

Social Work and Social Policy: Control or Empowerment?

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1. Introduction

The financial and economical crisis and its consequences on the augmentation of fuel poors in France, the creation of an open and competitive energy market in Europe leading to the privatization of the French energy companies such as EDF Company (Electricite de France), all these factors have contributed to modify the relationship between EDF poor customers and their energy use.

A reglementation has been developed in order to promote the energy access of excluded populations: a specific tarification and different kinds of aids are available in order to help them to get electricity according to their financial possibilities. But these kinds of rights are not immediately obtained. Customers having financial difficulties must interact with social workers for that purpose.

Statistics show that a large amount of people do not ask for these energy aids in spite of their rights : the phenomenon of non take-up in this domain is quite important and could be explained by different causes. One is the difficulty for these people to approach the social workers for asking for energy special tarification or specific aids.

A new kind of social actor is emerging at the present : the “social mediator” belonging to social mediation structures depending on public utilities and public infrastructures such as “PIMMS”.

Il this paper, we will present :

1. the context of fuel poverty and its specificities;
2. the mediation structure as a social innovation which may help fuel poors to a better comprehension of their rights as customers ;
3. the function of facilitation dedicated to the mediator in the interaction between fuel poors, the energy supplier and social services.

We will analyse how and in what conditions the new kind of interaction between these emergent actors, the professional social workers and the service users may improve the capacity of fuel poors to access to these energy aids. This study will be presented from the practical sociology point of view on the basis of a case study in a western town in France¹.

2. The context of fuel poverty

2.1. Urgency and complexity of the situation

One of the consequences of the financial crisis and its reflection on the economical, social and political plans in European countries, is the evolution of fuel poverty : it affects people which have been already located and moreover larger portions of the population rendered more fragile by the growing social and economical difficulties.

There exists actually, on both a European and a national level, a twofold consciousness, growing more and more important :

¹ This study has been done in the frame of EDF R&D “Fuel Poverty Project” (O. Estivals, Project Leader)

- that of the increasing vulnerability of the users confronted with the need, vital in our modern societies and essential to social life, of energy access for different uses (lighting, heating, sanitary hot water, cooking, spare-time...);
- the urgency to go over too specific experimentations and develop a transversal approach in order to intervene on the different aspects of fuel poverty : lodging energy efficiency, energy rates and charges, influencing energy usages behavior of households, phase-out of energy-guzzling appliance, social assistance to people in situation of dependency...

Energy precariousness is the subject of reflections of the European project EPEE (EPEE 2009) which assembles actors from different European countries with a view to improve the situation of households suffering from fuel poverty, compare the situations and share in both curative and preventive good practices.

But one of the difficulties to widespread efficient measures and joint plans of action results from the difficulty to come to terms on definitions and make a general quantitative survey of the fuel poverty phenomenon. For that reason, figuring out the situations can only be approximate : an estimation differing from 50 to 125 millions persons in Europe according to the modalities considered (EPEE 2009).

The indicators of energy poverty are manifold and sometimes paradoxical ; the modes of registering the situations of fuel poverty are not easy :

- in front of the difficulty, even the inability to pay their energy bills, some persons or households in very difficult financial circumstances (deeply indebted, insufficient left to live) assume different behaviors : suspension of payment, negotiation of respite allowed or self-disconnecting usages such as cold showers, cold meals, heating cutting (Moussaoui, 2009);
- over-consumption and under-consumption (compared with the estimated energy consumption according to data such as the lodging space, the number of inhabitants and the electric appliances) can then turn to be an indicator of energy precariousness. Over-consumption is due to the defective conditions of the lodgings and appliances and bad household energy practices. Under-consumption is due to the consumers' choices and arbitration ;
- the detection of fuel poverty situations is relatively difficult and impossible to detect by one actor alone : the effects of the lack of heating on the state of housing (damages caused by the cold and damp) and the health of the inhabitants will not be able to be detected by the same actors (the social worker, the family doctor, members of associations...) and occasionally will not even be detected at all if there has not been a visit at home. The energy supplier spots his customers in financial difficulties when they stop paying their bills and not when they adopt a self-limitation behavior ;
- in France, the fuel poverty phenomenon has been recognized by several actors (public powers, public organizations dedicated to social assistance, charity associations and solidarity organizations, energy suppliers) as a chief subject concern. It is not the subject, as it is in Great Britain, of a clear definition that should permit an easy quantification. But there exists a consensus of the majority to approach the phenomenon with the following terms : "someone is said to be fuel poor who experiences at home unusual difficulties to enjoy among others, the inadaptation of one's resources or the conditions of one's lodgings".

A lot of local realizations and experimentations have been developed for fighting against fuel poverty on the initiative of different actors (organizations, associations, companies, cooperating most of the time as partners). But, although several dedicated networks are forming, there is no exhaustive inventory of experimentations and shared access to experience results. But reports and projects have been made, particularly under the impulse of the French Sustainable Development State Secretary, Valérie Létard (Pelletier, 2009). They permit for the first time a global approach to fuel poverty, efforts toward a quantitative framing, an evaluation of existing dispositions, as well as propositions for fighting against fuel poverty.

The whole of these works have permitted to become aware of the situation urgency and its great complexity. They also demonstrate that it is necessary to have a global approach and to place systems carried on by complementary organizations acting in partnership.

2.2. Cumulative disadvantages in fuel poverty

The first steps to quantification and registering which were taken within the limits of these collective works allow us to realize a first approach to the situation and to pass beyond certain pre-conceived notions :

- the reckoning of the rate of energetic effort², realized according to the pattern of the British approach, is a first method, most certainly insufficient (it ignores the usual practices of heating self-limitation) but permits to define what is left for everyday life in poor-income households and to make evident their incapacity to access to energy in goods conditions;
- these first work grounds permit to identify the parts of the population the most hardly stricken among households knowing energetic precariousness (Pelletier, 2009) : for example, 87% are living in the private park, 62% are proprietors owners, 55% are over sixty...

Besides, the studies realized on energetic precariousness (often remained underground literature for different reasons), as well as expert sayings let us verify the cumulative effects of the poverty situations and their consequences on people's behaviors : low-incomes, bad housing, old appliances becoming energy-wasters, lack of information about energy efficiency and energy financial aids... but also choice of a kind of "fallback position" similar to the one specific of old age (Caradec, 2005), weariness and lack of desire which express a decline of vital energy, of interactions with others and incapacity of seizing opportunities.

In a parallel direction, a change has been observed in the representations and speeches upon poverty for about twenty years in France as well as in the other European countries (Olm, 2000; Paugam, 2005; Eurobaromètre, 2010). At the time of the vote on the RMI³ in France, the common idea was that the French society and nation were indebted to the poorest (Paugam, 2007) because they had not succeeded in setting a universal system of social protection to assist people in situations of extreme precariousness owing to lasting unemployment. At the present time, the explanation of poverty through injustice has been retreating in France, for the benefit of another explanation, the classical one of the "wicked indigent", inefficient, not hard working enough and irresponsible. A change of the perceptions of poverty may be observed : from the explanations of poverty by the imperfections of the system one slips off to an explanation through personal behavior.

Different film reports on French television have presented the question. But the analysis (Paugam, 2005) shows that the situations are more complicated than it appears at first sight and that the persons subject to assistance are noted down in a social disqualification process which goes through their self-confidence gradual loss, the vital strength, the retirement within themselves and the destruction of social links. There is a great psychological distress that has to be noted down in the understanding of the assistance relation.

3. The development of mediation structures : a social innovation

3.1. Great complexity of the energy aids system

A complex legislative system has been progressively set in by the French public powers for about ten years in order to help the persons and households in financial difficulty to have access to a decent and independent home and to the supplies essential for everyday life, more particularly energy supply.

In front of the complexity of this statutory device, of the coexistence of several solidarity models and of the now necessary cooperation of several actors, energy aids do not constitute an homogeneous automatic right but "rights to be built-up" (Caron, 2010) according to various parameters : the situations giving eligibility to energy aids and the kinds of aids available.

Some of the aids are interdependent (thus to profit by protection measures during winter in reference to energy disconnection it is necessary to benefit by an aid from the public funds FSL⁴ or the statutory

² This study has been carried on by P. Pelletier (Comité Stratégique du Plan Bâtiment Grenelle) with associative organizations such as Fondation Abbé Pierre fighting against housing discrimination, ANAH (Agence nationale de l'Habitat), ADEME (Agence de l'Environnement et de la Maîtrise de l'Energie) for energy efficiency.

³ Revenu Minimum d'Insertion (Minimum Income for Insertion), voted in 1988

⁴ Fonds de Solidarité Logement, allotted by the French « Départements » (County)

rate TPN⁵ available for certain low-income populations. Others are independent : the aids dealt out by the associations are not taken into account to open that sort of right.

So, the device as a whole, is extremely complex owing to the piling up of devices all along the years, the multiplicity of actors and the variety of political visions which had presided over the setting in of these devices. This complexity arises also from the impossibility, already underlined, to have a complete vision of the situation from the point of view of each actor. For example, the energy supplier knows his customers' situation only through the debts they owe him but does not know his social and financial situation.

Applying to the different forms of energy aids, thus implies that several factors are united :

- the mobilization of different types of actors who have to cooperate to make them effective ;
- these actors' ability to obtain a clear vision of the existing possibilities available for the particular case to be treated.

The user's situation therefore is particularly difficult, more especially as his social disqualification situation may make difficult for him any mobilization of his vital energy and make him fear an additional stigmatization (Paugam, 2005).

It is a well known fact that the non take-up of social benefits (Math, 1996; Caron, 2006; Warin, 2006) is an important phenomenon on different types of objects and in different countries for several reasons : insufficient information, complexity of the offer, parceling of the device, people's lack of reliance on the public offer, fear of stigmatization...

Measuring those non take-up phenomena is especially difficult in France for different reasons. The main one is that there are no possibilities of global and regular identification of the populations eligible to the different types of social rights. They do not have at their disposal the means to study as a whole the measure of non take-up, unless they initiate enquiries *ad hoc* on particular populations. Some organizations such as the ODENORE (Observatoire du Non-Recours⁶), have the vocation to work on the methodologies and means to use in order to measure non take-up from the unexploited documentary riches of the institutions and associations (Warin, 2006).

In qualitative terms, there exists some particularly interesting works to understand the reasons of these non take-up as it is the case for for the TPN, statutory electricity rate created by a specific decree (08/04/2004) after the French Law related to the modernization and development of electricity public utilities (10/02/2000). This rate introduces a right under the conditions of resources which permits to obtain a reduction on the electricity rate and consumption. Studies have been carried out (Caron, 2006), which have shown how and why this device has not attained its optimum and why a great number of eligible customers cannot have access to it and which propose improvement tracks.

Other studies have permitted to appreciate from a qualitative point of view, the results of the efforts displayed in the compass of such and such experimentation to help the families to assert their claim concerning energy aids. The investigation here presented gives the possibility to understand better the contribution of a mediation structure such as the PIMMS of the town of N. (in western France) to the users and the way it makes easier the interactions between them, the energy supplier and the social services.

3.2. The development of mediation structures in France

There exist in France different types of mediation structures having, for one, a general vocation aiming at simplifying the proceedings for the users : the PIMMS (Point d'Information Médiation Multi-Services) are the most widely spread and the best known. They started around the town of Lyon in 1995 and then rapidly developed owing their success into other French cities.

This innovation represents a collective apprenticeship (Harrison, 2007) as well as an adaptation to the new context both particularly interesting. It appeared with a collective rising consciousness of the necessity to find answers to the transformation process of the public utilities. The public utilities as it was traditionally organized in France, can no longer be ensured in the same way. The notion of public service "à la française"⁷ has to be recast considering the competition market exigencies of the

⁵ Tarif réglementaire dit de Première Nécessité

⁶ CNRS-National Center of Scientific Research

⁷ French specific

European Community. The new companies -formerly public services companies and said "historical operators"- and that are in charge of a public service mission contractualized with the State, must refund their solidarity policy and their relation to customers. The care of profitability may lead them to suppress physical reception and organize customer relationship management without taking into account the specific case of customers in a situation of social disqualification.

Front to this fact, EDF and several other companies ensuring public utilities missions (energy and water suppliers, telephone, national and local transport societies⁸...) have had the common will to adapt their offer to the fragile populations in poorly districts, in relation with the State, the employer of the mediation agents⁹ and the local communities. The PIMMS have an association statute financed at 50% by the institutions and 50% by the companies.

The engaged partners proceed after two objectives :

- to offer the population in poorly districts a facilitating relay to improve the relations between the companies in charge of public utilities missions and their customers;
- to create employment and constitute a professionalization for their wage earners, most of them issued from these districts, permitting them to move on towards a situation corresponding with their personal professional projects.

One may note, from the part of the companies, as from the institutions, the will to advertise positively in terms of company image but also the understanding that an efficient social positioning is essential to avoid all sorts of dysfunctioning. There is a convergence of interests between the elected representatives responsible for the public order and the companies in charge of a public utilities mission but equally confronted with logics of profitability.

3.3. Presentation of the PIMMS concepts

The principles of action which founded the PIMMS are the following :

- proximity : the PIMMS is a convivial place where one listens to the inhabitants, planted in the heart of a district. They propose proximity services as a complement to the traditional competences of the partner companies and institutions;
- mediation : the PIMMS interfaces between the population and the companies in order to restore, in a neutralism context, the dialogue between the two parties and to find concerted solutions to the difficulties that might arise between them;
- partnership : the PIMMS is a project piloted by a group of companies sharing their means as partners with the public powers and socio-economic actors in the district.

Such as they are determined, the missions of the mediation agents are double :

- they play a part of information and sale products and fundamental services of the partner companies. For that reason, the diffusion of advice on energy efficiency is a part of their mission. They especially act as translators between two logics : the energy supplier's (in the case of EDF) and the user's;
- another mission concerns the proximity services in order to improve the inhabitants' everyday life in the district by giving information on the local life, helping with administrative inquiries, giving access to office automation tools...

The setting into effect of the founding concepts of the PIMMS evidently meets the population's needs as it appears from the experience return. The customer's request and the uses are plural : purchase of products and service information and direction, help in administrative inquiries, help in reading or answering letters, help to understand written documents, help to write letters, "outdoor mediation" at their home for certain people.

Those requests are seldom segmented. The users appreciate the "general practitioner" mission of the PIMMS mediator agents who permit them to get an answer to a number of their everyday-life problems. The mediator agent acts as an intermediary with other professionals or

⁸ GDF-Suez, La Poste, France Télécom, La Générale des Eaux, SNCF-Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer

⁹ Union des Pimms

organizations that the user would contact himself with difficulty (and dealing with several fields : health, employment, family...).

The PIMMS mediation offer is in the center of a complex and opaque device in its integrality for each actor who knows only a part of it.

3.4. The need of skilled facilitators : the PIMMS offer

The PIMMS of N. city was placed in December 2007 amid the public politics of town development being spread in the Département¹⁰. The people sighted by the mediation structure are, by priority, living in the district. Yet, one may observe a shifting between the public relates with the town politics and the people who receive social mediation offers from the PIMMS that also have a large influence on the rural district territory through the mediation by telephone.

The mission committed by EDF to the PIMMS reveals the ambition of the solidarity politics to articulate curative and preventive aids in the construction of a global offer to the poor customer; It consists in :

- interfacing with the customers having energy debts, negotiating delays for payment, addressing reminders to the customers, sending them back to the social workers if necessary;
- organizing regular meetings to give advice about energy efficiency to the associations they are in contact with;
- providing various pieces of information regarding energy for the users.

The intervention area and the interaction methods with the other actors of the system are clearly determined but an incessant relation work is necessary to lift the ambiguities and define everyone's mission. The mediation agents come into contact with the customers according to different terms :

- mediation "on the spot";
- "outdoor mediation" by phoning to customers (from the list of the indebted users transmitted by EDF). It permits to warn again the fragile customers which is compulsory according to the legislation. This activity makes the mediation agents come regularly into contact by phone with the EDF solidarity team when they are not directly in contact with the customers for example to negotiate a bills book. The number of calls has doubled in 2009 on account of the financial and social crisis ;
- communication and formation actions which present an important form of activity of the structure to make itself known and propose prevention actions.

The PIMMS of N. city, too recent and insufficiently rich in staff, cannot yet ensure mediation actions at their customers' home. The only outdoor forms of action realized for want of a sufficiently large team consist in collective animations effected at the request of external partners such as the charity association Secours catholique. PIMMS legitimacy is strengthened by operations of this type.

In spite of the recent character of their implantation, the PIMMS of N. is characterized by results judged as quite positive by the structure itself and by EDF on quantitative and qualitative tests. Communication actions have been launched from the start of the project to make known the PIMMS objectives and stakes and to adapt the service offers to the precise case of the district. To the end, a district enquiry has permitted to inform the inhabitants of the imminent opening to explain the meaning of that new structure and to gather the district people's expectations.

The PIMMS has a global fighting activity against energy poverty which combines with prevention activities such as behavior changes as regards energy consumption.

The observation effected in the course of the summer 2009 has permitted to follow several examples of mediation and to note the great professionalism of the mediation agents and the importance of this type of action in the incitation to have recourse to the energy aids. One may note the diversity of the apprenticeships proposed to the customers through mediation, beyond

¹⁰ "County"

strict mediation with the recovery services of EDF. The dialogue of the users with the mediators constitute a real personalized accompaniment and permits to :

- have a better view of the risks incurred by certain behaviors;
- help the customers to modify their representations and take certain steps, especially having recourse to social workers;
- understand better the system of actors and the existing devices calculated to help them to solve their problems;
- understand better the system of actors and the existing devices calculated to help them to solve their problems;
- understand the competitive situation of the energy market and the consequences of a change of supplier on the attribution of certain rates (sending them back to a consumer association).

But this action of accompaniment is limited to the sphere of a mediation agent's attributions :

- no enabling to establish a document for aids. It is the social worker's work who is brought into the loop as soon as his intervention becomes necessary;
- no access to the EDF customer file permitting to follow the respect of the repayment engagements : the cooperation with the solidarity team is essential on that point.

4. Complexity of the interactions between social workers

4.1. Complexity of the interactions between social workers

The mediation activities directed towards the management of energy debts implicate interactions between the PIMMS and EDF solidarity team. But other actors (social workers, associative organizations) also contribute, in a second concentric circle and not immediately, to define the PIMMS mediation offer.

One of the mediation agents' competence is to know how to take one's bearings in the social workers crowded and complex scenery and to send them their customers wittingly. The polyvalence and proximity of the mediation agent represent two great assets in our party.

The whole of actors sharing the system of action have each of them, a proper position, benefit from leeway but also meet constraints to their action and innovation efforts which participate in the take-up or non take-up of the eligible population to the energy aids. An apprenticeship has been necessary to put in place cooperation relations between the PIMMS mediation agents and the social services that could be afraid of a "sort of competition". A work of putting in a relation and negotiation between the actors has been indispensable, to define the positions and precise the interaction methods. It is still often judged insufficient and must be thoroughly studied considering the organizational complexity of the aid system and the difficulties that the social workers themselves have to enter into relation between each other.

There is in N. city and on the PIMMS territory a "real mosaic of social structures" which do not enter into relation in the same way with the mediation agents. One may perceive :

- the social workers and social economy advisers belonging to institutional organizations. Most of them have a capacitation to ask for financial aids and are a prerequisite to obtain financial aids which may, paradoxically, be a non take-up factor;
- the social workers belonging to other structures who, though they have the same formation, do not have the capacitation to ask for financial aids but intervene in other ways against fuel poverty (prevention and formation actions).

Those actors reveal different expectations concerning EDF and the PIMMS. But a basic request, common to all of them, concerns information on the energy market, the available financial aids, rates and energy efficiency. The collective actions of formation to the energy efficiency co-organized by the PIMMS and EDF are greatly expected :

- by social workers who manage public accommodation for refugees or people in social integration situations;

- by the social workers who carry out specific housing social accompaniment according to ASLL¹¹ measures which includes the access to energy.

4.2. The paradox of social work

The collected sociological interviews underline the paradox of social work. As a leeway to obtain aids :

- it may generate in certain cases a backward movement from the people and may them act as a non take-up factor : dread of stigmatization, dread of interference in their private life : "I won't be free anymore", "they may be going to take my children away from me..."
- its efficiency greatly depends on the social worker's availability and competence as a help in the jungle of bureaucratic constraints (Gaulejac, 2005);
- finally, from the social worker's point of view, over-whelmed with work, fuel poverty represents the lesser harm compared to the priorities such as medical, familial and social urgencies. Many of them, in the course of their interviews, have recognized they had an interest in fuel poverty but had not the necessary time to attend their customers on that point they knew to be important but did not judge essential.

4.3. Partnership with the associative organizations

The many associative organizations present in N. city assemble important actors in the device who cooperate with the PIMMS according to different terms :

- by bringing financial complementary aids to the public aids, either in the form of gifts, or in the form of loans. But the public funds must only intervene after verifying that the public aids have been in action;
- by effecting the location of the hidden poverties and making perceptible the self-restriction behaviors non perceptible by the energy supplier : "there is a grand-mother who practically never has any heating lest she might not be able to pay her bills; she suffers from a lingering bronchitis";
- by assuring housing social accompaniment : delegation by the Département social centre (within ASLL accompaniment measures) permitting a very close attention to the persons with financial or social difficulties;
- by taking up the consumers' defense in front of the "wild" canvassing in the buildings by some electricity suppliers without any respect for their situation;
- by giving a help and a specific valuation on the excessive debts problems.

In spite of their modes of working and their different vocations, the associations have got in common :

- to search for a precise information on energy problematic;
- to propose a complementary access to manifold forms of aids and making easier the relation with the social workers;
- to work mostly with non volunteers who must receive a formation to be able to interact efficiently with the social workers.

5. Conclusion

Because of the great complexity of the action system and the interweavings of the cooperations, but as well of the uncertain area of the potential beneficiaries, it is impossible to effect a measurement of the PIMMS global impact on the take-up to energy aids. In compensation, it is possible to appreciate qualitatively the increment value of their mediation offer.

¹¹ Accompagnement Social Lié au Logement (07/12/1990)

As regards the non take-up, the interviews with the actors make appear their new consciousness of the importance of fuel poverty, the difficulty of understanding it, calculating and acting on its causes. It is also recognized that it is necessary to consider it from a global point of view in order to understand the setting phenomena which contribute to defection attitudes. There is a chain reaction in non take-up : the non take-up to the PIMMS mediation offer involves a non take-up to the social worker which leads to a non take-up to the FSL financial aid granted by the Département.

On the other hand, such a vicious circle (Crozier, 1963) can be replaced by a virtuous circle thanks to the mediation work. The positive results, quantitatively and qualitatively estimated, obtained by the PIMMS of N. may be explained by a quantity of factors which can be considered as good practices :

- the quality of communication and insertion in the district favouring the proximity reception;
- the professionalism and personal implication of the mediation agents, themselves often issued from difficult situations;
- the mediation agents' polyvalent character ensuring a "generalist practitioner"'s service to publics drowned in the bureaucracy complexity;
- by the non-institutional character of the structure favouring the reception of persons in difficulty who fear disqualification;
- the relations with the "second circle actors" : social workers and associative volunteers.

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