Report:


*Brussels, 5 June 2014*
In August 2013, the four FP7 projects LOCALISE and COPE (project leader: Martin Heidenreich, Oldenburg), FLOWS (project leader: Per Jensen, Aalborg) and WILCO (project leader: Taco Brandsen, Nijmegen) came up with the plan of organising a joint Policy Conference on the topic “Building Inclusive Welfare Systems: A Dialogue Between Research and Practice”. This Policy Conference took place in Brussels on 5 June 2014.

As the University of Oldenburg was the main organizer of the policy conference, the conference was opened by a welcoming presentation by Martin Heidenreich in which he also addressed current figures on long-term unemployment and social exclusion in Europe, explaining why it is important to make the welfare systems of Europe more work-friendly and socially inclusive.

After the introductory presentation, seven researchers from the four participating FP7 projects presented policy-relevant research findings in the format of short research “flashlights”. After each flashlight, there was room for questions and remarks from the audience.

Matteo Jessoula, COPE researcher from the University of Milan (Italy), opened the flashlight sessions by addressing the topic “Taking stock of Europe 2020: Towards a multi-level, multi-stakeholder and integrated governance arena?”. The key policy recommendations emerging from Matteo Jessoula’s presentation were to:

- create awareness for the Europe 2020 targets at the (supra) national and local level;
- create national and cross-sector anti-poverty alliances, such as the Semester Alliance;
- create/mobilise transversal networks among NGOs, political parties and scientific experts to propose and/or provide evidence-based policy solutions.

The next flashlight presentation was held by COPE researcher Håkan Johansson from Lund University (Sweden) on “The fight against poverty and exclusion in times of crisis”. Håkan Johansson issued the following policy recommendations:

- Local welfare systems matter. Effective policy implementation needs to recognize local cultures, traditions and local politics;
- A local welfare system is wider than a local welfare state → Recognize and take advantage of both public and private efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion;
- To improve the transparency and accessibility of local services and benefit systems, develop information on citizen rights and how services can be accessed.
After the COPE presentations, the second set of flashlight presentations came from the LOCALISE team. Martin Heidenreich from the University of Oldenburg (Germany) talked about integrated social and employment policies at the local level, concluding that inter-organisational networks connecting social and employment services at the local level should:

- take into account the heterogeneous nature of the problems disadvantaged persons are facing;
- take into account local peculiarities, both in terms of actors and target groups;
- develop a clear and well-structured framework for resource-pooling, data-sharing and the usage of instruments;
- develop shared objectives (e.g. employability, but also the social inclusion of groups distant to the labour market).

In the following presentation, LOCALISE researcher Paolo Graziano from Bocconi University Milan (Italy) addressed the question “How do different institutional contexts influence local activation policies?”. Paolo Graziano closed with two innovative ideas for policy-makers:

- Create local multi-stakeholder observatories on social solidarity and activation (for monitoring and benchmarking purposes, but also for a better shared understanding of activation as a multi-dimensional concept);
- Provide greater multi-level coordination on shared policy objectives via organisational units (i.e. activation agencies) that combine both administrative and scientific staff.

The third FP7 project to present its findings at the policy conference was FLOWS, represented by Per Jensen from Aalborg University (Denmark). In his first flashlight presentation, Per Jensen discussed how local policies concerning the employment chances of women correspond with EU policy targets. Per Jensen summarized the policy-relevant findings of FLOWS as follows:

- For EU policies to become effective, new types of vertical governance and dialogues between different policy levels must be established;
- An EU discourse about Europe's employment strategies takes place between Brussels and the capitals of Europe, but remains disconnected from the local political authorities responsible for policy making – and even more distant from ordinary people.

Per Jensen’s second flashlight presentation turned to the question “Do social investment strategies (care and life-long learning) help women to enter, re-enter or remain in the labour market throughout their life course?”. The presented core findings of FLOWS on this issue were:

- There is no easy solutions if the aim is to raise women’s employment rate. No single causal factor (e.g. day care) can be manipulated to do the trick;
- Supply side-oriented social investment strategies do not trigger employment opportunities or new labour market behaviour among women;
- Women’s employment is to a large extent demand-driven;
- There is a clear correlation between women’s employment and the size of the public sector. Thus, dismantling welfare states is a move in the wrong direction.

Finally, two researchers from the FP7 project WILCO presented their research findings. Taco Brandsen from Radboud University Nijmegen (Netherlands) opened the WILCO session with a flashlight on social innovation. Taco Brandsen’s main governance-related conclusions were that:

- social innovations can more gain recognition and sustainability easily where there is an open governance style;
- such openness partly derives from structural features of administrative systems, but policy-makers and officials in all types of systems have proven capable of achieving it.

Subsequently, Adalbert Evers from Giessen University (Germany) supplied more findings on the conditions under which social innovations may prosper (or not). In his conclusions, Adalbert Evers stressed that:

- social innovations meet special difficulties when policy fields are marked by hierarchical, uniform, closed services and systems with little local autonomy;
- there is a need for welfare policies that (a) allow for more diversity, co-existence and mutual learning of given and innovative concepts, as well as for (b) reducing the gap between dispersed innovatory changes and central state policy interventions – e.g. by devolution, pilot-programmes, room for policy entrepreneurs and reform-networks;
- some defined innovative characteristics should be convened upon and strengthened as points of reference for selecting and evaluating projects in already established and operating EU funding streams, such as EQUAL, LEADER etc.

The panel discussion.

The final part of the conference consisted in a panel discussion with four practitioner experts:

- Claire Courteille, director of the ILO-Brussels Office
- Sian Jones, policy coordinator of the European Anti-Poverty Network
- Wolfgang Müller, head of the European Representation of the Federal Employment Agency of Germany
• Iphigenia Pottaki, policy officer at the European Commission, DG Research & Innovation.

The panel discussion was moderated by LOCALISE project manager Deborah Rice. The panel was opened by statements from each of the panellists, in which they reacted on a particular research flashlight presented earlier. Afterwards, open questions were posed to the panellists, such as

- Which actors should be given more influence to make Europe 2020 a success, and how could this be achieved?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of decentralization in the area of social policy?
- To what extent is female employment sensitive to political and governance changes, as opposed to structural labour market trends?
- Is social innovation a promising trend or merely a political excuse for austerity measures?

The panel closed with the question where experts from the field see a need for further social-scientific research on employment and social policies. Iphigenia Pottaki saw a need for more research on the questions how successful social innovations can be ‘scaled up’, i.e. institutionalized more broadly. Sian Jones voiced concerns about the partial intransparency of decision-making on social and employment issues, requiring more research on the question “How are decisions made?”. Wolfgang Müller found evaluative research on the question “What works?” most pressing, suggesting that not every governance solution may be fit for every problem. Finally, Claire Courteille raised the issue that there is not yet enough empirical knowledge about an optimal allocation of shared decision-making authority in multi-level political systems. Overall, all panellists agreed that research on welfare governance continues to be of high relevance for policy-makers, which underlines the importance and timeliness of our joint FP7 policy conference.

Overall, the policy conference was a highly interesting and inspirational event not only for the audience of practitioners, but also for us researchers from four FP7 projects. We are grateful for having had the opportunity to organize this event together, and we look forward to our next joint endeavour – the scientific conference “Towards Inclusive Employment and Welfare Systems: Challenges for a Social Europe” in Berlin on 9-10 October 2014.