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Report

Workshop: Maintaining good administrative standards in public services in times of reduced resources

Chair: Lora Vidović (Ombudswoman of Croatia)

Since the financial crisis set in about a decade ago, ombudsman institutions have experienced significant challenges in terms of financial and human resources. The workshops' discussions took place on the premise that the worst is behind us, even though the crisis has lasted a long time and the inequality gap is getting bigger. The workshop discussed the challenges that the crisis has brought about and how ombudsman institutions are responding to them, in some cases generating good practices that could be shared with other institutions.

Challenges

Budgetary cuts: the participants singled out budgetary cuts as the main consequence of the financial crisis for their offices. The cuts range from 10% to 40%, and in some cases the budget has simply been frozen.

Expansion of the ombudsman's mandate: the second most important challenge is the expansion of the ombudsman's mandate to cover completely new areas of work, without providing sufficient resources for them. In Croatia's case, the office has in the last 10 years taken on the new roles of National Preventive Mechanism, Equality Body and National Human Rights Institution. Malta demonstrated further that as this expansion has not been accompanied with additional resources, instead of strengthening the ombudsman institution, it has tended to weaken it instead.

More complaints and cases and new fields: apart from increasing the number and type of complaints and cases, the crisis has also opened new fields of complaints and investigation, such as rural development, unemployment, homelessness and other. (Croatia)

Same needs, ineligibility for benefits: more and more people whose needs have not changed have become ineligible for benefits, and public administrations have become intransigent. Ireland drew attention to cases where public administrations deny applicants benefits if their incomes are even just one euro above the cut-off figure for qualifying for the benefits.

Ombudsman unknown: Belgium referred to sections of the population (including the very poor and newly arrived migrants with low levels of education) who do not know the ombudsman, and even if they did, they would not know how to approach the office. Because of their 'invisibility', ombudsman offices do not have easy access to these people.

Security concerns infringe fundamental rights: participants also agreed that because of security concerns, in particular due to recent terrorist attacks in several European countries, some fundamental rights are being infringed.

Difficulty finding the right staff: delegates to the workshop concurred this has become difficult because of competition from the private sector, whose terms of employment are more attractive. Fortunately, Malta added, people who work in ombudsman institutions do so out of conviction, and their motivation and quality of work can be counted on.

Difficulty proving good administration: due to the crisis, underlined Belgium, ombudsman offices may experience difficulties proving the benefits of good administration to citizens, especially when it comes to long-term projects that governments implement because then such projects become a political matter.

Responses

The exchange in the workshop revealed that ombudsman offices have established effective remedies to counter the challenges that the crisis has brought about through: creativeness, prioritisation, synergies, cost-cutting and delegation of responsibilities and tasks.

Creativeness: ombudsman offices have become more creative and learnt to do more with less. For instance, after a 40% reduction in its budget, senior staff of the Ombudsman of Ireland started delegating certain responsibilities and tasks to other staff, which freed up the former for other responsibilities. This move generated a 35% increase in productivity.

Better time management: ombudsman offices have got better at managing their time. Cyprus, for example, created templates and standardised letters to respond to certain types of complaints or requests for information. The office is now also making more effective use of IT, disseminating the annual report and other publications only electronically. However, there is fear that this practice could alienate the ombudsman's office from those it serves.

Sharpened negotiating skills: Cyprus managed to acquire a building at a lower price than the one announced.

New synergies: ombudsman offices, as Belgium explained, have created synergies with stakeholders, such as collateral institutions, which are also answerable to parliament.

Greater contribution to policy-making: through participation in policy-making discussion groups and systemic research as in the case of Croatia, and intervention in debt management, as in the case of Ireland.

Best practices: England explained that in the UK, ombudsman offices have shared their standardised complaints templates with public administrations.

Rethinking staff skills: ombudsman offices are moving away from hiring only case-handlers with a legal background to hiring staff with a variety of backgrounds, which increases emotional intelligence in case-handling.

Participants in the workshop concurred that the issues raised and responses put forward concern ombudsman offices across the board.

Rapporteur: Jean Lusweti (Office of the European Ombudsman)