Building active welfare states: How policy shapes caseworker practice

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Abstract:

With the introduction of the Work and Social Assistance Act (WWB) in 2004, the Dutch social assistance system became almost completely decentralized. This has led both municipalities and the central government to go searching for 'What works best' in the area of activation. In the early years after the introduction of the WWB, generous budgets and policy experiments were used to trigger a search for best practices at the local level. Currently, the focus has shifted to workfarist measures such as self-help, sanctions, and mandatory work placements. Also in other countries, the search for an optimal balance between self-help and employment support has led to continuous reforms in the activation domain. Therefore, a comparison between activation policies and practices across countries should yield interesting insights into the design of 'smart' and balanced activation systems.

The PhD research of Deborah Rice provides a sophisticated analysis of activation policies and practices in three active welfare states: the Netherlands, Denmark and Great Britain. Based on interviews with managers and caseworkers in local jobcentres in the period 2010-2012, Deborah’s research concludes that local activation discourses and strategies diverge much more than actual client treatment. This is due not only to scarce resources and/or legal regulations that leave little room for 'real' caseworker discretion, but also to similar client profiles across countries. On the basis of her extensive analysis, Deborah gives some recommendations on the design of smart activation systems in the final chapter of her dissertation.