

Rice, Deborah. *How 'social' are active labour market policies? A vignette study on activation in two decentralized welfare states*. Paper to be presented at the ESPAnet 12th Annual Conference, Oslo, Norway, 4-6 September 2014.

Activation policies became prominent in the late 1980s and early 1990s and currently imply mainly that individuals who rely on public support are offered strong incentives to no longer do so, either in the form of "carrots" (e.g. training measures) or "sticks" (e.g. benefit cuts). Because the toolbox of activation is very large, scholars have early on asked the question whether different activation trends can be observed across welfare states or even supra-national welfare regimes. By drawing on the theoretical repertoire of historical institutionalism, such comparative research on activation has usually departed from the assumption that different national-institutional "worlds of activation" bring about distinct social effects for citizens. However, more recently, a growing literature on the governance of activation has introduced the argument that not only formal policy design, but also practical policy implementation (at the local and individual level) matters for the real-world effects of activation. After all, activation implies a strengthened focus on individualized reintegration trajectories alongside a governance shift towards decentralization and multi-actor networks, thereby potentially leading to more variation in the local application of ALMP regulations. Hence, a central question examined in this paper is whether operational policy implementation matters just as much as formal policy design for the real-world effects of ALMPs.

More concretely, this paper examines the effects of active labour market policies (ALMPs) for citizens in two decentralized and relatively affluent welfare systems: the Netherlands and Denmark. Based on a vignette analysis conducted among welfare caseworkers in seven Dutch and six Danish jobcentres in 2011/12, the paper sheds light on the questions

- whether decentralization reforms in the Netherlands (2004) and Denmark (2007/2009) have led to homogeneous or heterogeneous activation effects across municipalities
- what the effects of local ALMP practices are for vulnerable and less vulnerable clients
- how institutional context factors interact with the agency of local managers and individual caseworkers in transforming or reinforcing pre-existing structures of social inequality.

As the vignette analysis shows, the implementation level has a strong influence on the social effects of ALMPs in decentralized welfare systems, especially when client cases are complex and thus transcend a purely labour market-related activation logic. Furthermore, the paper shows that local managers have a strong influence on ALMP outcomes in decentralized welfare states, although Dutch managers (and caseworkers) have more autonomy in shaping the social outcomes of ALMPs than their Danish counterparts. Finally, ALMP practices are more nationally-homogeneous in the highly devolved Dutch system than in the decentralized-centralized Danish system, which indicates that policy-devolution triggers homogenizing bottom-up processes of institutional learning and institutional diffusion.