



The financial, health, and social crisis in Europe. Developments and challenges from the Social Work perspective.

La crisi financera, sanitària i social a Europa. Desenvolupaments i desafiaments des de la perspectiva del Treball Social.

La crisis financiera, sanitaria y social en Europa. Desarrollos y desafíos desde la perspectiva del Trabajo Social.

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Abstract

We conducted a descriptive documentary review study using a sequential design of the assessable indicators of European social policies developed between 2008 and 2019. The period between the 2008 financial crisis and the current COVID-19 health crisis was studied using Eurostat indicators to compare variables related to social risk and the governmental response offered by the sample countries to provide social protection. We attempted to understand the current crisis by examining the key social factors and potential connections with previous trends in the development of social policies in the European Union. On this basis, we identified effective strategies for managing the crisis. The data suggest that, in general, the European social protection model has not prevented the growth of inequality and social risk, thus calling for new ways and approaches to the design, implementation, and assessment of public policies to ensure their effectiveness. These new strategies involve re-envisioning Social Work as a key profession and discipline to promote social transformation.

Keywords: Social Work, social indicators, social policies, health crisis, financial crisis.

Resum

Es realitza un estudi descriptiu de revisió documental mitjançant un disseny seqüencial dels indicadors avaluable de les polítiques socials europees desenvolupades entre 2008 i 2019. S'ha estudiat el període comprés entre la crisi financera de 2008 i l'actual crisi sanitària de la COVID-19 utilitzant indicadors d'Eurostat per comparar variables relacionades amb risc social i la resposta governamental oferta pels països de la mostra per brindar protecció social. S'intenta comprendre la crisi actual examinant els factors socials clau i les possibles connexions amb les tendències anteriors en el desenvolupament de polítiques socials a la Unió Europea. En aquest sentit, s'identifiquen estratègies efectives pel maneig de la crisi. Les dades suggereixen que, generalment, el model europeu de protecció social no ha aturat el creixement de la desigualtat i del risc social, per la qual cosa es requereixen noves formes i enfocaments en el disseny, implementació i avaluació de les polítiques públiques per garantir la seva eficàcia. Aquestes noves estratègies impliquen repensar el Treball Social com a professió i disciplina clau per la promoció de la transformació social.

Paraules clau: Treball Social, indicadors socials, polítiques socials, crisi sanitària, crisi financera.

Resumen

Realizamos un estudio descriptivo de revisión documental mediante un diseño secuencial de los indicadores evaluables de las políticas sociales europeas desarrollados entre 2008 y 2019. Se estudió el periodo comprendido entre la crisis financiera de 2008 y la actual crisis sanitaria del COVID-19 utilizando indicadores de Eurostat para comparar variables relacionadas con riesgo social y la respuesta gubernamental ofrecida por los países de la muestra para brindar protección social. Intentamos comprender la crisis actual examinando los factores sociales clave y las posibles conexiones con tendencias anteriores en el desarrollo de políticas sociales en la Unión Europea. Sobre esto, identificamos estrategias efectivas para el manejo de la crisis. Los datos sugieren que, en general, el modelo europeo de protección social no ha impedido el crecimiento de la desigualdad y el riesgo social, por lo que se requieren nuevas formas y enfoques en el diseño, implementación y evaluación de las políticas públicas para garantizar su eficacia. Estas nuevas estrategias implican repensar el Trabajo Social como una profesión y disciplina clave para promover la transformación social.

Palabras clave: Trabajo Social, indicadores sociales, políticas sociales, crisis sanitaria, crisis financiera.

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1. Introduction.

In October 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the three main bodies representing Social Work in its academic and professional aspects joined together to issue a statement of commitment to the construction of a new social contract (IASSW et al., 2020). The three bodies were the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). The statement conveyed the sentiments of each of the three women heading these bodies: Anna Maria Campanini (IASSW), Eva Holmberg-Herrstrom (ICSW), and Silvana Martinez (IFSW). It was a call to make Social Work the protagonist at time of this crisis because it can offer effective community responses to the global socio-political tensions accentuated by the pandemic.

The magnitude and scope of the social and economic consequences of the current global public health emergency remain unclear. For this reason, the construction of the new social order requires global analyses to anticipate its impact on society and identify the areas in which people are at their most vulnerable. A concept of vulnerability understood as “that which derives from belonging to a group, gender, locality, environment, socio-economic condition, culture or environment that makes individuals vulnerable” (Feito, 2007, p.8).

Following the austerity policies implemented over the last decade, where the needs of people with greater difficulty cannot be lost sight of (Sotomayor et al., 2017), Europe is entering a new social crisis that needs to be analysed using effective approaches that can objectively report what is actually happening. Such approaches need to establish a relationship between the new crisis of social exclusion faced by thousands of families and the structural causes underlying it. We also need to investigate how Social Work could respond to such crisis (Lorenz, 2017).

Social policies and their outcomes have an influence on Social Work and related disciplines in terms of how and what intervention models they can use to provide efficient and effective responses to the current social complexities we currently live with from the consideration that social policy and Social Work “are historically intertwined and will surely be in the future” (Alayón, 2010, p.278). Many of these situations have emerged from a lack of accurate diagnoses, policies that are too generic or inappropriate to address them, the absence of preventive strategies, and the inadequate assessment of the outcomes. All these issues are leading to a social emergency of such magnitude and complexity that urgent but not necessarily effective actions have become justified as being the only possible ones. This approach is having the effect of normalizing social anomalies, which are beginning to be viewed as unavoidable (Palma-García, 2019). Social exclusion and inequality need to be addressed by specialized responses capable of reversing them, but instead we are increasingly faced with the normalization and chronicity of social exclusion and inequality.

The present article is positioned within this type of specialized framework and provides data that can help to

understand the current crisis, establish possible links with early trends in European social policies, and identify effective strategies to manage the crisis.

2. From the financial crisis to the health and social crisis.

In 2008, a financial crisis erupted that affected millions of people worldwide. Before the world had recovered from this crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in the public health sector, with consequences that remain to be seen. Although reports such as the one from the Savings Banks Foundation (FUNCAS) “Social impact of the pandemic in Spain. A preliminary evaluation”, estimated that 280,000 people were in households that had lost their income in the initial months of the pandemic, reaching 1,250,000 who saw their income fall by at least 30%. With sectors such as the elderly that have been affected both at a health level, in terms of care, social services and pensions (Maldonado, 2021).

Little more than a decade apart, both crises have consolidated large areas of vulnerability in people’s lives, generated new vulnerabilities, and highlighted the existence of a social crisis that had remained latent over this period. The 2008 financial crisis had a major economic global impact, leading to a powerful setback in the economic welfare and human rights indicators of many countries. These effects have been denounced by several international bodies. Raquel Rolnik (2009) is a UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this setting appealing to human rights in order to enforce the right to housing.

In similar terms, several United Nations resolutions (2009), such as S-10/1 and 11/5, call on all countries to respect their obligations, especially towards the most vulnerable people. It also warns of the consequences that the payment of foreign debt and international financial obligations can have on human rights.

When a country generates and allows social inequality, although this is unjust and harmful to everyone, it is the poorest who suffer most acutely from it (OXFAM, 2014). In the current crisis, inequality is not only affecting the poor, but is also reaching other strata that had never been affected. Thus, there is “a great risk that the progressive increase in inequality will become chronic in the long term” (FOESSA, 2014 p.1) or that inequality will become unbearable for modern societies (García, 2011). In view of this situation, approaches are urgently needed to measure the effectiveness of social policies to guarantee welfare (Terziev, 2019).

The measurement of inequality and poverty provides an accurate readout of the social needs of the moment. Hence, any increase in social inequality is both a warning sign and a wake-up call for public administrations to develop policies to prevent the spread of social exclusion. Moreover, when inequality affects vulnerable sectors, we need to analyse the many dimensions of the social context that explain inequality. As González-Bueno (2014) pointed out a poor minor in Spain is going to be more affected and with greater difficulty in the face of proper nutrition, adequate education, or decent housing.

Inequality is linked to disadvantages or the loss of citizen rights, which can be brought to light by analysing a set of variables that ensure or hinder certain levels of social welfare. Hernández (2013) suggested that these variables are related to measures regarding “income, work, education, health, participation, socio-family relationships, and – of course– housing issues.” (p.120-121). Similarly, Raya (2010) has reiterated that the vital domains to be taken into account in any social analysis are the “economic situation, employment, housing, education, health, and social relationships.” (p.118).

The current health crisis is having an effect on each of these areas, accentuating existing social vulnerability, and challenging Europe’s inadequate social policies in the face of the new challenges that need to be solved (López, 2010). According to Rojo-Gutiérrez and Bonilla (2020), COVID-19 has unmasked people’s low level of well-being, their lack of social and medical coverage, and the lack of mobility and social opportunities: in short, the lack of guarantees of essential Human Rights.

3. The present study.

We conducted a descriptive documentary review study using a sequential design of the assessable indicators of European social policies developed between 2008 and the current moment. Establishing blocks of countries according to the social welfare model, in order to be able to analyze the results between them.

We used data obtained from Eurostat to analyse the indicators of social risk and the lack of protection, including the unemployment rate, risk of poverty and social exclusion, early leavers from education and training, GINI inequality coefficient, overcrowding rate, and housing cost overburden rate. We also analysed the variable expenditure on social protection as an indicator of governmental approaches to social policies. The variables were compared over time using data from Eurostat. The available data for most of the variables were mainly from 2008 to 2019. However, in some cases, the earliest data from Eurostat were from 2009 and the most recent data were from 2018. Variables were also compared by grouping the data according to the different social models defined in Europe. Figure 1 shows the structure of the analysis. Historically, countries within the European Union have followed different social action models that can be grouped by geographic areas. Table 1 show the models and the countries included.

Table 1. Classification of the countries that make up the EU, according to social model.

Social Model	Country
Nordic Europe (NE)	Denmark, Finland and Sweden
Continental Europe (CE)	Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, Holland and Luxembourg
Anglo-Saxon Europe	Ireland and UK
Mediterranean Europe (ME)	Cyprus, Croatia, Spain, Greece, Italy, Malta and Portugal
Eastern Europe (EE)	Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic and Romania

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Hernández & García (2017).

In the present study, each model was analysed by choosing two main countries in each group based on the number of inhabitants. The Anglo-Saxon European group (Ireland and the United Kingdom) was excluded from the study due to the exit of UK from the European Union. Following this criterion, the total population analysed in our study represents more than 50% of the inhabitants of the EU (64.41%) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Countries with the largest population according to social model 2019.

Countries	Population
Denmark	5.806.081
Sweden	10.230.185
Germany	83.019.213
France	67.012.883
Spain	46.937.060
Italy	60.359.546
Poland	37.972.812
Romania	19.414.458
Total	330.752.238
Total EU	513.471.676
%	64,41%

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

4. Results.

This section presents the data on each of the Eurostat variables under analysis and a temporal comparison of each variable using the current social action models within the EU.

The unemployment rate was defined as the percentage of the active population who were unemployed. The changes found between 2008 and 2019 differ according to the social action models used (see Table 3).

Figure 1. Variables analyzed in their temporal evolution from 2008 to 2019, according to selected countries of the different European social models.

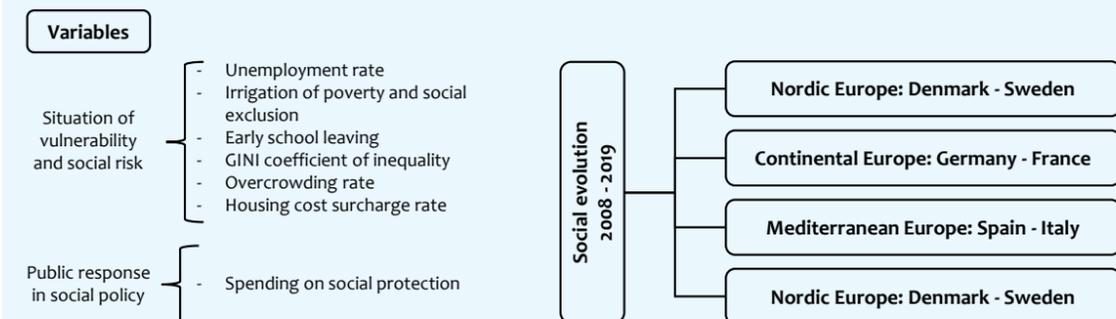


Table 3. Summary of variables analyzed and their values in the previous and final year, as well as the evolution of the time frame studied.

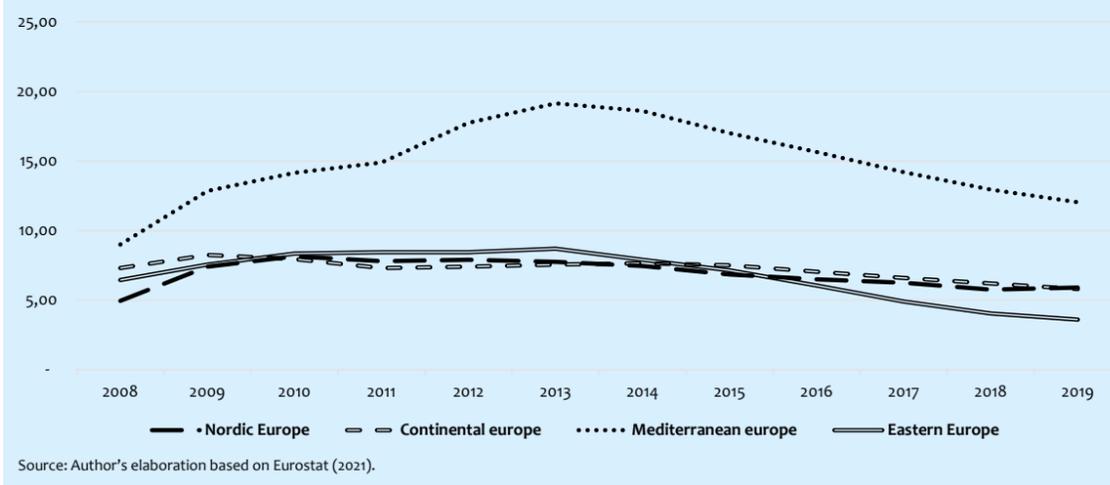
Social Models	Unemployment			Risk of poverty and exclusion			GINI			Early school leaving			Overcrowding			Housing cost		
	2008	2019	D	2008	2019	D	2009	2019	D	2008	2019	D	2009	2019	D	2009	2019	D
NE																		
Denmark	3,7	5	1,3	16,8	17	0,2	26,9	27,5	0,6	12,7	9,9	-2,8	7,8	10	2,2	24,2	15,6	-8,6
Sweden	6,2	6,8	0,6	13,9	18	4,1	26,3	27,6	1,3	7,9	6,5	-1,4	12,1	15,6	3,5	10,6	9,4	-1,2
M																		
M	4,95	5,9	0,95	15,35	17,5	2,15	26,6	27,55	0,95	10,3	8,2	-2,1	9,95	12,8	2,85	17,4	12,5	-4,9
CE																		
Germany	7,5	3,1	-4,4	20,6	18,7	-1,9	29,1	29,7	0,6	11,8	10,3	-1,5	7	7,8	0,8	-	13,9	-
France	7,1	8,5	1,4	19	17,4	-1,6	29,9	29,2	-0,7	11,8	8,2	-3,6	9,6	7,7	-1,9	4	5,5	1,5
M																		
M	7,3	5,8	-1,5	19,8	18,05	-1,75	29,5	29,45	-0,05	11,8	9,25	-2,55	8,3	7,75	-0,55	-	9,7	-
ME																		
Spain	11,3	14,1	2,8	23,3	26,1	2,8	32,9	33	0,1	31,7	17,3	-14,4	5,2	5,9	0,7	10,4	8,5	-1,9
Italy	6,7	10	3,3	26	27,3	1,3	31,8	32,8	1	19,6	13,5	-6,1	23,3	28,3	5	7,8	8,7	0,9
M																		
M	9	12,1	3,1	24,65	26,7	2,05	32,35	32,9	0,55	25,65	15,4	-10,25	14,25	17,1	2,85	9,1	8,6	-0,5
EE																		
Poland	7,1	3,3	-3,8	34,4	18,9	-15,5	31,4	28,5	-2,9	5	5,2	0,2	49,1	37,6	-11,5	8,2	6	-2,2
Romania	5,8	3,9	-1,9	47	32,5	-14,5	34,5	34,8	0,3	15,9	15,3	-0,6	53,4	45,8	-7,6	15,4	8,6	-6,8
M																		
M	6,45	3,6	-2,85	40,7	25,7	-15	32,95	31,65	-1,3	10,45	10,25	-0,2	51,25	41,7	-9,55	11,8	7,3	-4,5

Note: D = Difference 2008-2019 / 2009-2019.
Source: Author's elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

The Eastern and Central European social models showed the greatest reduction in the unemployment rate. For example, during this period, Germany experienced a 4.4-point decrease in the unemployment rate. In contrast, the Mediterranean model showed the largest increase in the unemployment rate, with an average 3.1-point increase compared to the figures for 2008. Although there was a large increase in the unemployment rate in Italy, the increase in Spain (14.1%) remained the highest of all the EU countries analysed in 2019. The Nordic model also showed an increase in the unemployment rate, with an average 0.95-point increase between 2008 and 2019. However, of the four social models, it is noteworthy that the Nordic model showed the lowest value for this variable in 2008. Figure 2 shows a shift in unemployment trends: in 2008, the four social models showed that the unemployment rates, from lowest to highest, were in Nordic Europe, Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and Mediterranean Europe.

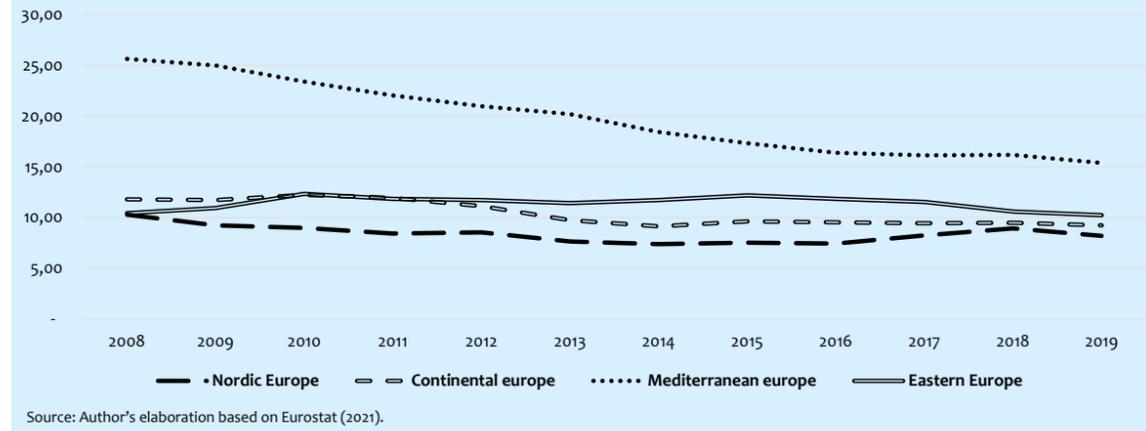
However, in 2019, the lowest values were in Eastern Europe, followed by Central, Nordic, and Mediterranean Europe. Eurostat defines the risk of poverty and social exclusion, as the sum of people at risk of poverty or who are severely materially deprived or living in households with very low work intensity. People are considered at risk of poverty if their disposable income is below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, which is 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers. People who are severely materially deprived have extremely reduced living conditions due to a lack of resources. Finally, households with very low work intensity are defined as those in which working-age adults work less than 20% of their total work potential during the past year (Eurostat, 2021). Table 3 shows that the greatest decrease in the risk of poverty and social exclusion took place in the Eastern European countries, with an average 15-point decrease be-

Figure 2. Annual comparison of average unemployment rate according to social model.



Source: Author's elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

Figure 3. Annual comparison of means in AET according to models.



Source: Author's elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

tween 2008 and 2019. However, these countries had the highest values in 2008: thus, despite this decrease, around 25% of their populations remain in a situation of poverty and social exclusion. The Mediterranean countries had levels of just below 25% in 2008, but there had been a slight increase in this variable by the end of the study period. By 2019, Italy had the highest percentage of the population at risk of social exclusion of poverty and social exclusion (27.3%). The only exception to this trend occurred in Romania. This variable decreased in countries following the Central European social model. However, in 2019, the average in these countries was still 18.05%. It is also noteworthy that in the Nordic countries there was deterioration in this variable, with an average 2.15 points increase compared to the figures for 2008. Sweden experienced the greatest increase, with a 4.1-point higher risk of poverty and exclusion compared to the figures for 2008. Generally speaking, by 2019, the Mediterranean countries had replaced the Eastern European countries as having the worst risk of poverty and social exclusion. In relation to this variable, the gap between Central Europe and Nordic Europe narrowed over the study period. Eurostat defines the GINI Inequality Coefficient as the ratio of the cumulative shares of population ranked by equivalised disposable income to the cumulative shares of the total equivalised disposable income they receive (Eurostat, 2021). Table 3 shows that inequality increased in all the countries analysed except in France (Central Europe) and Poland (Eastern Europe), which decreased income inequality by 0.7 and 2.9 points, respectively. Increases in this variable were the highest in the Nordic model countries, which experienced an average 0.95 points increase over the study period. Despite this increase, these countries still showed the lowest GINI index in the years under study. In contrast, the greatest inequality was in Romania and Spain, which in 2019 had GINI coefficients of 34.8% and 33%, respectively. The variable early leavers from education and training is a measure of the percentage of the population aged 18 years to 24 years which has completed at most lower secondary education and is no longer involved in any further education or training. There was a decrease in the rate of early school leavers in all the study areas with the exception of Eastern Europe. Mediterranean Europe had

the highest rate of early leavers, with an average of 10.25 points between 2008 and 2019. It should be borne in mind that the Mediterranean group had the highest dropout rates in 2008, especially Spain with 31.7% of early leavers. The latest data (2019) show that Spain still had the highest rate of early leavers (17.3%) out of all the countries analysed. In general, each group model has maintained a trend towards improvement in this variable, although the relative differences between these countries have remained the same over the study period. In this analysis of social risk, the last 2 variables addressed are the Overcrowding rate and the Housing Cost Overburden rate. The Overcrowding rate is defined as the percentage of the population living in a household that is overcrowded because of the number of people who have to share the available rooms. The Housing Cost Overburden is the percentage of the population living in a household in which the total housing costs account for more than 40% of their disposable income (Eurostat, 2021). Table 3 shows that the overcrowding rate decreased more in the Eastern European countries than in other countries analysed. However, it should be noted that this rate was very high in 2009 and that the overcrowding rate in 2019 remained higher in Eastern Europe than in the other countries. On the other hand, the overcrowding rate increased in both Nordic Europe and in Mediterranean Europe by an average of 2.85 points over the study period. In general, the overcrowding rates remained the same over this period: Central Europe had the lowest rate, followed by Nordic Europe, Mediterranean Europe, and Eastern Europe, which had the highest rate. There was an improvement in the Housing Cost Overburden rate in all the countries analysed except in France (Central Europe) and Italy (Mediterranean Europe) between 2008 and 2019. In Nordic Europe, the mean decrease was 4.9 points less in 2009 than in 2019, followed by Eastern Europe where the mean decrease was 4.5 points less in 2009 than in 2019. According to Eurostat, the indicator for expenditures on social protection between 2008 and 2018 in the countries analysed included social benefits transfers, in cash or in kind, to individuals and households to relieve them of the burden of a defined set of risks or needs. The indi-

ator also includes the administrative costs and other miscellaneous expenditures involved in running this social protection scheme. Table 4 shows that there was an increase in expenditures on social protection during the study period in all the countries analysed. Between 2008 and 2018, social protection expenditures in Central European and Mediterranean countries increased by a mean of 2.6 points and 2.05 points, respectively. In contrast, in Nordic and in Eastern European countries, these expenditures only increased by an average of 0.8 points. Overall, between 2008 and 2018, these changes have been minimal and had little effect on social protection.

5. Discussions.

Currently, social exclusion is experienced by millions of families in Europe. This phenomenon may be explained by the data on the evolution of social risk and lack of social protection indicators between 2008 and 2019. Our study shows that the structural conditions sustaining inequality and disadvantage among the more vulnerable population were the same at the beginning of the current public health crisis (2019) as they were after the 2008 financial crisis and its economic effects in Europe. The GINI index shows that in Mediterranean Europe the rates of unemployment, risk of poverty, social exclusion, and social inequality were similar in 2019 to those during the financial crisis of 2008. The lack of improvement indicated by the 2019 data shows that a worrying percentage of the population are on the threshold of extreme vulnerability. The trend of increasing percentages of the population at social risk was also found in the Nordic countries, although the rate in 2008 was lower than in other European countries. This aspect gives them some room to manoeuvre to design preventive responses and policies to better prevent social risk and exclusion. In the rest of Europe, the data show that these social indicators have undergone a slight positive development. However, there is a clear need to anticipate effective responses to chronic social exclusion. Such measures would help to prevent the current tendency of societies to de-

velop a dynamic that normalizes inequality (García, 2011). Between the crisis of 2008 and 2019, some social policies on this issue were implemented in the EU, but they were insufficient to eradicate chronic inequality. This outcome should be taken as a wake-up call for the urgent need for new approaches to the development of social policies capable of remediating this type of chronicity and avoid the further aggravation of structural issues (Palma-García, 2019).

Nevertheless, we found that, in most of the EU countries analysed, early leaver rates had gradually improved between 2008 and the 2019 health crisis. In fact, there has been marked improvement in the Mediterranean group, particularly in Spain, where the rates for 2008 were a clear sign of the need to develop policies to reduce early education dropout. However, a clear setback to this trend in improvement has been caused by the recent health crisis and its effects on the digital gap and illiteracy among children who have become socially disadvantaged due to the current education system (Kuric et al., 2021). Similarly, indicators related to access to housing and housing conditions should be carefully monitored. The Housing Cost Overburden rate has undergone an overall improvement in most of the European countries, except in France and Italy, where it had increased by 2019. This result suggests the need for policies that reinforce housing rights in the face of the possible impact of the current crisis on access to housing among some population groups.

On the other hand, social protection in Europe has improved, as shown by the increased social expenditures between 2008 and 2019. However, there has been little improvement in the social indicators of inequality and social risk. Therefore, unless social protection is further reinforced, the vulnerable population whose situation has slightly improved in recent years could be at risk of setbacks. In the period analysed, the data show that the so-called European social protection model has not prevented increases in inequality and social risk. This aspect calls for new ways and approaches to the design, imple-

mentation, and assessment of public policies in order to ensure their efficacy. Saltkjel (2018) has suggested that governments must play a greater role in the development of collective welfare resources to address inequalities and meet the needs of the citizens. A state with strong social policies would be in a better position to face any social crisis.

6. Conclusions.

Social Work is committed to the construction of a new social contract (IASSW et al., 2020) and, as such, social services and Social Work should play a leading role in the type of social changes and transformations needed to construct a more just society. Social services are actually an intrinsic part of the parameters established in Title X-Social Policy of the consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. This treaty legally binds member states to implementing social rights in the EU and it adheres to a strategy defined at the European Council held in Lisbon in 2000. Subsequently, social services were defined as Services of General Interest in the White Paper and Green Paper of 2004 and 2003. Hence, it is essential that Social Work plays a key role in developing and implementing interventions that are capable of reinforcing the social rights and wellbeing of the citizens, while going beyond simple welfare or charity activity. Social Work is the backbone of social interventions and Social Workers should become front-line agents in this setting.

Social Workers are in direct and daily contact with people exposed to highly complex, exclusive, and risky situations, which are a consequence of the social, economic, and health changes that have been brought about by the recent crises. Social interventions should aim at alleviating the deterioration of the welfare state, which is having a negative effect on large numbers of people. This task is challenging because effective and sustainable alternatives for intervention are not always available in an increasingly changing society in which (a) social inclusion is no longer a priority, (b) improving quality of life is being pursued in a rushed manner involving superficial changes rather than targeting the structural roots of social exclusion (i.e. social inequality), and (c) it is increasingly difficult for citizens to live a life of dignity in which their full development is possible.

This study analysed a set of European countries over an 11-year period. We attempted to shed light on how vulnerable populations could be affected by the current crisis by examining and comparing several social variables: poverty, inequality, education, and access to housing. This type of analysis provides valuable information and may become a starting point to make preventive and anticipatory proposals from the perspective of Social Work. This field embraces many different areas and sectors such as social services, the Third Sector, service companies, and education and training at universities and other institutions. All these domains should be in line with the principles and objectives of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development framework for 2020-2030. The leading role of Social Work is particularly needed in the current crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic (Aidukaite et al., 2021). Although expenditures on social protection have increased, the data show that unemplo-

yment, the risk of poverty, the GINI inequality coefficient, and housing conditions have not undergone significant improvements at a structural level. Thus, the current social protection model needs to be reviewed and new approaches need to be implemented. It has become a priority to assign more resources to Social Work and social services as a way to invest in the future of Europe (Council of Europe, 2001). As a discipline, Social Work acquires first-hand knowledge of the poverty, inequality, and social exclusion suggested by the percentages reported in this study. It has also become a priority to work toward strategies of cooperation and coordination that can lead to top-down inclusive formulas capable of increasing social equality. This proposal would involve facilitating an optimum level of personal and social development of all the individuals who make up a society. An effective social struggle is needed that would restore meaning to the construct of the Welfare State.

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Table 4. Evolution of spending on social protection (2008-2018).

Social Models	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Difference 2008-2018
NE												
Denmark	30,40	34,30	34,00	33,50	33,60	34,50	34,40	33,70	32,50	31,90	31,40	1
Sweden	27,70	29,80	28,30	27,90	29,00	29,80	29,30	29,00	29,40	28,70	28,30	0,6
M	29,05	32,05	31,15	30,70	31,30	32,15	31,85	31,35	30,95	30,30	29,85	0,8
CE												
Germany	27,30	30,80	30,00	28,80	28,90	29,20	29,10	29,40	29,60	29,60	29,60	2,3
France	30,80	33,20	33,20	33,00	33,80	34,20	34,50	34,30	34,30	34,00	33,70	2,9
M	29,05	32,00	31,60	30,90	31,35	31,70	31,80	31,85	31,95	31,80	31,65	2,6
ME												
Spain	21,60	24,70	24,80	25,50	25,70	26,00	25,50	24,70	23,80	23,40	23,50	1,9
Italy	26,60	28,70	28,70	28,40	29,10	29,70	29,80	29,70	29,20	28,90	28,80	2,2
M	24,10	26,70	26,75	26,95	27,40	27,85	27,65	27,20	26,50	26,15	26,15	2,05
EE												
Poland	19,40	20,30	19,70	18,70	18,90	19,70	19,40	19,40	21,00	20,20	19,70	0,3
Romania	13,70	16,20	17,50	16,60	15,50	14,90	14,70	14,60	14,60	14,80	15,00	1,3
M	16,55	18,25	18,60	17,65	17,20	17,30	17,05	17,00	17,80	17,50	17,35	0,8

Source: Author's elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

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