

Think Tank Plusconfidence, Rotterdam October 27th and 28th 2011

1. Introduction

It is clear that western countries are facing developments that challenge the bases of their social security systems. Immigration, an aging population, technological developments, mobility, communication and information technology, economic restructuring, socio-economic developments and so on, pose new challenges: welfare dependency, multi-problem families, mismatches on qualifications between vacancies and jobseekers, short-term unemployment but long-term shortages on the labour market, a shrinking labour force and a growing number of people in need of support, concentration of social problems with certain groups, and so on. The delivery of policies is challenged with a need to deal with more diversity, to prevent social cleavages, to contribute to empowerment as well as protection, to prepare the current long-term unemployed for future job openings, to do more and better with less. The recent economic crisis has put even more pressure on finding solutions.

Recurring questions concern among others eligibility (inclusion and exclusion), own responsibility (moral worthiness and motivation), and level of benefits (incentives). However, answers structured along these lines increasingly seem to fall short in effectively contributing to social inclusion in contexts of increasing individualisation and diversity in how people live their lives, as well as in increasing flexibility required in jobs and on the labour market, as a result of new ways in which companies and organisations structure their work. The effectiveness and efficiency of policies and approaches has become a central concern, even more so because of the current economic crisis. Increasing effectiveness and efficiency requires a systematic approach (evidence based) as well as creativity and innovation. Social innovation, flexicurity, life-long learning, social integration and human dignity, creating new skills and new jobs, are among the central themes on the 2020 agenda of the European Union.

Common themes on the agenda in many Western European countries, seem to be:

- how to improve the quality of services;
- the organisational culture in the delivery of work and income policies. How to stimulate a focus on results and customer satisfaction (clients, employers, commissioners and tax payers, partners and own employees)?
- the question of the most adequate level of organisation (central – regional – local) and the challenge of localisation;
- the balance and division of roles between public and private service providers;
- specialist or generalist organisation of work;
- target groups and caseloads;
- the balance between individualisation or standardisation of services;
- use of e-services;
- performance indicators, success factors and challenges

By organising an international think tank, Plusconfidence aims to create an inspirational environment for exchange of experiences and development of new ideas and practical solutions in the broad field of work and income policies, active labour market policies and social inclusion.

For this reason Plusconfidence has invited people from New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Scotland and The Netherlands. Each country has prepared a thematic presentation and a general presentation on the state of affairs of the welfare reforms.

2. Preliminary results meeting Oct 26-28: finding common ground

The Think Tank meeting made very clear that the current economic crisis increases the pressure on our welfare states. The crisis, which nobody really anticipated, affects countries, cities and local economies all over Europe and in other OECD countries. The ways in which this crisis affects us, differ. Some sectors of the national, regional and local economy are being hit severely, while other sectors are hurt less and still offer considerable opportunities for jobseekers and job-openings for people who are on social assistance. Nevertheless, every country and city is faced with the consequences of this crisis. There is, generally speaking, a rise of the unemployment-rate and a decline in registered vacancies on the labour market.

The ongoing debate on social policies after the crisis and also the Europe 2020 strategy have highlighted a number of urgencies, in particular the need:

- to explore innovative approaches to address current and emerging social challenges (involving new actors, defining renewed content, changing delivering mechanisms);
- to improve the cost-effectiveness of the employment and social policies;
- to make better use of evaluation for policy-making.

The Think Tank meeting showed, through presentations of the situation in different countries, that there is an important role for (local) government in cooperation with relevant partners to undertake the necessary steps and take measures to overcome the current crisis. The meeting also showed that there are a lot of similarities in our approaches so far in responding to the current challenges.

3. Topics discussed

Welfare reforms:

- increasing pressure on welfare states
- need for effective and efficient social protection and activation systems
- welfare reforms going on in every country (continuous reforms?)
- focus: from social benefits to a work oriented approach. Work-requirements attached to social benefits are strengthened
- new: a work-ability assessment before an social assistance application is processed
- increase of active labour market policies and practices to support jobseekers and welfare recipients to enter the labour market
- is a minimum income the right tool for fighting extreme poverty ? What is the appropriate level of a minimal income?
- safety nets without poverty traps?
- what activation measures are necessary?
- a lot of examples of what works

Cultural dimension

- a mind shift : focus on possibilities instead of barriers
- a mind shift for both clients and staff
- more stringent on fraud and benefit-cheats
- also a more mature relationship with clients: client involvement in the service delivery.

Demographic changes

- demographic changes expected in the next years (retirement)
- pension age is going up (except New Zealand)
- increasing problem of clients most distanced from the labour market
- combatting youth unemployment: preventing a lost generation
- labour market paradox: redundancies on the short term and a shortage on the long term, due to demographic developments (retirement of the post-war baby-boom generation in the upcoming years).

Clients

- discovery of the client as an 'individual' instead of a number
- client as a stakeholder in his own interests
- discovery of the employer as a new client of the welfare system
- importance of measuring customer satisfaction (and use the outcomes!)

Delivery of social services

- a tendency to more client-centred services: better targeting and more effective?
- is that the right answer to the crisis?
- strong involvement of clients in the way services are delivered
- a trend to tailoring services to the needs of clients and holistic approaches
- need for capacity building in order to achieve effective and sustainable networks

Organisational aspects

- need for inter-sectoral cooperation
- more working in networks (in parallel or in harmony?)
- decentralisation and localisation of services and management
- better use of new technology (email and internet) for more effectiveness and efficiency

Professionalising Staff

- education and training of our staff enabling them to develop their professionalism.
- case-managers need to be supportive to our clients offering intensive counselling to new target-groups.
- more employer-involvement requires also the competences of our staff (account-managers) to go out and communicate with employers in a way that they understand their business, their needs and challenges in order to make better matching for our clients.

Importance of leadership

- government and public agencies are held accountable for the development and implementation of successful employment policies, and the way these are combined with social services delivered to people on the local level.

- some agencies (PES) and municipalities are the first in line and therefore in the position of being the first one to act.
- we underline the importance of leadership in our agencies and our cities;
- the leadership required to take action and develop the right approaches;
- the leadership required to develop cooperation with relevant partners in networks, and
- the leadership in the internal organisation of the agencies (setting the right example)

Result orientation

- the crisis and demographic changes increase the pressure on our welfare states
- a real need for better results with lesser means which is a real challenge for us
- more use of e-services and the internet?
- more focus on results, to learn from experiences, rather than on ideology

How to make the transition?

- putting the client in the centre (community link)
- learning networks (employability learning network)
- visitation
- development bottom-up, but with a vision!
- randomised controlled experiments (Fit-4-Work)
- exchange of best practices (e.g. Neighbourhood mothers)
- competence development (managers/caseworkers)
- co-operative, learning attitude
- social experimentation? Testing the impact of a new policy or a new measure on a small scale with a view to up-scale it.

4. Suggestions for a follow-up

The welfare reforms are about the conversion of social protection systems to more activating services with a focus on work and work-requirements (efficiency and effectiveness).

The current crisis offers also an opportunity, as it provides the urgency and political room for innovation; a focus on new ideas and approaches, exchange of ideas and experiences, with the potential of making better choices for change.

We see active labour market policies (in different varieties) and jobcentres, NAV and Community Link coming up as answers to the often fragmented and split service delivery: holistic services delivered in one-stop-shops.

We also see new horizons as clients become more active and participate as a stakeholder in their own interests.

Against this background we can attempt to speed up these developments and come up with creative ideas. Possible actions for a follow up are:

- study visits
- peer reviews on specific topics or themes
- use this think tank group as a learning network or visitation group itself
- publication of good practices and/or a new paradigm

The general feeling is that these days have been very good and stimulating. There are more similarities than differences between us. We hope it is not the last time we meet like this.

Although the topics are not new, there are different ways to look at them. We have heard some great ideas. It is important to have a group like this to ventilate and communicate ideas. It would be good to have meetings every year or every half year.

We now can combine the faces with the names, so you can email each other sooner now when you have questions. It would be great to use this group as a 'platform'. With the use of email and internet a lot can be accomplished. We will look into the possibilities of such a platform, a shared space (website).

It was very interesting, also to discover that every country has its own problems and difficulties and to hear about the ideas the others have to solve their problems. Although circumstances differ from one country to another there are a lot of similarities.

The idea of a publication could be very interesting.

There could be a follow-up for this group as a visitation group. When we talk about client-centered services, we could exchange examples/good practices. For instance; take a 25 year old client with a 5 year old kid. What would typically happen in Norway/New Zealand/and so on with this client?

With a next meeting, we can try to focus more on those things. Also, we could aim for less presentations and more discussion, now that we are more familiar with each other and our different national contexts.

Relevant background material that has been mentioned in relation to topics discussed:

- report on jobcentre comparison for Eurocities (Plusconfidence)
- work assessment tool Norway (Erik Stene)
- study on e-services/social media/performance indicators(?) by the University of Amsterdam (Brian van Apeldoorn)
- use of video presentations of jobs and jobseekers (Nico van de Vrie, Tom Craig)