

Article

Transformations in Local Social Action in Portugal

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Abstract: The decentralization of social functions to municipalities, also known as municipal decentralization, triggered new contexts of practice in municipal social intervention. Municipalities are now dealing with more work and a focus on working in partnerships, which calls for greater dynamism of the local social action teams. This process has pushed the social workers to practices that alternate between mediation through the construction of access to a universal standard of social rights and the development of social intervention models with specific access to certain contexts and social groups. The objective of this paper is to envision new forms of standardization of social action within the framework of municipal decentralization, combining place-based perspectives with community and structural social work. What can we learn from social workers' perspectives on the context of social functions in order to envision forms of place-based standardization of municipal social action? We seek to analyze the professional visions of local social action systems reform, discussing new contexts of practice; new place-based functions; and their correlation with political mediation for universal and intermunicipal social rights, instrumental dimensions of concrete work, and dimensions of value attributed to practicing social work. We organized the research according to the phenomenological paradigm, mobilizing the qualitative method and the multiple-case study. Based on evidence from the discourse of all professionals involved in the study, the findings indicate that the transformations of local social action systems, associated with the processes of social functions decentralization, imply greater comprehensiveness of social intervention, the ability to work in partnerships, and new place-based approach matrices, but they also present challenges for social workers in terms of multilevel governance that may favor the standardization of access to better social well-being between municipal territories.

Keywords: municipal decentralization; community social work; place-based-approach; territorialized social work



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1. Introduction

Within the framework of the welfare state's (re)adjustments, the political mutations resulting from municipal decentralization in Portugal that frame this research unleash new contexts of practice, demonstrating both the effectiveness of municipal social intervention as well as the challenge of standardizing the diversity of municipal approaches to social action and social rights access. The literature has underlined the importance of critical repositioning and the search for territorialized social work matrices, that is, approaches that reaffirm the identity of social workers by actively participating in the construction of new products/social services based on communications between the Social State and the welfare community, involving local and central institutions in effective welfare [1–5].

The political and scientific debates of the decentralization of competencies from the state to the municipalities enhance the intervention close to the people and the propensity for greater regional equity, but paradoxically, there are constraints to equity in the access of populations to services, which contribute to worsening regional asymmetries between smaller municipalities and those with higher population density [6].

The process of municipal decentralization of social action, an alternative to the centralized bureaucratic model founded on the deconcentrated structures of the Ministry of Social Affairs, is presented as a government strategy framed within the public administration reform to encourage regional and local levels of government to produce goods and provide services [7,8], thus alleviating state tasks by allocating action to a new pluri-institutional locus, which calls for professionals from various sectors (social security, the third sector, municipalities, and companies) to articulate with each other and with local communities [6,9]. However, it is critical to ensure that these local structures, characterized by the flexibility of the analyses, which for several years were centered on the management of participation and conception, incorporate principles of effectiveness in the production of concrete results of access to social rights and territorial cohesion.

Arguing the importance of aligning the innovation of community social work models with the critical perspectives of access mediation in contexts of municipal social action, Payne [10] starts from the most recent definition of international social work and highlights change, development, social cohesion, empowerment, and the liberation of people; emphasizes the core principles of social justice, humanism and human rights; and points out to the indispensability of social action towards people and their structures, whose application mobilizes social work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge theories. In this sense, municipal social action must focus on people and their structures. The reconfiguration of orthodox theories and models of territorialized social work should be able to inform integrated and collaborative intervention in social problems affecting population aggregates, reinforcing both community intervention and individual and political intervention strategies [3,5,11,12].

The present paper analyzes the significance and meanings assigned to this political transformation as well as social work's visions on how the context of municipal social functions will change. It aims to comprehend the practice's redefinition, framed in the pluri-institutional teams of local power, and to envision new ways of practice organization, integrating place-based perspectives influenced by community and structural work, and ensuring standards of intervention to social right access.

We began the research by conceptually defining the municipal decentralization of social functions in order to discuss its implications and connections to social service practices (Section 2). In Section 3, we clarify the analysis model, and then we present and discuss the results (Sections 5 and 6). These results reflect data-driven professional sensitivities of how the practice context functions, the distinctive features of social work in teams, new work methodologies, mediation, and the access vision. Finally, we drew conclusions from the common vision, which, reflected on the basis of the literature, allowed us to envision the path toward standardizing municipal social action (Section 6).

2. Chronological and Conceptual Clarifications of the Local Social Services Reform in Portugal

The structural, socio-demographic, and socio-economic changes of population shrinkage; economic restructuring of societies; and technological, economic, and societal transformations of a global nature across industrialized countries challenged governments to face a set of mutations in reordering social functions aligned with the search for sustainability in public welfare models. Over the past three decades, Portugal has developed a wide variety of legislative initiatives on municipal decentralization, which have sought to alter the inter-governmental competency systems, as well as the role that each level of government plays in the political process, in matters of social housing, education, health and particularly, in light of the object of this article of social action.

The mobilization of local power in public and social policies was associated with the opening of societies to democratic regimes [13,14] and the legal impositions arising from the EU. Until the end of the 1970s, a redistributive policy of universalist social services characterized by the centrality of social action in state services [15] was in place, and from then on, it was replaced by a broad international consensus regarding the need to bring

social action closer to the sub-national territory and to mobilize new actors—the state and market and non-market sectors of civil society—following a triangular model of plural provision, which led advanced capitalist countries, with democratic political systems, to change their legislation on social function proximity management [15].

From the Treaty of Rome (1957), which established the European Community, to the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), which strengthened the powers of the European Parliament and the national parliaments of the state members, the EU has extended its scope to areas such as human rights, the environment, solidarity, security, civil protection, and administrative cooperation. The Lisbon Treaty reinforced the principle of subsidiarity in the institutional base of the states, providing for the division of competences between the various levels of power and triggering the construction of multilevel policy systems, with each central state communicating with municipal and regional entities. Despite the fact that local authorities in Europe have specific territorial organization features, there are identical elements and common principles of action, which made it possible to draw up the European Charter of Local Self-Government, the first international instrument on the territorial limits of local authorities and on the obligation of states to preserve a reasonable and broad sphere of decision-making on a local territorial basis, signed on 15 October 1985 in Strasbourg, later ratified by 47 State members of the Europe Council. It was ratified by Portugal in 1990 and can be consulted in the Resolution of the Assembly of the Republic no. 28 (1990).

In Portugal, legislative changes toward municipal decentralization were registered at the end of the 1970s during the national democratization process. Law No. 79 (1977) already defined vast attributions in areas such as assistance and public health, but the centralized tradition of the state institutions and the absence of a bureaucratic framework for the implementation matrix of those competences made their effective application unfeasible. However, only at the end of the 1990s of the XX century and in the first decades of the XXI century were there clear signs of this structural change, even so between advances and setbacks. The rectification of the European charter of local autonomy, which occurred in Portugal in 1990, was decisive in clarifying municipal autonomy in terms of the right and effective capacity to regulate and manage an important part of public affairs under the terms of the law and in the interests of the respective populations. Constitutional Law No. 1 (2005), already reaffirmed local authorities as territorial legal persons endowed with representative bodies that aim to pursue the interests of their respective populations (Article 235). The legal framework of municipal decentralization has deepened throughout the validity of Law No. 159 (1999), 75 (2013), and 50 (2018), as well as Decree Law 55 (2020). The bureaucratic framework of the implementation matrix of municipal decentralization was progressively clarified, resulting in an increase in the functions of municipalities, namely in the design, administration, and implementation of social action competences. The strategic place-based concept has been present since Law No. 159 (1999), providing guidelines supported by local partnerships for social action, such as the social network. Law No. 75 (2013) maintains the place-based approach concept and clarifies the limits of the legitimacy of multilevel local-based action between the inframunicipal, municipal, and intermunicipal levels. This multilevel recognition was in place between 2003 and 2008, when Law No. 10 (2003) and 11 (2003), both on May 13th, outlined the attributions and competences of the metropolitan areas and intermunicipal communities, respectively. These two diplomas were revoked by Law No. 45 (2008) of August 27, which clarifies the nature, responsibilities, and capabilities of intermunicipal communities and municipality associations, and by Law No. 46 (2008) of August 27, which establishes the legal structure of Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas.

Law No. 50 (2018) and Decree-Law No. 55 (2020) accentuate the narrative of multi-level decentralization and clarify the transfer of resources. Table 1 summarizes the new attributions and the multilevel proposal.

Table 1. Multilevel administrative decentralization of social action.

Municipal Bodies	Intermunicipal Bodies
Social assistance and follow-up services; Municipal social charters, including the mapping of existing responses in terms of social equipment; Link between municipal social charters and the priorities defined at national and regional levels; Recreational activities and family support for children attending pre-school education that correspond to the family support component; Technical diagnosis and monitoring reports and the granting of temporary cash benefits of a temporary nature in situations of economic deprivation and social risk; Conclusion and monitoring of integration contracts of the beneficiaries of the social integration income; Programs for the elderly in areas of housing comfort; Coordination and execution of the local contracts for social development programs, in collaboration with the local social action councils; and Issuing of a binding opinion on the creation of social services and facilities.	Participation in organizing resources and planning responses and social equipment at the supra-council level, exercising the competencies of the supra-council platforms, and ensuring the representation of the entities that integrate them; Articulation of municipal social charters as part of a strategy for territorial mediation of access.

Source: Adapted from Dec. Law No. 55 (2020).

In Portugal, the wide range of social functions implies the collaboration between the central, regional, and local administrations, bringing social intervention closer to the population (civil society) and simultaneously provides for a multilevel operation that assigns the intermunicipal scale the strategic function of mapping and political and territorial mediating. From a financial point of view, Decree Law No. 55 (2020) stipulates that the transfer of funds has to be proportional to the competences, namely the funds applied by the central services in the same years, in prior periods, and the human resources used, considering the current technical ratios and the indications for the functioning of the new municipal social support services. It should be clarified that in addition to the allocation destined to finance the tasks and responsibilities transferred from the central government, the municipalities also have their own revenues, calculated on the basis of 5% of the IRS (individual income tax), IMI (municipal property tax), IUC (road tax), and other taxes and fines. However, mayors' concerns regarding the proportionality of spending in light of the additional competencies obtained became increasingly evident as they faced territorial diversities, particularly in scenarios of greater scarcity of resources, which would indicate increased demand for social services. In Portugal, the last 30 years have been distinguished by resistance to the local decentralization initiative. By April 2022, only forty of the two hundred and seventy-eight municipalities on mainland Portugal had joined. At the beginning of 2023, the national orientation for the application of municipal decentralization of social action was generalized to all municipalities, although far from reflecting concrete results, which, at this date, makes it difficult to evaluate the process.

The literature confirms that the success of decentralization depends on ensuring three appropriate levels of delegation: administrative, fiscal, and democratic decentralization [16]. If the administrative and financial levels have raised concerns on the part of the local government due to the murky nature of multilevel functioning and the need for additional funding during periods of greater social vulnerability, at the democratic level, efficiency commitments are also required in terms of concrete responses of social inclusion. The Portuguese model foresees the operation of partnership devices and local and multilevel governance. Although the municipal scale is close to Bourdieu's idea of social capital [17], it is essential to recognize that at the local level, one finds different resources and personal interactions that determine how to respond to citizens' needs and aspirations, the demand and supply of services, and people's involvement in administrative and political control [9].

The professionals in these partnerships take on several roles: executors and coordinators of local programs issued by the central administration, producers of their own devices, and mobilizers of financial resources. Almost invariably, they accumulate these tasks with their main functions, regardless of their differentiated availabilities, predispositions, and capacities to participate and interact with the partnership actors.

The literature on social work records contradictions related to the loss of universality and the extension of citizenship, with evident effects on the profession's ethical–political project [4,18]. In this sense, the discussion focuses on the definition of the agenda of territorialized social work, pinpointing the need to have an intervention matrix supported on evaluative and ethical issues and prepared to intervene in scenarios of scarce resources [19,20].

In these new economic and socio-historical conditions of the field of practices, professional reconfiguration entails adapting social intervention to the complex problems to which it is intended to respond [3,18,21,22]. It is crucial to take on a role of self-examination in the organization of community systems that respond to emergency situations and ensure the structural action capable of promoting the efficiency of these systems. Numerous authors consider that the ongoing sociopolitical and institutional changes could lead to novel approaches in community social work; however, it is vital to strengthen theoretical eclecticism that can mobilize systemic, ecological, and critical theories [9,23–28] while searching for models of integrated intervention, place-based approaches, and equal access. Nevertheless, it will be important to envision a theory about the action and interaction between the various social institutions involved in the framework of these socio-political transformations [29,30] in order to standardize the new conditions of practice.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Object

This research mobilizes data collected in an empirical doctoral study about the social work practice and its foundation in the framework of professional projects, which explains the ongoing professional reconfigurations. This in-depth analysis enables us to proceed with the outline of the object and (re)position it within the context of this article's analysis of the social work views of the new practice contexts brought about by municipal decentralization of social action. We are also able to explore reconfigurations and perspectives of conciliation from the place-based community approach with structural practice. What can we learn from the specialist's perspectives of the current social function in order to envision forms of place-based standardization of municipal social action? We analyze the professional visions of the reform of local social action systems, discussing the new contexts of practice, new place-based functions of social action, instrumental dimensions of concrete work, and dimensions of value attributed to the practice of social work.

3.2. Methodological Framework

It will be important to clarify the option for the phenomenological paradigm, a post-positivist, qualitative, and interpretative conception, which combines observational methods with interviews. The Chicago School's symbolic interactionism and Husserl's investigations had a significant impact on scientific thought in the 20th and 21st centuries with proposals for a systematic science based on the so-called phenomenological reduction, which requires suspending knowledge of things in the external world in order to focus on the individual's experience. [31]. However, several authors [32,33] consider the results of phenomenological research insufficient because they limit themselves to the description of the phenomenon based on individual experience. In this sequence, within phenomenology, some perspectives of discourse and content analysis were developed, either for textual materials [34] or to arrange the fecundity of subjectivity [35].

Having as an object the analysis of the professional visions of the new practice contexts resulting from the municipal decentralization of social action, it was understood that by organizing the investigation according to the phenomenological paradigm, simultaneously deploying the qualitative method and the study of multiple cases, this investigation would

entail the understanding of the practice context in addition to the systematic analysis of the individual experience of the practice visions.

The cases correspond to professionals working on municipal council teams who are in charge of implementing social assistance programs and all other forms of social action aimed at assisting the populace, as well as to the Local Social Action Councils (CLAS), also known as the Social Network Partnership, responsible for strategic planning of social intervention in municipal vulnerabilities, making selective decisions on intervention priorities in this or that area of social action.

The analysis of the context of the ordering transformation was based on an extensive analysis of secondary sources, the legislative framework, government resolutions, and literature (previous appendix), while the examination of the perspective on the practice context and the reconfiguration of the practice was based on primary sources through category and discourse content analysis of the professionals' narratives, acquired through interviews and focus groups.

In the first phase of the investigation, we conducted six semi-structured in-depth interviews and six focus groups (one per municipality), covering a total of fifty-two professionals, while in the second phase, we conducted four more in-depth interviews with social workers. Of the fifty-six professionals covered by the study, fifty-two were social workers.

According to the research objectives, the municipalities were chosen according to innovation criteria both in municipal strategic planning and local community social action projects. In order to obtain visions of the political process and its impacts on social work and on the organization of local systems of social action, we consider, as a second criterion, municipalities that had already fully adhered to the new legal framework of municipal competences. Table 2 presents the methodological design.

Table 2. Methodological framework.

Paradigm	Phenomenological and Interpretative.
Methods	Multiple case study, qualitative method.
Sample units	Legal framework for the decentralization of social action competencies; Social work views of the new practices contexts brought about by municipal decentralization of social action in Portugal's northern region.
Collection techniques	Interviews with six coordinators holding divisional leadership positions in the municipal authority, of which five were social workers and a kindergarten teacher; E1; E2; E3, E5, and E6—social workers. E4—kindergarten teacher. Interviews with four social workers. E7; E8, E9 and E10—social workers. Focus group with social workers from social network partnerships GF1—seven social workers. GF2—seven social workers. GF3—two social workers, two psychologists, and one sociologist. GF4—thirteen social workers. GF5—six social workers. GF6—eight social workers. Observation and documentary analysis.
Analysis techniques	Categorical analysis (Nvivo); Narrative (discourse) analysis.

Source: Elaborated by the author.

As shown in the previous table, only one of the interviews was directed to a kindergarten teacher (E4) due to the leadership functions she assumed in the respective city council. All other interviews were directed to social workers. The focus groups aimed at professionals from municipal partnerships, covering a total of forty-six professionals, of which forty-three were social workers. Of the six focus groups, only one registered the

incidence of other professionals (GF3—two social workers, two psychologists, and one sociologist). The predominance of social workers in the focus groups, despite the greater representation of this professional profile in the partnerships, resulted from the previously communicated objective of the research. All participants were previously informed of the research objective by email, and they provided verbal informed consent at the start of the collection.

Through each interview and focus group, speeches were highlighted, and the categorical organization highlighted the organization of the dominant contents in four main categories: (1) factors that determined the transformation of the practice context (decentralization, networking, political mutations); (2) the place of social work in teams (representativeness, role); (3) the reconfiguration of the practice and the interaction with the professional project (methodological renewal, acting in complementarity, connection with ethical principles, acting for specific projects); and, (4) constraints to practice (interaction with the universal standard, instrumentalities of practice).

We mobilized discourse analysis and categories content analysis to obtain an orderly description of subjectivity and an understanding of its interaction with the practice context from the interaction with phenomenology. The professionals' points of view on changes in the context of practice in interaction with municipal decentralization did not differ according to disciplinary background.

4. Results: Perceptions and Approaches

The municipal decentralization of social action competencies explained by professional perceptions allows highlighting the densification of functions and reconfigurations of place-based approach in social work related to intervention with vulnerable territorial communities. The narratives account for the densification of social functions at the municipal level, referring to the framework law on decentralization and the Rede Social local partnership created at the end of the 1990s. They are also punctuated by other mutations that gradually converge toward territorialized social work, with processes that include new spaces for the insertion of social work professionals and greater visibility of territorialized social work. This view is not limited to social workers (see E4's speech (kindergarten teacher)).

It is a more visible job, especially for social workers, and at the same time it is more valued by the political sphere. I4

A positive representation of the model is transversal, which refers to the greater scope of the fields of practice but, at the same time, to the need to implement identical forms of work between municipalities (see Table 3).

The new workplace of social workers' is traversed by the logic of partnership work, in which the idea of collective social action produced from local pluri-institutional structures that give greater rationality and meaning to the practice is transversal. The narratives highlight several elements that indicate increased rationality and purpose of the practice, as well as greater communication between the individual and community responses.

I think the difference [referring to the work in the municipality] is a more structured and intentional collective work. Axes of intervention are defined based on the problems of the territory, new actors are involved, with different resources... the idea is to reach consensus on solutions. (I3)

The discussion in the focus groups highlighted the benefits of the social work discipline in collective work, highlighting the specific features of the social workers in the teams and particularities of the social worker's insertion in these local structures, cross-sectional views, with high similarity in focus groups where the reflection involved other professional areas, namely in FG 3.

Social workers are better prepared for this intersectionality, and we coordinate a lot of activities and resources. GF3

Table 3. Representation of the proximity model in social functions.

Associated with municipal decentralization	<p><i>It is a process that brings advantages for the territory, if we have the capacity to implement identical ways of working [the interviewee is alluding to the need to avoid competitive logic between municipalities with differentiated social capital]. I1</i></p> <p><i>Over the years, the municipalities depended on a clear regulation of the process. A lot of our action was limited to housing and projects. I2</i></p> <p><i>(...) For 15–20 years now, municipal councils have been challenged to be more active, with more projects in the social area (...). I6</i></p>
Associated with the social network partnership	<p><i>Since the 25th of April, the reinforcement of the competencies of the municipalities has depended on the specific regulations that are currently in place. [a reference to the social network partnership.] Everything has been changing; we have been gaining space due to the way we work, the need for articulation imposed on us, and the room for maneuver left by the executives. I3</i></p> <p><i>The change in the legal framework, the orientation towards new partnership formats, such as the social network, the projects, and the internet due to its ease of communication and sharing of experiences (...)! I3</i></p> <p><i>It is more visible work, especially that of social workers, and at the same time it is more valued by the political sphere. I4 [referring to the importance of social networks]</i></p> <p><i>The proximity that the municipality has with the territory and, on the other hand, this new structure [social network] have brought comprehensiveness to social action besides avoiding duplication of support. I5</i></p>
Associated with other important mutations	<p><i>In the 1990s, several policies other than the social network were important. The RSI [social insertion income] addresses the situations in terms of supporting the individuals while the social network obliges us to leverage projects and services in the municipality that complement the individual action. I2</i></p> <p><i>Social policies in general have changed a lot (...) They are committed to working in this way. I3 [referring to operational rationality and intervention in the context].</i></p> <p><i>(...) The change in social policies and the new intervention formats [such as the social network]. (...) We were taking on new functions and ways of working that imply the activation of places and CIMs [intercity community, partnerships]. I4</i></p> <p><i>In 20 years, a lot has changed: minors are in the sphere of CPCJ [Committees for Protection of Children and Youth], cohesion and municipal responses belong to the social network (...). The sector is now very comprehensive and challenging, the territorial character is ongoing, we define response. We have more space for locally decided actions. I6</i></p>

Adapted [5] pp. 68–86.

See Table 4.

The transformation of local social action systems implied organizing local implementation structures and administering and setting up territorial policies, which caused changes in everyday social practices. Social action has become more rational, leading to the development of new technical, investigative, political, and ethical skills. The social worker is more involved in understanding the individual in context, explaining the causal complexities of the problem, coordinating resources, and undertaking political mediation in order to ensure social rights are some of the practices within community-based social work.

(...) Today there is a lot of emphasis on territorialization (...) a very well-structured ethical, technical, and political action. Territorialization requires rigorously defining strategies and coordinating resources. It calls for inter-institutional and community dialogue. And, of course, commitment from universal policy structures. (I1)

Table 4. Social work representation in local multi-institutional structures.

	Relevant Speeches
Representation of Social Work in partnerships	<p><i>There are many more social workers than other technicians, which is good for the way social workers articulate case management with community intervention (...) Proximity prompts community intervention, although there are still technicians on site who act as if they were far away. FG2 [view that cuts across all FGs] [referring to a professional body's tendency toward casework which sometimes results in a constraint on community intervention]</i></p>
Role of Social Work	<p><i>Today we have more intervention possibilities, (...) and we can deviate from our main functions [the individual approach] and do strategic reflection work that allows us to think locally. FG6 [view that cuts across all FGs]</i></p> <p><i>Social workers are better prepared for this intersectionality, and we coordinate a lot of activities and resources. FG3 [view that cuts across all FGs]</i></p> <p><i>Today the role of social workers in municipalities is vital. These technicians are in fact changing their form of intervention (...) more attentive to networking, diagnoses and work plans. E4</i></p> <p><i>[territorial action] is underway to a multi-level articulation is underway, starting with the establishment of priorities for the municipalities integrating the intermunicipal communities [However, social workers are not always represented in this structure] FG5 [view that cuts across all FGs]</i></p>

Adapted [5], p. 68.

In the social workers' view, the inter-institutional cooperation allowed the municipalities to strengthen their local intervention capacity. However, functional legitimacy is anchored in the municipalities' principles of action. The new institutional organization for social functions, the new guidelines for social policies, and proximity to other institutions in the sector and to the community are factors that contribute to the renewal of territorialization practices.

(...) First of all, because we all agree that a good coordination of resources [referring to the resources of all network partners] makes it possible to boost the response. GF3

Through their technicians, the municipalities are able to coordinate and expedite toward a complementary action, reinforcing the global vision that allows them to control the overlapping of support. (I8)

We have a cohesive network (...), a collaborative action involving the IPSS (public institution of social solidarity) in the municipality. We will use this resource to make the process efficient. (I9)

It was important that the entire intervention was thought in an integrated way (...) we needed to be able to manage resources and guarantee the strategic direction. Template formatting is complex. It was important to have a more academic basis to the problems that would help us to explain the collective's options. We need to develop both critical thinking [universalism] and flexible thinking [adapting to the local context]. (I3)

The expansion of functions that fit within the professional project of social work is represented by the need to develop more practices of mediation and a reasoned conception of a place-based approach. On the other hand, partnership, clearly the main characteristic of the intervention model, is valued because it brings an increased capacity for strategic territorialization of social intervention, essential for strategic mediation. It is still represented as a complex action due to the reasoning of the issues, the complexity of interdisciplinary and interinstitutional collaborative dialogue, and multilevel mediation.

We are in a privileged position to know the problems, draw up social charters, map responses, signal asymmetries, ensure forms of care and follow-up, and speed up the mobilization of local resources. (I7)

[It is] an important process for the territories that should be based on working in partnership and establishing the basis of the problem by taking advantage of the proximity, which is not always easy to achieve. (I8)

The social worker is recognized as a contact professional who can easily enter the community while identifying the fragility of its political mediation action.

We are easily accepted by the community; we manage to raise awareness and to empower; but it is important that we manage to commit the structures [social security] to financing the responses that can improve both people's and local communities' living conditions. (I10)

The municipalities, together with the platforms [CIM], which have representation from the Social Security, decide on these matters (referring to external financing for the construction of social responses), we technicians are a little withdrawn (...) the representation of the municipality on this platform is in charge of the executive. (I2)

The predominant narrative of the focus groups identified systems of place-based practices, highlighting the methodological renewal associated with the strategic conception of social projects and collaborative work. Some emergency practices are essential in contexts of limited resources that do not compromise professional principles since professionals consider that the complementarity with universal policies persists in the current contexts of practice (see Table 5).

According to the visions of the practice, the new collaborative contexts of the practice provide suitable conditions for the territorialized social action at the municipal level to be strengthened and integrated. The innovative elements of work methods fit into the philosophy of the place-based approach, which is related to the development of collective social projects. The recognition of strategic social diagnostic practices is transversal, with new functions that imply methodological renewal in intervention, research, articulation, and mediation. However, there are uncertainties regarding the outcomes of the practice in terms of inclusion because a lack of financial resources appears to impose a concept of citizenship that is tailored to local needs, selective, and often for emergencies. Senses of more effective application are perceived in some municipalities. Nevertheless, there is an allusion to a social intervention that distances itself from traditional social action, both for its integrality and systematicity, as well as for its new methodological approach.

Critical views of the practice context underline scarce financing resources and the persistence of some centralized matters.

The funding [referring to financial subsidies to the municipalities] was not calculated based on the real dimension of the problem or the geographical dispersion of the municipality (...) Who ensures the transportation of the teams and the adaptation of infrastructures? (...) They decentralize the service and leave the granting component to social security (...) There is a danger of unsustainability here. (I10)

In addition, critical views on the complex mediation dynamics may converge to ethical and deontological dilemmas far beyond those narrated, even if they are unsure of how they may materialize, underlying the concern of national social action standards that are uniform across the country.

Social Security needs to commit itself to funding and standardization. The support of the national team to the municipal organization of the processes—schedules, service locations, information system—has been important. The social action system has to be national; there has to be a matrix and the possibility of transferring processes. (I9)

Table 5. Representation of practice in relation to the professional project.

Relevant Dimensions	Relevant Speeches
Methodological renewal	<p><i>In fact, the paradigm of social intervention has changed: diagnoses are now a regular practice, there is more strategic planning and more community intervention (...), a commitment to articulation (...).</i> FG1 [view that cuts across all FGs]</p> <p><i>[To do] proximity work [is] to read and interpret the territory, create answers to social problems (...), coordinate local social action.</i> FG2 [view that cuts across all FGs]</p> <p><i>There are more projects, and the projects are different [reconfiguration]. The social network resulted in regular community action and sensibility toward regular access, as well as the sustainability of the territories' development processes.</i> FG3 [view that cuts across all FGs]</p> <p><i>(...) An inter-collaborative work (...), an inter-institutional coordination of the structures [view transversal to all the FGs, although with differences in applicability in the contexts of practice]</i></p>
Acting in complementarity with universal policies	<p><i>(. . .) There is always that feeling that in the projects, the universal dimension can be compromised. . . But it is necessary to see that the territories are different; besides, the state has universal resources (. . .) and these territorialized policies are complementary. [Here, there is the notion of complementarity with social integration income policies.]</i> FG 1 [view that cuts across all FGs]</p>
Acting in line with ethical and deontological principles	<p><i>We have no ethical dilemmas when proposing the creation of territorial responses; today's projects are completely different from what they represented in the 1980s [referring to how regular and structured the action was depending on the project]. In addition, there is the complementarity with the active policies.</i> FG3 [view that cuts across all FGs]</p> <p><i>When resources are clearly insufficient, we must coordinate, mobilize and act ethically with greater intensity.</i> FG2</p> <p><i>Sometimes it is necessary to apply measures that go against (professional) ethical principles, either because the publics do not partake in the decision, or because they are emergencies or not adequate. . . but we have no other resources.</i> FG4</p> <p><i>I think that our dilemmas now [after the interview] are sharper. . . at the level of mediation and strategic analysis. After this conversation, I think we should give more value to the definition of strategic axes.</i> FG6</p>
Acting by project	<p><i>(. . .) We deal with scarce resources and we have some emergency action, but it will not be the most representative of the municipality (. . .). We need to be aware so that the emergency action is not dominant.</i> FG4 [an idea that runs across all FGs]</p> <p><i>We have projects in various areas: support for the aging, financial support, support for refugees [. . .]. We respond to the concrete problems of the territory. All these publics are beneficiaries of other universal policies, from retirement pensions to social benefits. . . it is just that the benefit amounts are insufficient.</i> FG5 [an idea that runs across all FGs]</p>

Adapted [5], pp. 84–186.

Since these contexts are diverse and present varying levels of social capital, it is urgent to consider local social action within the framework of contemporary definitions of municipal delegation of social action competences. This is especially true when the narrative of practice demonstrates that this place-based approach is affected more in some municipalities than in others and highlights the high level of bureaucracy that permeates the context of practice.

The articulation between individual and collective responses is complex. The planning and governance systems are not yet fully functional in all municipalities. They are assumed by technicians who also have full time main functions in other local institutions. (17)

The narrative underlines the need to transform institutional municipalities into functional public service spaces to implement social services. According to the professionals, it is essential that the central government assume a central role in providing social policies, which considers the allocation amount, as well as the implementation of forms of monitoring, the establishment of general principles, and the control of asymmetries in social protection. Evidence of constraints on practice points to the need to reinforce communication with universality and the assimilation of the new instrumentalities of practice (see Table 6).

Table 6. Conditionalties of the interaction with the universal system.

Interaction with the Universalist Standard of Social Rights	<p><i>A universal policy must guarantee its spheres of action [standard rights]. Technicians must understand the limitations of the measures, and the political context, the possible ways of mediation [for this interviewee, local action must be able to establish complementary projects]. I1</i></p> <p><i>The resources that may be allocated fall within the competencies of the central administration (...). This orientation toward governance... can go well and imply integrality, but it can also go wrong and translate to nonchalance and/or responsibility dilution. FG1 [an idea that runs across all FGs]</i></p> <p><i>The medicine cheque [refers to the selective practice of a project just for that municipality, which pays a subsidy to elderly people with low pensions for the purchase of medicines] for the elderly is a support granted by the municipality to compensate for the low retirement pensions. FG2</i></p> <p><i>[This refers to the lack of external funding] Sometimes we have to find projects or practices that follow a sense of urgency (...). I2</i></p> <p><i>(...) One mustn't forget that social policies cover a whole set of interventions that should remain under the central administration's purview if they are to be equal and fair. (...) There are gaps in the public protection system [the amount of social benefits] that must be compensated! I6</i></p>
Complex Instrumentalities	<p><i>Tighter access criteria were introduced into the policies, as were new modus operandi and much productivity ratio accounting; and we have too many cases assigned to each of us (...). The whole gear should be able to work; above all, we should actually guarantee people's access to social rights. I5</i></p> <p><i>There should be a more academic interpretation of the problems, one that helps to inform the collective's choices. We need to listen to people more and at the same time develop reasoned and flexible critical thinking [referring to the functioning of the partnership and the ability to gauge expectations]. FG3 [an idea that runs across all FGs]</i></p> <p><i>Social diagnoses, networking, participation, articulation of individual problems with decisions on local priorities, work plans... We are more familiar with instruments of rationality, but of course there are social networks whose territorialized work application is still peripheral. I3</i></p> <p><i>The reinforcement of municipalities' competencies was very important. I think that an integrated intervention at the municipal level, complementary to the universal social policy instruments, will make sense... Now this is complex and we are assigned many functions! [There are perceived hesitations and feelings of local pressure for answers.] FG5 [an idea that runs across all FGs]</i></p>

Adapted [5], pp. 81–85.

Nowadays, we witness a participatory social protection system that bases social action on shared action mechanisms with a strong public lean. According to the transformation into analysis, there is a local articulation of institutional actors as well as formal and communitarian forms of solidarity. However, there are constraints resulting from the mobilization of external funding and the complex work processes involving social workers, namely in the formulation of proposals and funding authorization procedures, which causes social workers to feel dissatisfied. These feelings are even more evident when social workers are asked about differences in practices in social services between neighboring municipalities, an idea that, in the eyes of experts, may jeopardize the common standard of social rights.

It seems to me that there will be a great diversity of practices... some social workers remain confined to the case... [However] there are certainly good practices in community intervention... In fact, the case work absorbs us (...) I think the Integrated intervention should be more internalized in institutions and social workers. (I1)

These speeches reveal feelings of accomplishment and assimilation of the proposal, at the same time that they convey a certain division in professional practice, in the allocation of resources, in the gears of local and multilevel governance, and in the integrated conception of the place-based approach. We verified, however, the existence of a place-based social action that contributes to identifying, solving, or alleviating social problems, which mobilizes the participation of local institutions and the community, whose perspective and deliberative management of the construction of strategic meanings for the territory lacks greater communication between neighboring territories.

In understanding what is lived by the professionals, we considered that the relationships built with the public and with other professionals in collaborative communication have triggered the construction of territorialities. It is important to highlight the commitment of the work teams at the level of strategic management of social action, which has entailed the renewal of planning and governance practices but also entails stronger organization of mediation mechanisms that cover multiple territorial levels. This view is obviously cross-cutting among the fifty-six experts covered by the study. The fifty-two social workers who were interviewed provided an accurate representation of their professional daily lives and work processes, which alternate between community intervention and individualized intervention. Due to their subjectivity, social workers highlight methodological transformations in practices and a greater predominance of territorialized practices while referring to the challenge of thinking about the attribution of social rights and access to municipal services/projects, reconciling the localized policy with other neighboring territories.

5. Discussion

The socio-political transformations of the past 30 years, particularly in relation to new social action orders, have spawned new practice contexts and social relations that call for social workers to adopt new paradigms of understanding society and for the university to adopt new matrix theories of social worker intervention. The results of this investigation suggest that municipal decentralization has a direct impact on the formation of new, more fragmented professional contexts, which are less universal but also more flexible in their potential to develop local response processes. On the one hand, they indicate an increase in local autonomy in decision-making regarding strategic guidelines and a continuation of subsidiarity in social action based on complementarities with national social policies. On the other hand, they highlight the need to rethink the allocation of the state and its adaptability to financial crisis scenarios, as well as safeguard a standard of action that does not compromise equity and cohesion among populations of different municipalities.

In general, professionals attributed a positive assessment to the municipal decentralization of social functions, highlighting the achievement of the democratic dimension of structures, given the relative autonomy of the local scale to define courses of social action. However, social workers emphasize the need to rethink the dimensions that condition the practice: the financial dimension of the municipal delegation, given the rigidity of the state allocation (annual), which can be insufficient in scenarios of financial crisis and higher demand for support services, as well as the administrative dimension characterized by multiple functions, challenges, and working methods assigned to the local sphere, often accused of being complex in terms of multilevel governance, specifically in the construction of similar accesses between nearby municipalities.

Once again, we return to the research question: what can we learn from professional perspectives on the context of social functions in order to envision forms of place-based standardization of municipal social action?

Social workers believe that the new municipal practice contexts give place-based social work greater relevance as it promotes community innovation practices but faces

challenges with multilevel strategic design as well as standardization and universality at new social services. Some of the new services currently take the form of municipal social projects and operate in areas as dispersed and complex as aging, poverty, gender differences, migrations, sociocultural inequalities, and addictive consumption, depending on the specificities territorial. Critical social theory is, therefore, relevant and prevalent in current practice, but research shows that it will be necessary to guarantee that professionals have a greater capacity to comprehend and deal with the complexities of contemporary social reality.

Several authors underline a “new pragmatism, focused on the elaboration of contextual proposals (...)” [23] (p. 13), which invites us to interpret the practical problems that professionals and communities face within the framework of the rights and social protection framework in place. The community approach is becoming a priority for social work. On the one hand, the economic crisis has once again highlighted the need for us to group together and recover the ability to link up and act collectively; on the other hand, the new space of sociability that has been generated from social networks, such as the internet, is driving new designs for social intervention” [25] (p. 42).

It is critical to enhance the development of action logics that are directed towards action-research work with a place-based approach, focusing on problem analysis, collaborative intervention, and results in terms of well-being and quality of life. Social work must be linked to mediation, dialectical, and ethical-political thinking.

The analysis of the social problem must go beyond a purely theoretical comprehension of the issue and the rights framework in the society under consideration. To envision innovation in local response, it is required to understand the problem and highlight territorial determinants of service supply and demand, response indicators, and subjectivities in how the problem is felt. Following the professional identity, it is important to include in the matrix of practices the response to manifestations of inequalities, from economic and social to territorial, class, gender, or racial. At this level, the narrative reveals weaknesses in political mediation and leaves evidence of a social service absorbed in social control procedures.

Consistent with the professional identity, it is the social worker’s responsibility to mediate for social and human rights, which, in the current practice context, should result in effective localized practices of social inclusion. In this sense, mobilizing universal protection programs as well as local and regional place-based policies is critical. At this point, professionals started to show signs of discomfort, evoking the financial constraints that often confront municipal practice with emergency action. The literature confirms this professional concern; financial pressures often determine that local social action opts for emergency assistance response to support local populations [5,23,36]. Arguing that it is essential to strengthen the critical traditions of social work, whose genesis is found in the 1960s and were explicitly diffused in the 1990s, particularly in the literature from Canada and Australia [37] (pp. 123–124), this context of practice challenges social workers even more to interpret the true causes of people’s problems, as highlighted by Howe on unfair social structures and inequality in the distribution of power and resources [38].

Within the framework of contemporary political, economic, and social contexts of scarce resources, the practice implies a critical, ethical-political, theoretical-scientific, technical-operational, and humanist-relational professional positioning that equates the response and simultaneously triggers a thorough knowledge of the possibilities and of the limits of universal policies that consider new products of social action and mobilizes informal, collaborative, public and community solidarity systems.

In view of the collected data, we must ask ourselves if the inability of social workers to articulate territoriality and mediation is due to academic training or to the local authorities and partnerships where social action is carried out. It is crucial that the academy strengthen training and reflection on the function of the state and the potential of the welfare system, particularly with regard to political mediation.

The narratives suggest the need to reinforce political mediation to a standard of social rights and access to new place-based services.

The literature has confirmed that the social control of inequalities implies a structural approach and empowerment of the public. Additionally, it also considers that structural practice as the only option limits the practice's radical potential and exposes professionals to immoral ambiguity [4,39,40].

Professional views enable triggering the urge to deepen both the critical perspective in the interpretation of social accesses and the operative capacity, mobilizing new methodologies of strategic conception, community innovation, and partnership work capable of reconciling the specific response with access's effectiveness and standardization. It will be important to ensure that the territorialized social service is oriented towards a dynamic concept of equality, aligning the mediation of access to rights with the new theoretical frameworks of citizenship; development; and sustainability and implementing the response at the interface between the welfare state, the welfare community, and the generational and family providence.

In the context of social action system transformation, superficial analysis and naive practice are not acceptable, mainly because they can easily lead to a practice subverted by local interests [22]. According to several authors [11,18,39], it is important for social work to develop a renewed spirit of mission, promoting the interface between the political and the technical without neglecting the profession's propositional responsibility in the design of policy measures and in progressive post-structuralist practice.

Another striking piece of evidence points to the need to deepen networking between municipalities in the same region and multilevel governance, with a view to reconciling the place-based response with the standardization of access. It will be crucial to strengthen professionals' ability to articulate local, regional, and national objectives and to carry out contextualized inter-territorial interpretations attentive to the comparison of human rights, modalities, and social benefits of the state between neighboring territories.

6. Conclusions

The socio-political transformations of the last 30 years discussed throughout this paper reveal reforms in the ordering of social action, which brought a new rationality to the functions of municipal social work. It is true that professional views on municipal social action allow us to identify models of place-based aligned with the classic perspectives of community social work. The evidence reveals that it is essential to reinforce the reflective thinking of professionals, promote greater mastery of systemic and ecological theories and post-structuralist criticism, as well as to build common matrixes of territorialized social work at the municipal level.

Despite the multiplicity of positive factors that run through the decentralization discourse, within the framework of the complexities that cross contemporary work, there is evidence of ambiguities that the functionality of multilevel governance, collaborative innovation, and the sharing of answers.

Professional participation in municipal partnerships promoted methodological renewal and improved the potential for local-based approaches to be created and recreated. This action increasingly takes place in an environment of collaborative work that implies multilevel governance with a view to political mediation in a network between municipalities in the same region. According to the new theoretical frameworks of citizenship, development, and sustainability, it is imperative to create the conditions for greater professional participation in multilevel partnerships and to coordinate mediation across municipalities.

Although this article only uses data from the northern region of Portugal to examine how decentralized social action contexts are perceived, particularly how they interact with social work practices, the findings can be generalized to other national and international contexts, in part because in Portugal, the process of municipal decentralization is nationwide and more countries have registered this reform of social action structures and teams. The substantial transfer of powers to local authorities, particularly in areas of social policy, forces us to engage in the exercise of reflective standardization and multilevel communication. Municipalities frequently have their own agendas and, in many cases, a great

innovative capacity, which raises the possibility of social rights asymmetries. Therefore, it is essential that the practice of place-based be integrated into a multilevel government strategy and inter-institutional relations that promote greater territorial cohesion.

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