



Erasmus+



Competency Framework for Learning to Innovate with Families – Intellectual Output 1

The LIFE project partners:

APCC, Coimbra, Portugal

Comune di Cervia, Italy

Ljubljana University, Slovenia

NTNU, Trondheim, Norway

Municipality of Linköping, R & D Centre, Sweden

1. Introduction

The overall aim of the Erasmus + LIFE Project was to develop new skills, competencies, training products and methodologies required to enable social workers and related professionals to innovate and adopt more effective interventions in working with families experiencing multiple and complex difficulties.

To achieve this aim the project planned to develop 5 main outputs and products, the first of which was a Competency Framework which would provide the basis for the development of a transferable Innovation Skills Development Programme. The main content of the framework was identified through research carried out separately and collaboratively by the project partners over the first 6 months of the project which resulted in a Baseline Study which identified some of the common characteristics of and problems faced by multi challenged families in the partner countries, existing professional practice and professional training for social workers and related professionals working with the families, and perceived gaps in existing education and training provision and content.

We will begin by describing the main findings of this research which provide the background and context for the development of the Competency Framework. We will then describe the partner organisations and their differing perspectives in more detail before identifying the common competencies that are needed for professionals to work in more innovative ways and achieve greater impact in their work with multi challenged families.

2. Defining Multi Challenged Families

Although all of the partners recognize and have experience of working with multi challenged families, there is a question of definition. Researchers from the Research Centre for Child Welfare and Innovation at the University of Trondheim and from the Research and Development Centre Linköping found that a number of problems often recurred in long term child welfare families, and this research was reinforced by the findings of the other project partner organisations. These were;

1. Parents are often unemployed, or have at best, insecure part time work.
2. There are many one parent families, usually single mothers.
3. Incomes are generally low, at around 70% of national median income for household type, and there are some families with incomes lower than the EU poverty line, that is 60% of median income for household type.
4. A significant number of parents have been traumatized by abuse or neglect suffered when they were children, or by maltreatment and dysfunctional relationships with partners in early adulthood, or have suffered both these deprivations.
5. Relations between parents, even when they live apart, are often strained.
6. In many families, parents have not completed their education at upper secondary level and suffer disadvantage in obtaining employment
7. Family members often have poor health, especially poor mental health. Chronic health problems and disabilities are frequent. Children suffer from stress and anxiety, and may develop behavioural problems, learning difficulties, ADHD or ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). At puberty, symptoms often

become more pronounced. Children often have difficulties at school. Parents may have had, and some still have, substance abuse and / or alcohol problems.

8. The families often have difficult relations with parents' siblings (uncles, aunts) and with grandparents. They also often have little support and help from friends or neighbours and can be socially isolated.

The findings of the research and the consensus among the partners was that a family with 4 or 5 of these characteristics could be defined as multi challenged. However it must be emphasised that families with multiple challenges have a wide range of differing needs requiring a flexible approach from professionals working with them which can be adapted to the specific needs of individual families.

3. The Partners and their Perspectives

The Baseline Study in the LIFE project found that there were some differences between partners on the needs of multi challenged families and how to work with them, and that this was not only because of different national traditions, structures or cultural differences. The partners had different roles as well. The Italian partner, the Municipality of Cervia in Emilia Romagna, is a service provider with a broad range of service users and activities. APCC in Coimbra, Portugal, provides services and facilities for physically and intellectually disabled persons with an emphasis on the family and a life cycle approach, and has long standing links with research bodies and universities. The Centre for Innovation in Child Welfare at NTNU (Trondheim) is based at a university institute with long standing links to the field and to other university departments working on child welfare and social work issues. The Faculty of Social Work at the University of Ljubljana is the only social work education milieu in Slovenia and has undertaken extensive work on developing links with practice in the field as well as introducing innovations in the field of social work training. FOU – Centrum in Linköping, Sweden is a regional research and development centre affiliated to the University of Linköping, with well-developed links to municipalities in its region as well as to the national network of R & D Centres, central government and partnership networks throughout the EU.

Differences in approach were also influenced by differing social conditions and policy environments, with an important contrast being between the negative impact of economic problems and austerity policies in Italy, Slovenia and Portugal and the more stable economic conditions and expanding health and social services budgets in Sweden and Norway. In the former, efforts to combat social exclusion and social interventions to support struggling families have become increasingly difficult whilst in Sweden and Norway who haven't had to contend with austerity, the picture is more complex. Although services have expanded, inequality has increased and the labour market has become more difficult for those with limited education and skills with the growing focus on higher skills requirements in many jobs and less permanent reliable employment. Migrants also tend to be overrepresented among low income households. Research demonstrates that there are significant numbers of multi challenged families in both countries in which both adults and children often have significantly greater health problems, poor school attainment and other challenges.

However, the mapping and research leading to the Baseline Study also demonstrated that there were many similarities between the needs of multi challenged families in the partner countries and in the perceived ineffectiveness of existing services in addressing these needs.

R & D Centre, Municipality of Linköping, Sweden defined their main target group as *multi-challenged families with low incomes and in receipt of social benefits/welfare from the member municipalities of the R&D-centre*. They provided an explicit rationale for this choice based on earlier research carried out in Linköping and Trondheim. This has shown that:

- Multi-challenged families have difficulties in benefitting from social services.
- Multi-challenged families may have many contacts with the welfare system; this complicates support.
- If parents and/or children have neuropsychiatric diagnoses this complicates the situation further.

They identify two major factors underlying this:

- A lack of relevant working methods that focus on the family as a whole and;
- The highly specialized organization of Social and Health Care that leads to fragmentation of support.

The project *Family Pilot* conducted in Linköping set out to design, test and evaluate working methods for social workers as family pilots in order to effectively help and empower multi-challenged families. This project had positive and interesting results. Innovative aspects in the project were the development of new working methods for social workers in the Family Pilot. The methods involved:

- A focus on the family as a whole.
- Acting on behalf of the family.
- Working flexibly to support the family at home and in relation to other partners, i.e. School, Health Care, Social insurance etc. This can include everything from everyday activities at home to supporting families at meetings with representatives, “interpreting” documents, helping to plan and organize activities etc.
- The results show that the families’ home situations improved, stress was reduced, the school situation improved for the children, placements could be avoided, and parents could move from unemployment to work, training or education.

The working methods for the Family Pilot can be characterized as more generalist than specialist oriented and inspired by Case Management. They addressed unmet needs (lack of proper assessment and co-definition of the problem, need for key person /coordinator, poor definition of social worker roles, fragmented professional interventions, and a general need to clarify professional roles and remits). Their innovative content was:

- Co-creation of solutions with the families, valuing their perceptions.
- Case Management as part of an interdisciplinary approach.
- Need for reflection and perspective (with others).
- Focus on practical skills and solutions.
- Identifying areas of potential for change in the family situation.

Linköping specify a set of skills required to work with multi-challenged families:

- work holistically with the family as a whole (generalist),
- to be able to act in a complex and fragmented context,
- work in a multi-professional team,
- work in an cross-organizational and coordinating professional role,
- coordinate work of inter-organizational and multi-disciplinary teams,
- work with innovations in social work in a family environment.

A generalist role in social work means a shift from specialized social services, where every problem requires its specific contribution and where the mission is clearly defined, to provide support and treatment with width and a system theoretical perspective, to focus more on preventative work, to interact with all relevant partners and the family. A generalist should also be able to judge when there is a need for specialized treatment and be able to motivate and direct on to the current instance.

This can translate into different competencies and skills needed such as the capacity to:

- Reflect on theory and practice
- Analyse the complexities of life in multi-challenged families
- Analyze the context and structural factors
- Assess and prioritize needs
- Participate in Team work
- Plan interventions more effectively

The Swedish participants the Innovation skills training programme were chosen from the member municipalities of the R&D-center. The participants all had a connection with client work and a formal professional education relevant to the field, e.g. in social work, psychology, behavioural science, physiotherapy etc. Furthermore, the participants all had a connection to area based social work, i.e. focus on the local conditions in each area and how to improve a family's situation by strengthening and supporting natural networks and collaborative forums in the local community. One aspect is area based social work should build on a co-creation approach in which citizens should be involved in the planning and implementation of the actions.

The University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Work, Slovenia, defines its target group as *families with multiple challenges, especially those threatened by social exclusion and the risk of poor health*. Their aims are similar to those pursued in the project *“Helping families in the community: co-creation of desired changes for reducing social exclusion and strengthening health”*. This project was described in some detail in the research documentation for LIFE, and will not be described here. In essence it sought to develop social work with families as the main vehicle of training. The Faculty has had a distinctive approach to training for social workers within the framework of bachelor- and master level education, encouraging students to reflect on their practice experience together with faculty members and field supervisors. Their aim has been to train social workers to co-create approaches and solutions together with the users of services.

The Slovenian partners are concerned about the impact of social change and poverty. There are some parallels to descriptions provided by Cervia and APCC Coimbra, but a difference is that Ljubljana describe a situation in which the basic functioning of the family unit and community may be increasingly threatened. As an example they point to the increasing frequency of situations in which mothers leave their families, most often with a background of very adverse circumstances. In the LIFE project the Slovenian partners will begin to extend their distinctive approach beyond social work training, into the work of the social work centers that provide service to local communities.

Ljubljana's approach to working with multi-challenged families is that it is primarily a matter of good up-to-date social work practice. This has to be individual in the sense that the practitioner is the key to good work, and practitioners must be able to operate in situations of uncertainty. Learning is seen as always involving practical learning, and the approach to skills is that characteristic of clinical practice, in the sense that the relationship with the family and the possibilities opened up by this are in sharp focus.

The Faculty in Ljubljana would ideally want to offer training to some social workers from communities outside Ljubljana, but there are resource constraints that may make this difficult. The Faculty has established a stakeholder group.

APCC Coimbra, Portugal, describes its target group as *‘Families of disabled people from aged 0 to more than 45 years old, with diagnosis of cerebral Palsy and / or other neurological disorders, or intellectual and multiple disabilities.’*

In recent years APCC has been adjusting to pressures due to the impact of austerity. There have been changes in the resources available for service provision to the target group, and substantial changes in entitlement to service. Not only specific services for disabled children and adults are involved but also provision of basic health and social services which disabled persons are so often dependent on. For APCC this results in severe pressure, especially in relation to case management functions which have become very difficult to maintain. APCC initially identified 84 families who met the criteria defining multi challenged families within the LIFE project.

Critical skills for social workers and related professionals working with these families which were identified by APCC included the following;

1. Understanding innovation
2. Critical reflection about intervention models and their underlying concepts, and practice with multi challenged families.
3. Case Management
4. Assessment and analytical skills
5. Reflective skills
6. Skills required for scientific production (practice and evidence)
7. Ethical awareness (the role of each professional and how this is articulated in an organizational setting)
8. Organizational skills
9. Knowledge and understanding of social policies and their evolution.

APCC has a strong set of interrelationships with a wide variety of agencies and organizations involved in research, education and training and practice and used these to establish a strong Stakeholder Forum.

The Centre for Child Welfare Research and Innovation, University of Trondheim (NTNU), Norway, defines its target group *as families with multiple challenges that are in contact with child welfare services*. In practice these will be mostly families that have long-term contact with child welfare. Trondheim devised the master degree level course in innovation that has served as a forerunner for the training envisaged in the LIFE project. In the light of that experience it has been judged as important to adopt a broad definition of innovation (it being especially important to include low-level practical innovations such as changes in administrative routines, the precise framing of assessment work, and follow-up routines for work with families). In the project *Working with Neglected Families* designed as a follow-up to the *New Child Welfare*, financed by the Norwegian Research Council, the centre in Trondheim attempted to establish an innovative approach to work with families in four local authorities. The results were by no means as positive as those of the Linköping *Family Pilot* project, but very interesting all the same. They suggest that social work in child welfare in the Norwegian setting is seriously constrained by management styles that use sub-optimal output measures to regulate work, management styles that have been much assisted by digitalisation of records and reporting procedures. In a sense management is not motivated to foster innovation unless the government imposes it, and may indeed actively oppose initiatives if they originate at the front line.

Trondheim specify a range of skills that somewhat resemble those provided by Linköping. The view of underlying problems connected with working with multi-challenged families is very similar, but Trondheim has perhaps a less optimistic view of the potential for general change due to their experience with *Working with Neglected Families*:

- Working with the whole family.
- Listen and learn from family members.
- Good communication skills including written presentation.
- Understand the importance of practical help.
- Understand the value content of models and methods and think critically.

- Learn how to assess and utilize research findings.
- Working with other agencies and professionals.
- Teamwork.
- Ability to constructively question approaches and routines.
- Helping others to reflect about work and accept others` contributions.
- Attaining an engaged and helpful but realistic and critical approach to management.

The centre in Trondheim is working with social services in two local municipalities to select child welfare staff to follow the training.

The Municipality of Cervia identified families in which parents have difficulty in obtaining employment as the priority. Little research dealing with quality issues at national level is available, and they believe that too little attention is paid to inequality and marginalisation issues. They are also concerned with community awareness of services and the importance of securing community support. Cervia have interesting approaches to enlisting community support, as for example with their work with volunteers who can identify and channel families in need toward the services available to them.

Cervia have to contend with more adverse circumstances than the other partners in the project. One aspect of this is that the municipal services they operate are under severe pressure due to austerity and legislative changes that have led to worsened circumstances for the target group, as we have seen in the projects Baseline Study. Services in Italy are much more regionally differentiated and organised than services in the other partner countries.

4. Existing Professional Training

During the Baseline Study the partners reviewed existing professional training relating to work with multi challenged families and found that there were few directly relevant programmes available at either basic or advanced levels in the 5 countries represented in the partnership. Sweden, for instance, which probably has the most comprehensive social work education system among the partners, with relatively large numbers of students at master`s degree and doctoral levels, but has few courses at these levels which could be considered relevant to social work with multi challenged families. Many courses and courses deal with the family to some extent, but the multi challenged family gets little attention. In the research carried out by R & D Centre Linkoping the opportunity for students at advanced level to undertake research in this area was identified, but few take this up. Similarly in Norway there is little focus on work with multi challenged families in basic or post graduate training. In Italy professional training tends to focus on specific client groups such as migrants and people experiencing addictions rather than multi challenged families as such.

The Faculty of Social Work at the University of Ljubljana, who are the only professional and academic social work training institution in Slovenia, have developed training programmes at bachelor degree level which include a focus on multi challenged families and APCC in Coimbra, Portugal, identified courses at the Catholic University in Lisbon including a master`s degree course in family at risk.

Perceived Gaps in Education and Training

Overall, the partners concluded that there were severe shortcomings in existing education and training provision directly relevant to the LIFE project`s primary target group. In addition to a general lack of provision, specific concerns identified included the following;

- There is too much emphasis on intra family relationships and too little on inequality and marginalisation in analysis of the challenges facing families within education and training programmes
- Thinking underpinning interventions with multi challenged families is not sophisticated enough and the complexity of the issues and situations facing practitioners is not adequately addressed in existing programmes.
- Professional education is too specialised and segmented and discourages a holistic analysis and multi-disciplinary approaches, even though everyone pays lip service to them. Training programmes need to include a focus on multi-disciplinary and inter organisational working, as well as innovation in family environments.
- Existing programmes have insufficient emphasis on practical work which hinders learning about how to apply theoretical knowledge and there is often a tension between what students learn in social work training and what they encounter in practice settings.

5. Partners' Views on Current Practice with Multi Challenged Families

The partners considered the most serious challenges facing services and practitioners working with multi challenged families. They identified the following;

- A lack of professional focus on multi challenged families and serious shortcomings in knowledge and competencies in working with them.
- Individual services were over specialised and coordination and cooperation between them is inadequate, which creates problems when the families concerned were in receipt of a range of services
- Management and organisational structures could obstruct effective inter agency and multi-disciplinary working.
- There was a need for a more holistic approach, including inter agency case managers to provide better coordination between services , an improved overview of families' situations, and a prioritisation of interventions to achieve greater impact and change.
- There was a need for an enhanced emphasis on the families' perceptions of heir situations and co creation of solutions.

The results of the Baseline Study and research carried out during the LIFE project strongly reinforced the project's central idea that local innovation can play an important role in developing better quality services for multi challenged families. It concluded that current education and training for social work and other relevant professions was not providing the grounding in the competencies and skills required for innovative practice and that practice itself, with its day to day pressures, was not likely to generate a pressure for innovation. The importance of innovation skills in working with vulnerable families is due to the fact that the families usually require help from a range of support services, so that effective cooperation is required between these services. The families also often need sustained support over a lengthy period to overcome their difficulties and organisational barriers and resource constraints can obstruct efforts to help, so that for practitioners, skills required to think outside established frameworks are at a premium.

6. Core Competencies Required to Support Innovation

We have described how the partners had a variety of differing perspectives on the needs of multi-challenged families and how best to work with them. These were influenced by the different social circumstances and policy environments within which each of them were operating as well as their different agency roles. However, the experience of the project has resulted in a strong consensus across the partnership on the core skill components and principles that training should embody:

1. An approach that deals with the problems encountered by the family as a whole.
2. Understanding that service structures and ways of working do not necessarily serve the best interests of multi-challenged families.
3. Working with the family as closely as possible, respecting and working on the basis of their experience and viewpoint.
4. Paying attention to communication skills.
5. Understanding the nature of disadvantage and disempowerment.
6. The importance of teamwork skills.
7. Working towards a dialogue with the owners of services and their management.

Based on these conclusions the key elements of the Competency Framework should include the following:

- The understanding and skills required to implement a holistic approach to working with the family. This means that from the point of professionals undertaking an initial assessment of the family's needs and throughout the period of intervention, the totality of the issues and problems facing the family should be considered, analyzed, and continually reviewed, together with the relationship of these issues to each other. The project has developed an assessment tool as an additional output to support this.
- The capacity to identify areas with a potential for change in the family situation and to prioritize interventions accordingly. Current work with multi-challenged families is often characterized by a reactive response to individual crises rather than a proactive approach which can effect real impact, change and improvement in the family's situation.
- Understanding innovation in social work in a family environment. This will include an understanding of 'abductive learning' through practice based knowledge and experience, incorporating the experiences, understanding and perceptions of the users of the services i.e. the families themselves.
- Co-creation of solutions with the family, valuing their perceptions. This contrasts with much current practice which tends to assume the families are fundamentally dysfunctional and that their perceptions are therefore of little value. A greater focus on co-creation can empower the family, enable it to achieve greater ownership of agreed solutions and courses of action, and ultimately greater independence with a reduced need for the support of social work and related services
- The ability to work in a multi-disciplinary environment and to address the often fragmented nature of multiple professional interventions. Current practice is often characterized by a range of professional services intervening relatively independently of each other with only a limited attempt at assessing the relative impact of these interventions, or planning and prioritizing them. For the families concerned, dealing with the range of services involved can become a major weekly task.
- Case Management skills involving the ability to jointly assess and plan interventions with professionals from other disciplines who are working with the family and to manage the implementation of these interventions. This can represent a challenge to management hierarchies both within the professional's own discipline and those of related professionals, so competence in negotiating roles and responsibilities with these will be a critical part of this.

- Generic and functional skills and competencies required to implement innovation in working with multi-challenged families. These will include reflection on theory and practice, problem solving, teamwork, and communication.