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Redefinition of social assistance benefit levels

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Theme(s):	<i>Social benefits, Minimum income and Basic income</i>
Title:	Redefinition of social assistance benefit levels
Category:	<i>Policy debate</i>
Abstract:	In Switzerland, social assistance is a cantonal policy and social assistance benefit levels are set by cantonal laws. However, a non-governmental body (<i>Schweizerische Konferenz für Sozialhilfe [SKOS]</i> , i.e. Swiss Conference for social assistance) issues guidelines that are generally followed by the 26 cantons. Over the last few years, these guidelines have come under attack as some consider them too generous. To address these criticisms, SKOS has contracted researchers and opened a consultation procedure that should lead to a redefinition of benefit levels.
Description:	<p>In Switzerland, social assistance benefit levels are set by cantonal laws. However, a non-governmental body, SKOS, issues guidelines that are generally followed by the cantons. Arguably, this is because of the highly politicised nature of the exercise. Cantonal governments prefer to rely on these guidelines rather than engage in a politically risky exercise of defining benefit levels on their own. SKOS is a private association comprising representatives not only of cantonal and municipal social services, but also of the main anti-poverty organisations, such as Caritas. It has about 1000 members. The SKOS guidelines correspond to the average disposable income of the 10% poorest households in Switzerland, calculated on the basis of a national survey. Over the last few years, these guidelines have come under attack. Some municipalities, which are in charge of the implementation of social assistance, complained that benefit levels were too attractive (especially for large families) and decided to leave SKOS. SKOS being a private association, membership is voluntary. Right wing political parties have picked up the issue and some of their members have requested that benefit levels be roughly halved.</p> <p>In response to these critiques, SKOS has contracted independent researchers to produce two studies and has opened a consultation procedure among its members. The first study aimed at assessing the impact on social assistance of activation efforts (Dubach et al 2015). Its conclusion was that this is at best modest. The second study (Bundesamt für Statistik 2015) aimed at assessing benefit adequacy, relative to the aim of reflecting the average disposable income of the poorest 10% of the population. It found that some benefits, for single adults, actually needed to be increased. It should be noted that there is no legal text that states that benefit levels should correspond to the average disposable income of the poorest 10%. Currently, the recommended benefit for a single person according to SKOS guidelines amounts to CHF 977 (about 950 EUR), plus health insurance and accommodation. For a household consisting of two adults and two children, this amount is: CHF 2090 (about 2000 EUR), plus healthcare and accommodation.</p> <p>The debate on the appropriate benefit levels is currently highly topical. In addition to the above mentioned studies and consultation procedure, two other ideas are currently being discussed. First, some are calling for a federal law that would set minimum social assistance benefit levels</p>

	<p>applicable throughout the country. Second, it is being advocated that the SKOS guidelines should be formally validated by a body representing the cantonal ministers of social affairs.</p> <p>Finally, in a report on social assistance published on 25 February 2015, the Federal government has confirmed that it has no intention to promote legislation in this policy field, and encourages the cantons to coordinate themselves (Conseil Fédéral 2015).</p>
Outlook & Commentary:	<p>The political climate is such that a reduction in benefit levels cannot be excluded, even though the left, anti-poverty groups and the trade unions are against that. It is also possible that a compromise will be found by increasing activation within social assistance, which currently remains rather underdeveloped. This is due in part to the culture of the social services who tend to view activation with scepticism, and partly to the very fragmented nature of the system that does not allow the emergence of a sufficient critical mass to develop modern and professionalised activation policies.</p>
Further reading:	<p>Website of skos: http://skos.ch/</p> <p>SKOS guidelines (in German, French and Italian) : http://skos.ch/skos-richtlinien/richtlinien-konsultieren/</p> <p>Other references:</p> <p>Bonoli, G. and C. Champion (2013). <i>La réinsertion professionnelle des bénéficiaires de l'aide sociale en Suisse et en Allemagne</i>. Lausanne, IDHEAP, Cahier de l'IDHEAP.</p> <p>(http://www.idheap.ch/idheap.nsf/0/47e16fc4bb8ac81dc1257b81002955a7/\$FILE/bonoli_champion%202013.pdf)</p> <p>Bonoli, G. and C. Champion (2015). "Federalism and welfare to work in Switzerland - The development of active social policies in a fragmented welfare state." <i>Publius the Journal of federalism</i>, 45, 1, 77-98.</p> <p>(http://publius.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2014/05/08/publius.pju.025.abstract)</p> <p>Bundesamt für Statistik (2015) SKOS-Grundbedarf. Aktualisierte Berechnungen des BFS, Neuenburg</p> <p>(http://skos.ch/uploads/media/2015_Studie_Grundbedarf-d.pdf)</p> <p>Conseil Fédéral (2015) <i>Aménagement de l'aide sociale et des prestations cantonales sous condition de ressources. Besoins et possibilités d'intervention</i>, Berne.</p> <p>(http://www.news.admin.ch/NSBSubscriber/message/attachments/38419.pdf)</p> <p>Dubach, P., Rudin, M., Bannwart, L., Dutoit, L. & Bischof, S. (2015) <i>Evaluation der Leistungen mit Anreizcharakter gemäss SKOS-Richtlinien</i>, Bern, Büro BASS.</p> <p>(http://skos.ch/uploads/media/2015_Studie_Anreizsystem_d_def.pdf)</p>
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