EU in the context of the Horizon2020 Research and Innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 870572). The recommendations and findings presented in this policy brief are based on the [Integrated Report on Trust and Distrust at the Street Level of Public Policy](#) as well as on an expert policy dialogue between the research team and the following experts: Leonardo Ebner, Council of European Municipalities and

Regions, Camille Roux, COFACE Families Europe, Sian Jones, European Anti-Poverty Network, Erich Hulman, Caritas Slovakia, Tomasz Pactwa, Warsaw Municipality.

The EnTrust consortium consists of eight partner teams conducting research and dissemination activities in seven countries (the Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Germany, Italy, Poland and Serbia) and at the EU-level. Its work-plan consists of seven work-packages devoted to the systematic analysis and reflection of different aspects of the topic:

1. The Theoretical and Normative Underpinnings of Trust and Distrust

2. Trust and Distrust at the Street-level of Public Policy

3. The Role of Democratic Social Movements in the Formation of Trust and Distrust

4. The Role of the Media in Trust and Distrust Building: Information or Polarisation?

5. Developmental-psychological Insight into Trust and Distrust

6. Appraising Citizens' Trust and Distrust in Governance: Forms, Determinants, Effects and Remedies

7. Civilising Trust and Distrust: Role Models and Recommendations

Further work-packages are committed to the dissemination, exploitation and communication of research, management and ethical issues.

Consortium:

Civil Society Europe (Brussels, Belgium)

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Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences (Athens, Greece)

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Further information on the EnTrust project is available at www.entrust-project.eu.

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