

PUBLIC POLICY

1. Public policies in the context of a changing welfare State

Public policies aimed at vulnerable and socially marginalised people, at socially excluded groups, have gone through significant changes in the past couple of decades. Whatever the actual content of these policies, they are always dependent on the ways in which the different powers look at these phenomena and identify the processes and mechanisms underlying them – ultimately, they are ideological issues.

If, as a society, we acknowledge the existence of excluded individuals, groups and territories, we are also acknowledging that there is a number of mechanisms placing those individuals, groups and territories in hardship. Are these mechanisms of an individual or a social nature? Are the great difficulties experienced by some individuals due to their personal characteristics, which would fit poorly to social demands? Or is it the case that such demands end up relegating individuals with less social, academic and professional capital?

These questions are grounded on quite different understandings of the world. In their turn, these different world views form the basis of different political views, and respective policies. They oscillate between a mindset of compassion, as mentioned by Didier Fassin (2001), and the ambition to control risk, the priority of which is to neutralise the danger that such marginalised individuals, groups and territories are presumed to represent (in line with the longstanding association of drug users, homeless people, and illegal immigrants to disorder and criminality).

The edification of the Welfare State, a trademark of European policies for several decades, led to interventions in the mechanisms that were identified as producing relegation and disintegration. One of the most important mechanisms was work – meaning: employment – and the possibility of access to a minimum guaranteed income that would enable all individuals to be integrated in the realm of consumption. Several European countries introduced this type of policy from the 80's onwards.

However, in the last few decades, the policies typical of Welfare States have been increasingly questioned and criticised. They have been charged with being paternalistic, with breeding dependency in those who benefit from them, and ultimately of being ineffective. This debate has gained momentum with the current European crisis, as States are under pressure to cut public expenditure, something that may have direct consequences for social intervention with those who are most vulnerable.

In short, public policies aimed at vulnerable and marginalised groups have gone through important transformations. Some argue that we are moving away from a Social Welfare State to a Securitarian State, in which the main goal is controlling the dangerousness of such groups. According to Loic Wacquant (2009), the USA are moving from a Welfare State to a Penal, Penitentiary State. In Robert Castel's (2003) formulation, Europe is moving towards a State of Social Insecurity; in other words, going from Social Security to Civil Safety.

In Europe, then, there is not an abrupt transition from the State's Welfare form to its Penal form. Rather, there is a progressive, parallel evolution, which both reinforces support to those most

vulnerable and measures aimed at containing the disorders they are held responsible for (e.g., the multiplication of support programmes and harm reduction policies targeted at drug users, which go together with the criminalisation of begging and loitering, as well as the occupation of critical territories by anti-riots police).

2. Work programmes with marginalised and vulnerable groups

Different EU Member States have different realities in what regards to work integration programmes and WISEs. While the situation differs among countries, the current socioeconomic crisis can bring about similar trends such as the following:

- a set back of the State, aggravated by the socioeconomic crisis
- severe funding cuts in established programmes and programme reforms
- a decentralisation of responsibilities (shift from central to local governments accompanied by a decrease in the budget available)
- the attribution of a growing responsibility to individuals for supporting themselves

Work integration programmes, to be sure, are very much influenced by this context of public policy, namely in terms of:

- funding opportunities to develop work integration programmes
- political priorities that affect the action of NGOs
- welfare and health regimes supporting individuals from target groups

Specifically, public policy affects work integration programmes in the following manners:

- for those who rely in public funding, the target groups and intervention priorities may shift according to government orientations - "follow the funding"
- transition from benefits to work depends on welfare programmes design (and its relation with the dynamics of the labour market)
- emphasis on local delivery (from central to local authorities) is an opportunity to have control over own activities and budget but it also carries a negative aspect: it is devolving power but no money or resources to perform

Also, the benefit trap is perhaps more engaging than ever, as the requirements for receiving social benefits can create a burden instead of supporting people to engage in work experiences. Also, with a very unstable labour market welfare, benefits might seem preferable to work (a temporary job in times of high unemployment does not guarantee any stability). Also, wage levels may not be sufficiently attractive to pull people from receiving unemployment benefits into WIPs. It may happen that target group participants do not recognise the wider importance of training and work experiences and might decide not to join the programme, based mostly on a lack of material

incentives. Of course, the benefit trap poses problems for developing autonomy, as benefits are in some cases immediately cut and do not facilitate a gradual transition to autonomy.

As a result, people from marginalised groups might be in a weaker position due to programme reform in times of increased unemployment. Also, the jargon of inclusion and participation is being reframed and participation is becoming a term for coercion and compulsory measures - very often used to push vulnerable groups into unpaid work integration programmes.

Therefore, critical challenges emerge, and organisations that work with and for the vulnerable and marginalised have to be proactive and strategic in responding to the current changes in public policy. There is less public money available, so new working methods should be developed.

It is important to overcome the set back of public policies and the legal gap that does not recognise or support work integration programmes, and particularly social enterprises.

References

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