

Social Cohesion and Development

Vol 15, No 1 (2020)

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doi: [10.12681/scad.25018](https://doi.org/10.12681/scad.25018)

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To cite this article:

Skamnakis, C., & Kostas, A. (2020). Local social policies: Between specialization and fragmentation. *Social Cohesion and Development*, 15(1), 5–9. <https://doi.org/10.12681/scad.25018>

Local social policies: Between specialization and fragmentation

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In a world where insecurities mount and mechanisms to counteract tensions and resolve social problems fail to effectively meet challenges of the present, the need to reflect on accomplishments of the recent past might function as stimulus for fruitful dialogue. Indeed, this is the ambition of the issue at hand, which provides an opportunity to think critically over aspects for reinforcing social coherence. For that matter, the local dimension of social policies lies in the centre of attention, emerging as a dynamic field of research which shows the crucial changes in the mechanisms of social protection and development. Arising elements are those which shape the current level of social provision and account for the creation of social (in-) security. The main question concerns the content and orientation of social policy, its role in the social evolution process as well as its effect on social inequalities and ultimately on interpersonal relations and social stratification. This is the key purpose of the study and analysis of social policies, the scope of which is every time defined by relevant justifications (Sakellaropoulos, 2019).

The present issue combines contributions from different aspects which converge in their starting point of thought. The focused, local dimension of each intervention is discernible to a different degree of intensity in its relationship to the wider socio-economic environment and in the policies expanding beyond national boundaries, which also form the research context of the case studies. Viewed separately, these references cast light on aspects of social policy transformation in a setting of intense social friction and weak social protection mechanisms.

On the one hand, providing for the most rudimentary means of survival is considered to be a critical parameter of any social policy. It constitutes both a direct measure and a final obstacle to intercept the menace of social exclusion and to battle the hazard of community distancing for people and groups which lack the privilege of material supplies. Still, it cannot suffice for the entirety of a social welfare system. In fact, the very content of this safety net defines the system orientation. Also, it constitutes per se an element of identity for the social policy and as such it is analyzed in the respective studies. On the other hand, employment accessibility as a vehicle for social development as well as the mechanisms which support and regulate work and financial multiplication both define employees' participation in the world of today. The relevant studies of the current issue approach this particular subject matter multidimensionally, by providing a supplementary description of the conditions so that employment accessibility, as well as, the terms of participation meet the demand for social cohesion. After all, interventions on local scale do not comprise unified and independent systems. On the contrary, they form part of wider mechanisms which, in turn, are prescribed by the wider environment, interacting with one another. Finally, this aspect is underscored by a study of networks which are developed locally among institutional authorities and highlight the importance of establishing communication channels.

The local dimension of social protection creates an open spectrum of thought around social policy. The unanimous position against the disruption of the traditional social state instigates the initial point of discussion. The weakening of the national welfare state as it had been traditionally constructed in post-war Europe fuels local empowerment against generalized statutory

regulations for the major part of the country. This procedure, however, might put at risk the unity of regulations, the outcome of interventions, and finally create conditions for the reproduction of inequalities, rendering them place-specific. For this reason, the framework established by the government seems to guarantee for the settlement of this inexpediency (Andreotti and Mingione, 2014; Alexandru & Johansson, 2106).

By referring to local level practices, we should distinguish those with a real local reference point and among these the ones whose implementation is particularly accredited to the local authorities (Loughlin, et.al, 2010; Jonh, 2001). More specifically, this area of action mainly relies on local self-sufficiency that is the institutional and financial potential of local authorities to design and implement interventions within the designated area of their jurisdiction. In terms of social policy, it is taken for granted that the way in which these interventions “communicate” with broader regulations of the social protection system, be it supportive or potentially impeding, is also crucial.

The spatially defined interventions are likely to showcase the practical nature of control and resources allocation by the respective local communities. This parameter consists of two axes of concern, the first relating to the terms and conditions of the providers mixture, that is the plurality of institutions which contribute to social protection and to the final composure of the welfare mixture (Powel, 2019). The second axis is prescribed by the first, specializing particularly in the planning and organization mechanisms of the mixture (Ascoli and Ranci, 2002). It refers to social policy governance on local level, the allocation of responsibilities, power, and ultimately accountability with respect to the outcome of the interventions (Daly, 2003).

The development of local safety nets is evident of the transformation of central welfare mechanisms. Social policy acquires new orientation, by gradually setting a minimum survival resources framework vital to social coherence, yet rather unable of providing the requisites for social development. As follows, the interventions for covering individual life needs do not suffice to promote collective development. Most likely, they are personalized measures which ensure the most mundane terms of survival, but fail to create conditions for ending the exertion of inequalities reproduction processes of every kind. In other words, these are emergency mechanisms, which however manage to thrive in an environment of generalized incompetence of the welfare system.

The articles of Pantazopoulos and Spyridopoulos explain the stance of the official sector towards the eruptive social needs, emerging as side effects of the 2010s crisis. Reinforcing the role of local government in the exercise of social policy in the Greek case is linked to a broader procedure to transform civic welfare not only in Greece but in the wider European area, as well (Skamnakis, 2020). It does not necessarily constitute a byproduct of the crisis, still though it accelerates. The two research papers although different and independent are yet able to complement one another, accounting for transformation direction and speed of acceleration. The interventional propositions are considered significant, still not effective in meeting social needs, and thus subsequently transforming the deficient nature of the social welfare system of the country. In addition, despite the local authorities’ involvement their role is restricted by a central administrative and funding framework, thus producing a gap between local character and local needs interconnection, a question that remains to be answered. Concluding, the series of the intervention proposals examined has supported the development of a minimum level of social provision, as shown by Pantazopoulos’ quantitative data as well as by Spyridopoulos’ qualitative analysis, both contributing to the understanding of the dynamic development of local mechanisms for the social protection, in contemporary Greece.

At the same time, work is restructured in terms of content and scope as the respective employment rights are differentiated. Today the labour markets continue to be layered, multisided and complex, while place identity maintains its pivotal role as a factor, although not exclusively. The occupational policies aiming at diminishing unemployment and its consequences on the individual and on society as well as on the household and the economy still remain a distinct aspect of social policy. Unemployment as a twofold social and economic issue lies in the heart of post-war social state practices, with a basic tool being that of full-time occupation. The withdrawal of the welfare state regulations and the prevalence of deregulation practices gradually disintegrated the triple full-time occupation–work insurance–protection of income. Instead, they have been replaced by a new triple now; dominant active policies/small-scale interventions/targeting of special groups of population (Dedousopoulos, 2018: 198-202), with the result of being differentiated in relation to range, methods and content.

Of course, the spatially designated interventions neither inevitably cancel the prospect of social coherence nor do they necessarily undermine the quality level for collective prosperity. The drafting of completed action plans for the economy, work and social reproduction with the involvement of local stakeholders has not been an unknown idea. All relevant information concerning local development strategies, the multiplier effect in economy, and occupation has already been described in detail since the 80's (Cochrane, 1987; Boddy, 1984). The degree of involvement, the content and orientation of local planning constitute debatable elements of the local strategies as well as individual qualities of the accompanying interventions. Nevertheless, it is the external environment that ultimately defines the context within which the latter are formulated, while also setting the requirements for their effectiveness. Yet, the connection to the wider space determined by the final outcomes and mainly the continuity between locality and its surroundings, still remains a topic for future research.

David Harvey has set four parameters whose composition defines the final strategy to be followed on local level. The first one refers to place positioning in work allocation, the second to the spatial allocation of consumption, the third to the link with the international routes of money and stock exchange capital and the fourth-particularly determinant in social policy the importance of reallocating the results of spatial effectiveness with regards to the broader environment, that is currently (still) the national state (Harvey, 2016:180-84).

There ought to be one more mention to the pace of adjustment in an ever-changing world, or else the response to the new circumstances as these are prescribed by the technological advancements, on the one hand, and by the given social requirements, on the other. The framework of interventions of the locally focused social investment is capable of supporting the aim for social coherence. Without substituting for social protection, life-long enhancement of employees' adjustment mechanisms to the new situation encapsulates a distinct approach to social policy, assigning a dynamic and ever-evolving character to the notion of the welfare state (Esping-Andersen, C. et. al., 2002). As far as the interventions implementation and social policies transformation is concerned, the role of public institutions continues to guarantee for the securing of social cohesion under the modern socio-economic circumstances (Hemerjick, 2012).

The mission for collective prosperity and social coherence is pursued via different routes, as mentioned accordingly in Staboulis and Kostas' as well as Ntasios' articles. The two first in their common work refer to the idea of adjustment through training on new skills, by highlighting the need to develop mechanisms for the on-going monitoring of the exploitation of comparative advantages through new tools, in each field. In essence, they point out the need to design processes

of life-long education as the core axis for development. In their results, however, they underscore something significant and this is the inconsistencies in the interpretation of results, even for the best practices. Elaborating on their important observation in its own right, society is not secured against the uneven allocation of the adjustment benefits or against the social impact that every change produces. This responsibility [of reassurance] rests with the broader welfare state and its particular regulations. Ntasios presents methodically the context for building a complete strategy for tackling unemployment locally. In his research study, he concludes by stressing the importance of local level to the social and economic evolution, also by flagging up ultimately the gravity of the local bodies' contribution to the planning and implementation of spatially designated interventions.

For the discussion of controversies between local policies and communication channels within the wider context it is worthy to consider Karvounis' article. In a setting where the expansion of social issues trespasses national boundaries, the significance of communication and collaboration mechanisms grows stronger all the more. It is understood that the vertical relations between local stakeholders and supra-national institutions as much as the horizontal relations among local authorities within the European environment both shape practices and influence the scope of policies. This network is constructed on levels of different pace, and thus subsequently on different outcomes in the respective national settings. The emphasis in the Greek case of raising awareness of obstacles in building mutually beneficial relations demonstrates certain peculiarities which give birth to and feed national deprivation. According to the data provided by Karvounis' work, a truly critical point regarding local policies becomes apparent; the need for extroversion and diversification, with the aim to surpass prolonged issues which are thwarting the desired networking between local institutions and their wider environment, and hence the enhancement of their role in the implementation of policies.

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