Chapter 11
Social Assistance via the Internet: The Case of Finland in the European Context

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the connection between social assistance and the use of information communication technologies to gain access to social rights as human rights. The research is based on data consisting of 594 online questions and answers related to social assistance. Of these, 160 analysis units were chosen for a detailed content analysis. The aim of the study was to determine what different positions and combinations of positions officials and service users found themselves in during online social service consultation and how service provision was affected by an official’s educational background and the phase of the social assistance process that was in progress. The results show that there are several possible combinations of outcomes and that the educational background of an answering official, as well as the phase of the process for which answers are given, have an impact on the service received.

INTRODUCTION

The use of information and communications technologies (ICT) is increasing in the service sector. In the coming 10 to 20 years there will be mounting pressure to develop electronic services (e-services) particularly in the public sector due to the fact that the population is aging, and this will see an increase in demand for services. The availability of a labor force and the recruitment of personnel will also be key issues in the future particularly in the Finnish context, as Finland is already experiencing a shortage of social workers. Increasing the share of e-services is also aimed
Social Assistance via the Internet

at reducing costs in public sector services. This transition towards e-services also applies to the social and health care sectors, which will be introducing more and more new information and communication technologies.

The emergence of e-services has seen a reduction in personal, face-to-face interaction. Service structures must be reformed so that equal and adequate services can be ensured for everyone. Today, one of the challenges the service sector is already faced with is that many service users have insufficient knowledge of different services, not to mention which of these services are available online. As not everyone has access to e-services, online services may place different population groups on uneven footing with regard to one another, thus creating inequality. According to a report from the Human Rights Council of the United Nations General Assembly (La Rue, 2011), Internet access is a human right. Internet access not only allows people to exercise their right to freedom of opinion and expression, but also enables and facilitates the realization of other rights, such as social rights.

The introduction of e-services has become increasingly important in sparsely populated areas, like the ones chosen for this study. Six towns in Lapland, in northern Finland, have introduced online consultation for issues that involve social services such as social assistance, daycare, and services for families with children and the handicapped. However, the content of the service varies between towns. In the Finnish system, KELA (The Social Insurance Institution of Finland) provides social security benefits targeted at situations that may cause a risk to human life, such as unemployment, sickness or disability. In addition to these, people may as a last resort receive social assistance, which is financial assistance provided by the municipality. The aspects of inequality are particularly important as everyone should have the opportunity to apply for social assistance, regardless of external factors such as their place of residence. For example, in Lapland people may find it difficult to visit their social office, due to long distances. Their possibility to access the Internet in order to obtain services also varies. The Constitution of Finland, (731/1999) guarantees the right to social security, which includes social assistance. In order to access the online social service consultation, service users log into an encrypted connection identifying themselves with their Internet bank access codes. A respondent group consisting of social workers and other professionals working at the social office prepare a response to the service user, who then receives a notification of the response either to their e-mail or cell phone. The response can then be read on a special “response account” produced by this online service. Service users should receive a response within five days.

The data for this study consists of 594 online questions and answers related to social assistance. These questions were asked and answered between 2005 and 2009 in three towns (Rovaniemi, Tornio and Kemijärvi). According to statistics from population censuses by the Centre of Municipality Information (31.12.2009), Rovaniemi is the largest of these towns with a population of 59,848, followed by Tornio (22,426) and Kemijärvi (8,519). The possibility of using services via the Internet is important for these towns as they are situated in sparsely populated areas in northern Finland with long distances to services.

The study first explains the connection between ICT, social rights and social assistance. Second, it discusses the character of social assistance in Finland and other European countries. Next, it gives the theoretical background for the analysis, after which the data is analyzed. In the next part the study presents results relating to the research questions; what position or combinations of positions do officials take and social assistance service users can find themselves in during and after an online consultation event, how is service provision affected by an official’s educational background or the phase of the social assistance process being carried out? The final section of the study includes