

CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE SOCIAL ASSISTANCE POLICIES: SOME PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

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Toate politicile se bazează pe un șir de principii, care constituie fundamentul în baza căruia se elaborează o politică. O politică bună este construită pe un fundament puternic. Spre deosebire de temelia statică a unei case, fundamentul unei politici este dinamic, aflat într-un mediu dinamic. În acest articol se abordează unele condiții majore necesare pentru existența unei politici eficiente în asistența socială.

O societate civilă activă și cu inițiativă, care este luată în serios de guvern, un guvern care onorează principiile subsidiarității, mecanisme de coordonare funcționabile, existența instituțiilor de instruire profesională, actorii activi politici și sociali implicați, discuții publice asupra cheltuielilor și necesitatea politicilor eficiente de armonizare și coordonare sunt elucidate de către autor ca fiind unele dintre cele mai importante pre-condiții pentru o politică socială eficientă în asistența socială.

In this short article I will discuss some major conditions for an effective welfare and social assistance policy. My contribution to this discussion is based on personal observations in The Netherlands as well as in the Caribbean and Eastern Europe. All policies are based on a number of principles or assumptions that constitute the foundation on which the policy is built. A good policy is built on a strong foundation. Unlike the foundation of a static house, the foundation of a dynamic policy that is carried out in a dynamic environment needs to be discussed, assessed and adapted continuously.

What do we mean by social policies? They contain principles and guidelines for the improvement, maintenance or creation of living conditions that should lead to *inclusion* of all citizens. More concretely social policies aim to improve human welfare (mostly financially) and wellbeing (mostly mental). The two are interrelated. Of course, social policies should be especially be directed to the most vulnerable in society, as well as to those who tend to be excluded.

It seems to me there are 3 major welfare policy principles:

1. The first one is based on the idea that citizens will naturally help one another if they feel they should do so. The government should not interfere in the lives of people and take over somebody's personal responsibility of 'being'. If people desire or feel called to help one another: great. If others want to financially support those who help other, this is also great, but it is not the state's responsibility. All types of free market concepts still plead for moving into this direction as much as possible. However, Bismarck in late 19th century Germany and Beveridge in mid 20th century England have strongly argued for a proactive state in the area of welfare. Both rightfully put forward this is in the interest of all citizens. Exclusion always creates tension and conflict and is blocking the development of human capacity which is to the detriment of the entire society.

2. In the second model the state assumes primary responsibility for the welfare of its citizens. In theory this responsibility is comprehensive and there is no limit to state intervention. Surely in this model the state creates and maintains a „safety net” of minimum standards of varying forms of welfare and wellbeing. The state is also responsible for human (capacity) development. And what is more, state institutions will implement the state policies. This model has been tried out in most socialist-centralist countries, past and present. The flaws are obvious and in practice the model has proved again and again to be ineffective. The social democratic version of the model as developed in Sweden functioned quite well, but here the model is not applied rigidly and is combined with a strong democratic practice.

3. The third model is a mix. In many „welfare states” in continental Europe, welfare is provided by a combination of independent, voluntary and government services. The provider of benefits and services may be a department of the central or local government, a state-sponsored agency, a private corporation, a charity or another form of non-profit organisation. I will argue that this 'mix' is relatively easy to develop, to maintain and to adapt if something is not functioning well. In practice this mixed model can be handled and utilised effectively.

In this article I want to point to some personal observations that I collected during some 30 years of studying and teaching welfare systems. My observations strongly support the above mentioned 3rd model.

Let me start with a personal experience that contains all the elements needed to reflect on the nature of a healthy foundation for a welfare system according to model 3.

Since my student years I worked as a volunteer and later as a board member for a social service centre in the Red Light District of Amsterdam, strangely called OZ100. The centre offers all sorts of services, varying from medical to juridical to financial and socio/psychological services to people living and working in the this district. Mostly prostitutes. The centre is funded by the main Amsterdam churches, Roman Catholic and Protestant, as well as individual donors. In fact the churches took the initiative and established the centre. Apart from our centre the Salvation Army is also operating a service centre, called 'goodwill centre', but here the client must also listen to preaching. The municipal government too is offering social services, but very few people living in the district make use of these services as they are afraid the government will obtain information regarding their legal status or conduct. So most people turn to OZ100 or the Salvation Army. During the 70'ies of the last century the Red Light district started to attract significantly more visitors from all over the world. The pimps and clubs were forced to make extra efforts to find ladies to work in the 'industry'. So a high number of good-looking and charming 'lover boys' were hired to attract ladies from countries like Kenya, Dominican Republic, Thailand, Moldova and others, offering partners, marriages and great jobs with great salaries as well as a visa. The number of naive young ladies is high all over the world, so they succeeded remarkably well. Once in Holland they lost their naivety within a couple of days. Strongly intimidated they did not dare to ask for any help and quickly found themselves half naked behind the windows of the streets in our district. In the late 70'ies the situation in the district got out of control. On top of the increase of prostitution, drugs were offered at any corner of the street, by dealers who do not behave particularly decently. Our centre with a low threshold was flooded by all sorts of victims. We could not cope with the staff of volunteers and the few professional social workers. Also some volunteers did not dare to enter the district any more.

Unexpectedly we were approached by the social service department of the municipal government. In fact it should not have taken us by surprise for the central government had already adopted a policy to make social funds available to local governments to be used to fund local initiatives for welfare and assistance. Anyway they wanted a discussion with OZ100 and in this discussion it turned out they realized they were unable to meet the needs of people living in this district. In stead of improving and developing their own service department they suggested they provide us with additional funds to extend our services. Great. 'But we want to put some conditions' so they told us. Which conditions? He came up with 3:

1. The social assistance you offer must be delivered only by professionally trained social workers. Perfect. You provide us the funds and we will recruit more professionals. That was an easy deal. IN fact we were very happy with this part of the deal, for we might thus be able to substantially improve the quality of our service. We could hire more professionals and provide supervision as well.

2. You must regularly report by means of facts and figures. OK, we also quickly agreed. And, much later, when we first had to write a report, we discovered that reporting is an excellent tool for internal assessment, evaluation and reflection. Writing a report means that you have to give explanations why you did things in a particular way or why something did not go according to expectations, which are questions that spark reflection, which is the beginning of improvement.

3. And.....I remember the Amsterdam civil servant hesitating and I also remember I realized instantaneously what was going to be put forward as the next condition..... „We also want insight in your clientele”. Ah....It appeared they wanted information about the clients of the centre. They needed it and the police needed it....'We are afraid we are losing control, you see', so he admitted.

The third condition became the subject of a lengthy and difficult discussion. We, from our part, could not fulfill that condition. Partly because we knew some of the Amsterdam police was co-operating with the sex industry. (To my surprise the civil servant did not make any effort to deny this rather awkward fact.) And partly because very few people would approach us for help once it was known we were co-operating with the police and conveying information to the city hall or police. So we put forward that social services in areas like ours one need to be absolutely independent from any interference from the state in order to be effective. The civil servant on the other hand insisted that the government needed information in order to keep matters under control.

Our director responded furiously and confronted him with the big question why the government and the police are not doing more to chase up these lover boys who lure ladies to Holland with beautiful promises in order to exploit them. They are causing the misery that we are supposed to deal with. And why don't you clean up the police force. This is your duty. The painful point was made.

To cut a long story short, this meeting marked the beginning of a change in the municipal government's social policy. From then on the city decided to hire NGO's to carry out social services that they were unable to carry out effectively. We received funds, we had to make sure we worked with professionals, we had to report in a general way, but we did not need to convey personal information of clients to state institutions. However, over the years this remained a sensitive area. The municipal government and the police could never resist the temptation to try to get some information from us and many times they accused us from poor co-operation. Today, in 2009, the situation is still exactly the same. However there were several moments that the municipal government was about to cut its subsidies. Each time it was finally decided by the government to continue to grant subsidies because (apart from our arguments) the public in Amsterdam would be very displeased and even upset. We noticed the public was interested, concerned and willing to express their indignation if the municipal government would leave us to ourselves. At one scary stage the Catholic bishop intervened and phoned the mayor to tell him withdrawing subsidy would be unwise and would create a very unhealthy situation. Civil society surely was a partner in the process and a very helpful one indeed.

What lessons can we learn regarding conditions?

1. An active civic society that takes initiatives and is creatively used by the government

A government is a government and is neither an engineering company nor a social service institution. Its duty is to protect, control, facilitate, support, stimulate in all different areas of life and society, as well as (re)distribute wealth and make sure people and groups of people will be able to develop themselves. When it comes to the specifics of engineering, education, medical service, social assistance or whatever, governments have proved to be unable to produce any quality or effectiveness. Either the government establishes the fact that society is providing such services itself and leaves it like that, or it establishes the fact that society is not providing it sufficiently and starts providing funds and other stimuli to further the development of the desired services. Plainly, I do not believe civil servants can offer effective social assistance, or to put it the other way round, I do not believe that a professional social worker will perform professionally within the framework of the civil service. Social assistance needs a very specific organizational framework. Like medical, educational, cultural and lots of other services also need specific frameworks and environments. Governments should be wise and acknowledge it. Nevertheless, out of a sense of responsibility or a sense of political expediency government are easily tempted to carry out such services themselves and turn to model 2.

In my entire career as a sociologist of welfare policies I always and everywhere had to draw the conclusion that governments do better to source out the implementation of welfare programs. Whether it concerns a social assistance service in the Amsterdam Red Light District, or an Institute for Autistic children, or a Rehabilitation program for prisoners or whatever, evaluation studies consistently conclude that non-governmental organization perform better more efficiently.

Civic society may also take creative initiatives. The Methodist movement in England excelled in taking initiatives as early as the 18th century and can still be considered an inspiring model.

2. A live civic society discourse that is taken seriously by the government

I am not denying that there are lots of well-informed civil servants and policy officers who do a good job in developing welfare and social assistance policies. However, one excellent expert or a group of very well-informed civil servants who embark on writing a great policy paper, are by definition biased and can still benefit from public feed back as well as public input. They may also err and need to be open for correction. Moreover, there are few policies that work which are not enjoying the support of the public. Sure, the government may invest in PR and promote its excellent or less excellent policies, but this is so much easier if the public has a sense of ownership, and feels it was and is somehow involved in the development of policies or is able to express its opinion about priorities, problems and objectives.

Let me put it differently, social assistance should be a mutual concern of all citizens. If the word 'society' (*societas* in Latin) has any meaning at all it should mean: a group of people, citizens, companions who somehow care for one another and who engage themselves in patterns of mutual behavior. Governments are expressions of society and vice versa governments have an impact on society. This mutuality should come to an expression in policy debates, both in the formation phase and in the implementation phase. Without a healthy civic society discourse governments easily lose touch with daily life and the concerns of the public they are supposed to serve.

3. A government that honors the principle of subsidiarity

The next condition follows immediately. The more responsibility can be given to the lower levels of government (municipal government) the easier public discourse can be incorporated in governmental decision making. This is known as the principle of subsidiarity. It cannot be expected from the central government in The Hague to have a clear picture of the situation in the Red Light District in Amsterdam nor that it is particularly sensitive to the needs and requests of the people living there. The Amsterdam municipality obviously is much closer to the situation. And what is more, it is also closer to the Amsterdam public discourse. It can hardly afford to deny the discourse.

In more recent years local governments have also adopted the habit of involving the public in formulating, assessing and adapting local policies, especially social policies. By doing this the entire framework of social assistance and welfare arrangements become a matter of mutual concern, of citizens and civil servants.

The principle of subsidiarity must be taken as it was originally formulated: delegate as much as possible as long as it improves quality. If lower levels of government get too small to provide, develop or assess services, they should not be charged with it. In that case it is, for instance, wiser to charge a number of local governments with a particular service together. One small village cannot be expected to develop an effective social policy framework, nor may a local NGO be in the position to provide the professional expertise needed to assist a particular category of people. Here combined efforts by a group of neighboring villages should be welcomed.

4. Mechanisms for coordination are in place

And the fourth condition follows as well. Assistance projects need to be coordinated and harmonized. First overlapping must be avoided. Second neglect of a area of need must be avoided. And thirdly it should not happen that many donors support one particular project, ignoring others that equally need financial support. Donors, whether churches, individuals, international funds, companies or governmental funds tend to have their darlings. Projects with street children quickly enjoy the attention of donors.

Local governments should keep this in mind and direct their funds to the neglected areas.

In countries that are highly dependant on external donors, coordination needs ample attention. For these donors often have a very poor understanding of the local situation and all too often support overlapping projects or organizations. In some Caribbean countries, like Jamaica, a local coordinating fund is created to coordinate disbursements and wisely use the money that comes from internal and external donors. Donor organizations are often happy. Now they do not need to make assessments and choices themselves. That they entrust to the local coordinating fund. And so does the government. Usually the government has a strong say in the organization of the coordinating fund.

Otherwise municipalities may also establish a local social assistance council that advises the local government on coordination.

5. Existence of professional training institutes

Social workers need to have a sound professional background, regular training and supervision. I would not like to downgrade impressive attempts made by volunteers to provide social assistance to those in need. In fact I myself have served as a volunteer during practically all me adult life and I stimulate others to do so as well. At the same time I believe professionals are needed to support non-professional volunteers and of course to carry out the more complicated parts of the work.

Professional training for social work originated in the USA. Helen Perlman's 'Social Casework' from 1957 marked a milestone in training of social workers. In a both systematic and imaginative way it stimulated continuous reflection on the process of casework, stimulating its practical progress. Generations of social workers in England, Holland and Scandinavia used it as a kind of bible in their profession. It provided the

social worker a professional foundation different from the psychologist, pedagogue or andragogue. Suddenly it became clear: this is what social work is all about. A host of scholars, professors and trainers in the area of social work consciously or unconsciously are indebted to Perlman. And I guess Carl Rogers' work on 'non-directive counseling', a method based on phenomenology, can be considered the second milestone in the professionalisation of social work. His impact on most of the methods of social work developed in the early stages of the profession is of equal importance. Perlman taught to be responsibly practical. Rogers to be practically responsible to the needs of the client. Both of them put the client firmly in the centre of the process, and defined the role of the professional as a facilitator.

Schools of social work in the countries mentioned above all developed themselves from these milestones onward.

Having taught myself at a post graduate college for social workers for a long period of time (as a sociologist and policy specialist though) I still cannot perceive of any professional training that is not somehow building forth on Perlman and Rogers.

Basic training up to a Masters degree is necessary but not enough. Young professional workers are confronted with the complicated miseries of life and the challenge to help people, often much older, who are deeply hurt and damaged or who are severely disabled to find a way to development in spite of their condition. Young professionals need coaching as well as regular post graduate training. Different from an engineer or a medical doctor, the effectiveness of professional service is also strongly dependant on performance as a *person*. Therefore the development of the person of the social worker needs ample attention and if the need for permanent education is basic for any profession, this is particularly the case with social workers as well as any other 'agogical' professions.

By way of conclusion, an adequate governmental educational policy for higher education is not only needed to stimulate economic development, technological research or medical quality service, it is also needed to provide quality social assistance.

6. Committed people

Of all the listed conditions this seems to be the most difficult one to deal with from a governmental point of view. You can take action and develop a workable organizational structure and you can see to it that some good faculties for the education of professional social workers get established, but how to see to it that people have the right motivation and commitment to carry out the work? Motivation and commitment cannot be 'engineered'.

During many centuries of European history the monasteries served as centres for social welfare and assistance. Round 1600 around 20 monasteries were established in the Red Light district of Amsterdam, originally the Harbour district, to care for prostitutes and sailors who got into trouble. Lots of highly committed nuns were actively involved in the practice of social work. In the 18th century John Wesley the founder of the Methodist movement in England, noting the dire conditions of the working force during the early years of the industrial revolution, developed a whole range of social assistance programs, privately funded. Members of the churches cared for the sick, provided medicine, helped alcoholics to get rid of their addiction, offered assistance to unemployed and so on. In the middle of the 19th century the Protestant revival moment likewise mobilized the churches and individual members to care for the poor. Famous was, and still is, the work of Heldring who established the houses for unmarried mothers. And so was the rehabilitation work for ex-prisoners of the Salvation Army.

After the Second World War the need was felt to offer training to the thousands committed volunteers. Some private schools were established, funded by churches. When Western European governments were attempting to establish a 'welfare state', naturally the question was asked how social assistance programs should be like and who should carry out such programs. It often became a mix of governmental 'neutral' institutions and traditional Roman Catholic and Protestant institutions. The latter sometimes received governmental funding, but on the condition that the social workers had the right professional background. As from the 50's a professional tradition got established, including professional schools and methodology.

As a first result the former, spiritually inspired volunteer movements were looked down upon and seen as an obstacle to professional development. Neutral professionalism was stressed. Institutions like OZ100 were not considered eligible for any governmental funding. However, evaluation studies soon provided evidence

that the 'neutral governmental institutions' were not half as effective as the traditional ones. Discussions got heated. At least in The Netherlands it was slowly admitted that both are needed.

A close reading of the above mentioned works by Perlman and Rogers made it abundantly clear: the *person* of the social worker has an effect on the process of assistance. The client must feel accepted and respected. Two attitudes are counterproductive. One is the deliberately neutral attitude which in fact invokes a feeling on the part of the client that he is an object to be treated. The opposite one is the moralistic attitude that is characteristic of many forms of traditional social assistance. The result is the same. The client feels he is reduced to an object of (moral) change. The real professional on the other hand, knows how to keep the balance: commitment to the client as a person and just because he is committed to him as a person, he will respect his freedom and refrain from any type of 'manipulation', thus creating conditions for change. The balance is as delicate as it is crucial. This was (part of) the message of Rogers' 'client centered' approach.

That means that both committed and well-educated professional social workers are needed.

7. Public discussion on spending

Basically there are 2 ways, one pointed out by Bismarck and the other by Beveridge. Bismarck's model is based on insurance schemes, whereas the Beveridge model is based on taxation. In times of relative equality the Bismarck model has a number of advantages. Mostly because it seems fair in the eyes of the public: I pay insurance and if something happens I get help and I deserve to get help because I paid for it. But it does not lead to any sort of redistribution of income, which means that in times of growing inequality and growing problems it tends to become too expensive. The Beveridge model seems better equipped to keep going in times of financial crisis and it lowers income differences and supports societal solidarity. But public acceptance can be problematic. In practice most countries apply a mix here as well.

Usually there are some additional ways of funding. In some countries civic society is raising significant additional money for welfare institutions, like OZ100. In other, less affluent countries, external donors contribute to welfare arrangements.

Both Bismarck and Beveridge have strongly argued that a well-organised social assistance program is a must for any healthy society and is in everybody's interest. It supports the development of human capacities, it eases tension in society and it realizes basic humanitarian solidarity. During the last 20 years we witness a growing inequality and a growing resistance against expensive welfare arrangements. Contemporary scholars like Giddens and Rawls have revived that discussion in Britain and the USA, countries which are both very rich. In such countries the problem is really not a lack of funds, but a lack of solidarity, as well as a lack of insight in what will happen if some categories of people get systematically excluded. In these countries the condition is not the availability of financial means but the willingness to participate in societal dialogue about the right use of available means. The happy rich few are seldom prepared to participate.

Lots of other much poorer countries however have a happy rich few as well. Here it is even more important that they participate in that discussion and start realizing that measures of solidarity geared to inclusion of vulnerable categories of the population need to be taken. The problem is that the average citizen is expecting the government to tackle the problem and make the rich pay. However, as long as citizens remain silent, governments tend to do nothing. So the conclusion is that citizens should speak up and demand at least a modest social assistance scheme and put pressure on the government. Vice versa good governance means being prepared to face sensitive issues. Moreover, good governance is inclusive governance. In other words, from the side of the government there must be a political will to spend on social assistance. In the end I believe this is the most basic of all listed conditions.

8. Need for sound policies and strategies: priorities, harmonization and coordination

Conditions mentioned above need to be worked out in sound policies. Social policies should aim to *include* citizens and be directed to meet human the needs for personal development and education, work, health, housing and social security. Before developing policies an analysis of the (lack of) welfare situation and the formulation of problems is essential. Different people and groups of people have different problems and different interpretation of problems. Adequate problem identification and formulation cannot just be done by a governmental actor. It must be the result of a public dialogue with stakeholders involved.

In order to develop an adequate social assistance framework a number of crucial choices have to be made. Not everything that is desirable can be done. Choices have to be made due to limited funds, limited availability of people and limited organization capacity. Here the public discourse must again be taken into account. Next a 'critical path' should be worked out. Which parts of the policy need to be put into practice first and which second?

Choices have to be made regarding out-sourcing of work and cooperation with NGO's as well as conditions of cooperation. What mix is suitable? Regular consultation with different institutions working in the same area will be needed to avoid overlap and conflict. Local and national councils of welfare need to be established. Monitoring and regular evaluation are needed. And countries which are still struggling to develop a system of social assistance much attention must be given to the schooling of professional workers and providing support to relatively new NGO's and governmental institutions which get charged with the carrying out of part of the work.

Crucial is also a 'social warning system' that provides the government with information regarding vulnerable and problematic groups of people. Schools, police, medical services and so on need to be cooperating in the social warning system and provide information discretely. The information must then be analyzed and translated into new policies. This also requires training, experimenting and evaluation.

At the same time the public needs to be informed and potential clients need to know what to expect and what not to expect. And what is more, they need to be consulted as to how they perceive situations and problems. The more citizens feel they are part of the policy process (which is in itself a way of inclusion) the stronger the social support basis is for the implementation of the policy and the more relevant and effective it is.

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