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**“Activation” policies on the fringes of society:
a challenge for European welfare states**

International Conference, May 15th-16th, 2008

in Nuremberg, Germany,

organized by the

“Institute for Employment Research (IAB)” and the

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Activation has become a prominent paradigm with regard to both labour market and social policies in Europe. Not only has it permeated political oratory in a short period of time across a wide range of European countries, but it has also become a crucial reference point for the restructuring of the modern welfare state in its legal and administrative structures, in its political programmes and social services, and even in its normative self-understanding and moral mission. There is little doubt that activation policies in Europe were inspired by US-American "workfare", which aimed to reduce unintended effects of public assistance by fighting a "culture of dependence" and fostering the "individual responsibility" of the jobless to look for work. In the mid-1990s a major welfare reform restricted receipt of public assistance to five years in a lifetime and simultaneously built a strong link between benefit receipt and work requirements. Furthermore, it is well known that public assistance in the US is restricted to households with children ("Temporary Assistance for Needy Families", TANF); benefit claimants without children are relegated to residual services (e.g. food stamps and primary health care) after social security entitlements expire.

In Europe, political debates were fascinated by these experiments but remained highly sceptical about unintended outcomes, such as growing rates of social exclusion and poverty. While policy reforms took up the idea of recalibrating the balance between incentives and sanctions enshrined in social assistance and placement programmes, there was strong consensus on the fact that the welfare state has essential responsibilities in securing a minimum living standard of its citizenry. In Europe the idea of "activation" was thus confronted with a conflict of objectives between preventing malincentives through social assistance and simultaneously securing a humanitarian level of economic subsistence. "Flexicurity" became a political catchword intended to represent a political paradigm devoted to improving flexibility on the labour market while guaranteeing a sufficient level of social security to needy individuals at the same time. More specifically, activation measures were linked to the idea of raising the "employability" of potential job-seekers, thus documenting that the state was not only becoming more demanding with regard to benefit recipients, but was also committed to raising the prospects for the unemployed to find work, e.g. by improving training and placement procedures.


The European Union (EU) has taken up these policy developments recently through the Lisbon process, set out by the European Council in 2000. The ambitious goals defined there were backed by cooperation measures, such as the Open Method of Coordination, which were designed to allow for common action in spite of a lack of EU competencies in the realm of labour-market and social policies. The paradigm of activation and employability became one of the generally agreed reference points, and it is assumed that the benchmarking system established by the European Employment Strategy has helped to increase the diffusion of these policy concepts and practices across member states. Today, many European states have developed activation programmes of some kind, but there are different answers to the problems of social exclusion. The success of the activation and employability paradigm is also documented by the



fact that the target group of activation policies is being extended in order to make all able-bodied benefit claimants join the labour force.

Activation policies have now been in place for a couple of years and have generated enough stories of success and failure to arouse public debates about necessary corrections and further policy reforms. But while there is a large body of research on Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP), the assessment of activation programmes for welfare claimants/recipients in Europe is still in its infancy. So far, we have learnt that well-structured and well-financed programmes are quite successful, particularly when speaking of benefit recipients with a medium level of need for state guidance and help. In general, we perceive that the effectiveness of activation for welfare claimants is limited to a particular group of people who have good chances of finding work anyway. Conversely, first experiences seem to demonstrate that activation policies are illequipped to improve the situation of a number of deprived groups, amongst them the most marginalized fringes of the population (e.g. the longterm unemployed, jobless migrants, and people with psychosocial problems). Moreover, there seems to be evidence that activation dissociates into a number of interlinked levels and dimensions of action. This means that activation – in the strict sense of labour market insertion – depends on overcoming social and civic exclusion and the subsequent process of self-marginalization and self-victimization by the jobless. Some countries, e.g. the Netherlands, respond to this problem by implementing "social activation programmes" in order to overcome social isolation and passivity and to develop some basic skills even below the "employability threshold".

In spite of these tentative impressions, we are unable to generate any sound statements today about activation programmes for welfare claimants in most European countries. There are different reasons for this lacuna. First, the evaluation of these programmes is still in its infancy. Systematic evidence has been generated mostly in Great Britain but is lacking in most other countries, particularly at the level of municipal activation programmes. Second, these shortcomings are associated with a lack of systematic implementation of adequate methodological tools and techniques, particularly regarding the assessment of the net effects of these programmes. Furthermore there seem to be few concepts as to how activation should be measured. This lack of concepts is due to the fact that activation and the relevant programmes have quite different agendas and orientations, administrative and legal structures. Thirdly, what is lacking in this regard is systematic cross-national research on activation programmes with respect to the process of policy formulation, the implementation at national and local level, the successes and failures of activation policies at local, national and European level. Fourthly, research has convincingly demonstrated that unemployment erodes social capital and leads to a process of societal exclusion and individual self-marginalization. However, we know little about the (potentially detrimental) effects of social and civic exclusion on labour market activation, and about the lessons to be drawn from this interplay between different dimensions of (labour market, social and civic) activation for possible policy reforms.



The coming international conference wishes to address these problems and aims to help overcome some of these shortcomings by inviting scholars to present and discuss ongoing research. In particular, the conference will deal with a number of questions that need careful attention:

- Is there a specific European agenda of activation? What are the main similarities and differences between national activation policies and programmes? Are public debates and policy reforms evolving in a specific direction within Europe, and what is the impact of the EU's Open Method of Coordination and other forms of policy diffusion and learning? What is the role of 'institutional myths' in the diffusion and implementation of activation measures throughout Europe?
- What experiences are being made with the implementation of activation programmes and measures at local level? Are there 'best practices' championed within the various nation states, and if so, what are the reasons? What are the administrative, legal, political or social factors that intervene in the implementation of these 'best practices', either adapting or distorting them?
- What are the methodological requirements for a systematic and sound evaluation of activation programmes? What data are available in the various European countries, and which methodological approaches seem adequate in order to capitalize on these data? Considering the different legitimations of and approaches to activation: how can its success or failure be assessed?
- What are the outcomes of activation at aggregate and at individual level? Are activation measures suited to improve the situation of all deprived and excluded people? Which societal groups benefit most strongly from activation, and which do not benefit at all? Which societal characteristics affect the success or failure of activation? Does activation facilitate the segregation of the labour market according to gender, age, class, and ethnicity? What do we know about the effect of activation measures on an individual's life-course? What works and what does not work in activation measures from the target groups' point of view?
- What is the interplay between labour market activation and social exclusion? Does social marginalization impinge on the success of labour market insertion? What aspects of societal exclusion are potentially the most harmful factors impeding labour market activation (e.g. lack of social capital, the heredity of unemployment)? Does labour market activation even depend on previous 'societal' activation (e.g. civic and political inclusion)? What role can labour market activation play with regard to (the potentially vicious circle of) exclusion, and under what circumstances is a remedial effect to be expected?

The international conference is planned as a two-day event. It will include keynote speakers and will be organized along various sessions that thematically address the group of problems and questions listed above. Scholars are invited to submit an abstract of about one page to the organizers of the conference by November 30th, 2007. After acceptance, authors are required to deliver a full paper by March 31st, 2008, which will be made accessible to conference participants via a website.

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