



# ESPN Thematic Report on minimum income schemes

## Switzerland

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**European Social Policy Network (ESPN)**

**ESPN Thematic Report on  
minimum income schemes**

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## Summary

Minimum income protection in Switzerland is provided by municipal/cantonal social assistance with substantial differences in the way it is implemented across the country. Given this very high degree of cross-cantonal variation which concerns benefit levels as well as other features of minimum income schemes, in this report we present the system contained in the SKOS-recommendations. These are guidelines issued by a non-state body (SKOS - (*Schweizerische Konferenz für Sozialhilfe*), that are usually followed rather closely by cantonal and local authorities.

Social assistance is delivered by cantonal/municipal social services. One-stop-shops with other social programmes are not common, also because the two other main programmes for working age individuals are run by the federal government (invalidity and unemployment insurance). However, some cantons have experimented on a pilot basis with this type of arrangement.

Recommended benefits aim to reflect the disposable income of the 10% poorest households in Switzerland. Simulations of benefit levels for ideal-typical households suggest that this objective is broadly achieved.

With regard to active inclusion, relative to other European countries and relative to other social programmes in Switzerland, the reorientation towards activation in the Swiss social assistance system has been rather limited. This is testified above all by the low rate of participation in inclusion programmes, whether aimed towards social or labour market inclusion. In addition, the programmes available to social assistance clients seem to be mostly of the social inclusion type and consist of job creation programmes in the public or voluntary sector, with little connection to the unsubsidised labour market. Key measures that in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century are part of the activation toolkit are available only in a small number of cantons. However, notwithstanding the above, there are substantial cross-cantonal variations, with urban areas having gone further in the reorientation of minimum income schemes towards activation.

Available estimates of the non-take-up rate suggest that for social assistance this could be in excess of 30% nationwide.

Finally, with regard to access to services, there is a strong social gradient in access to childcare services in Switzerland, which most likely results in the exclusion of social assistance clients from this service. However, in some cantons at least, proactive efforts are being made at facilitating access to quality childcare for this group.

## Part I - Description of main features of Minimum Income Scheme

### 1 Governance arrangements

#### 1.1 Levels of governance

Minimum income protection is provided by social assistance. Social assistance is a cantonal and municipal responsibility, with substantial differences in the way it is implemented in the country.

Federal involvement in minimum income protection is limited to two acts of law. First the federal constitution states that cantons must provide assistance to persons in need (Swiss Federal constitution, Art. 115). Second, a federal law states that it is the canton where the claimant is legally resident that has to provide a minimum income (Classified compilation of Swiss law, No. 851.1). The federal level of government has no further involvement in this important field of social policy.

As a result there is considerable variety in the approaches adopted in different parts of the country and we lack a precise view of what actually goes on in terms of benefits and services across the 26 cantons and over 2,000 municipalities that make up Switzerland. Benefit levels are set by cantonal laws, and the cantons are entirely free with regard to level, design, activation elements, as long as they fulfil the constitutional mandate of guaranteeing a “standard of living respecting human dignity”.

Against the background of this high level of institutional fragmentation, a very important role is played by a non-governmental body, the Swiss Conference of Social Assistance (Schweizerische Konferenz für Sozialhilfe - SKOS). 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 1,000 members. SKOS issues guidelines concerning benefit levels, design, implementation and many other aspects of social assistance (the guidelines are collected in a volume which is several hundred pages long, SKOS 2015). The guidelines are very precise and are generally followed quite closely by the cantons. Arguably, this is because of the highly politicised nature of the exercise of setting benefit levels in the field of minimum income protection. Cantonal governments prefer to rely on these guidelines rather than engage in the politically risky exercise of defining benefit levels on their own.

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. In response to these critiques, SKOS launched a consultation procedure among its members, and decided to adopt a new set of guidelines which went in force on 1 January 2016. The new guidelines were made available in December 2015, and, information about the main changes introduced is available on the SKOS website ([www.skos.ch](http://www.skos.ch)).

Given the very high degree of cross-cantonal variation in benefit levels and in other features of minimum income schemes, in this report we present the system recommended by SKOS. As already mentioned above, deviations from these recommendations are ubiquitous but small. We present the guidelines that were in force at the time of writing, but will mention the main changes that were adopted in 2016.



## 1.2 Delivery arrangements

Social assistance is delivered by cantonal/municipal social services. Historically, the delivery of social assistance was a municipal task. In many cases, decisions regarding eligibility were not taken by public servants, but by “social commissions”, made up of groups of citizen selected by the municipal government. In recent years this traditional and pre-modern system of delivering social assistance has been modernised through two types of processes: cantonalisation and professionalization. Cantonalisation means that in several cantons it is now the cantonal government that has all the responsibility for the implementation of social assistance (e.g. Geneva, Ticino). In some other cantons, social assistance has been regionalised, with the delivery being assigned to regional social services which group several municipalities (e.g. Vaud, Fribourg, Bern). However, in a majority of cantons, mostly German speaking and to the east of the country, social assistance remains a municipal competence with regard to delivery (Bonoli and Champion 2014).

Professionalization refers to the replacement of citizen’s social commissions with professional public servants. Like cantonalisation, professionalization has progressed faster in the west (French speaking) part of the country. Social commissions have been abolished in most French speaking cantons, but still exist in many German speaking ones. Their role, however, has diminished, and they tend to validate decisions taken by public servants.

One-stop-shops with other social programmes are not common, also because the two other main programmes for working age individuals are run by the federal government (invalidity and unemployment insurance). However, some cantons have experimented on a pilot basis with this type of arrangement. For example, the canton of Aargau has a single gateway system for all three main working age benefits (invalidity and unemployment insurance and social assistance). This type of experiment is the exception rather than the rule. However, efforts to improve the coordination of the whole social security system are being made through initiatives called “inter-institutional collaboration”.

## 1.3 Rights-based versus discretionary benefits

Basic benefits are paid on a rights basis. However, the SKOS guidelines and most cantons also provide additional benefits for exceptional expenses (*Prestations circonstanciées*). These are much more discretionary.

## 2 Design of minimum income scheme

As mentioned above, since there are in Switzerland 26 cantonal schemes, it has been decided to present the guidelines issued by SKOS, which are followed quite closely by all the cantons. It should also be noted that working age individuals who receive invalidity benefit have access to a different (and more generous) means-tested scheme, known as “*prestations complémentaires*”, which parallels the means-tested old age pension.

### 2.1 Level of benefit

The amount of the benefit is based on a calculation where incomes are subtracted from needs and the benefit is equal to the result. In most cases needs include rent, health insurance and living costs. Since health insurance premiums and rents differ across the country, so the benefits which are actually paid out will differ too. However, the living cost portion of the benefit is applicable throughout the country (i.e. SKOS does not make different recommendations by canton or region). The actual benefit levels are presented in table 1.

**Table 1: Social assistance benefits for living costs (SKOS guidelines)**

Household size	Amount in CHF	Amount in EUR	Implicit equivalence scale
1 person	986	913	1.00
2	1,509	1,397	1.53
3	1,834	1,698	1.86
4	2,110	1,954	2.14
5	2,386	2,209	2.42
6	2,662	2,465	2.70
7 persons	2,938	2,720	2.98
For every additional person	+276	+256	+0.28

Exchange rate: 1 EUR = 1.08 CHF

Source: SKOS 2015

Recommended benefits aim to reflect the disposable income of the 10% poorest households in Switzerland. It should be noted that the notion that benefit levels need to reflect the disposable income of the poorest 10% is not written in legislation or in the constitution, but is practiced by SKOS. The relevant amounts are calculated on the basis of a survey by the Swiss federal office for statistics (Bundesamt für Statistik 2015).

It should be noted that the guidelines consider only the number of persons who are resident in a household and not their age. The amounts of MI benefit for the three reference household types can easily be inferred from the table above: single-adult households with no children, EUR 913/month; 2-adult households with no children, EUR 1,397/month; 2-adult households with 2 children below 14, EUR 1,954 /month); a divorced single parent household with one 2 year-old child, EUR 1,582<sup>1</sup>. In addition to this, accommodation expenses and health insurance are paid for.

The SKOS guidelines prescribe the uprating of benefits in line with the basic pension. According to the law, the latter is uprated every two years, by the average increase of prices and wages (or half of the increase in real wages).

On 1 January 2016 the following changes were adopted:

- For households of more than 6 people, the amount for living expenses will be reduced by CHF 76 (EUR 70) per person per month
- For young adults (aged between 18-25) living on their own, the amount will be reduced to CHF 789 (EUR 731).
- In addition to the benefits mentioned above, social assistance clients can also receive additional financial help for additional expenses (*prestations circonstanciellles*). These typically include:
  - dental care, which is not covered by health insurance
  - medical expenses that are not covered by health insurance (e.g. out of pocket payments by patients)
  - care and activity expenses for children and adolescents that improve their participation in social life (childcare, playgroups, sports, games, etc..)
  - school-related additional expenses (e.g. a ski camp).

<sup>1</sup> This amount includes an integration supplement of CHF 200 that is paid to single parents of small children, who cannot be expected to participate in labour market programmes or work because of their care obligations (SKOS 2015, CH. D1-1).

One important characteristic of Swiss social assistance is that the benefits paid are, in many cantons, formally a loan. If the client manages to increase his or her revenues and leave social assistance, he or she can be requested to pay back the amount received. This practice has been abandoned in the western part of the country but it is still widespread in the centre-east. The SKOS guidelines recommend the following with regard to reimbursement:

1. Reimbursement should not start before 1 year after someone has left social assistance
2. It should not last more than 4 years. The possibly remaining outstanding debt should be written off.
3. The reimbursement should be requested only if a former client's earnings exceed twice the amounts reported in table 1 above, + rent, health insurance and other expenses.
4. The amount of the reimbursement should not exceed half of the difference between actual earnings and the revenue calculated on the basis of point 3 above.

## 2.2 Eligibility conditions

With regard to age, those eligible are individuals aged 18 and over. Given the fact that there is a means-tested pension supplement that is higher than social assistance, there are very few individuals over 65 who receive the minimum income. All legally resident persons are eligible for social assistance. However for asylum-seekers and individuals who are granted temporary leave to stay on humanitarian grounds, lower rates apply. Those who obtain refugee status, however, are eligible for the amounts stated above.

Both non-working and working individuals are eligible for social assistance. For the latter the actual benefit paid will be reduced by the amount of income they obtain.

Individuals with assets exceeding a certain threshold are not entitled to social assistance. The asset thresholds amount to:

- for single persons: CHF 4,000 (EUR 3,704)
- for couples: CHF 8,000 (EUR 7,408)
- for children: CHF 2,000 each, (EUR 1,852)

The total amount of the asset threshold cannot exceed CHF 10,000 per household.

Assets that cannot easily be converted into cash or that if sold would impact negatively on the claimant's life situation (essentially an owner-occupied home) can also be disregarded at least temporarily.

Relatives (parents) can be requested to participate in covering the living expenses for young adults, if they do not have a professional qualification. Family law obliges parents to cover the living expenses of their children until they have obtained a professional qualification or a university degree.

## 2.3 Conditionality rules

Social assistance clients are expected to do whatever can reasonably be expected from them in order to leave social assistance. If their efforts are considered insufficient, sanctions can be adopted. According to the SKOS guidelines, sanctions can amount to a 15% reduction of the living cost amount, for a period of up to one year. This has been modified and in 2016 the maximum reduction will be 30%. Sanctions should respect the proportionality principle.

Exclusions can be applied if claimants refuse to produce the proof required to document their state of need, or refuse to apply for other sources of income to which he or she may be entitled. The SKOS guidelines also mention the possibility of exclusion if someone explicitly refuses to take up a job that is adequate considering their qualifications.

Participation in labour market programmes or other “integration” activities must be encouraged, and the SKOS guidelines recommend the payment of a supplement to those who accept to participate in such programmes. The amount of this supplement should be within the range of CHF 100-300 per month (EUR 93-278).

Individuals who cannot be expected to participate in a labour market programme or integration measures, should receive a “minimum integration supplement” of CHF 100 per month (EUR 93), as long as they would be willing to participate if they could. This supplement concerns above all (single) parents of young children and individuals with health impairments.

In relation to activation, the SKOS guidelines provide scant guidance, and it is known that there are substantial differences across cantons and municipalities. In general, larger cities and cantons in the west of Switzerland are investing more in activation, sometimes in collaboration with the public employment service (Bonoli and Champion 2013).

## **2.4 Duration**

There are no limits on the duration of social assistance. The benefit can be granted as long as the conditions are met.

## **2.5 Transitions**

In case of income from work (and of other incomes), benefits are reduced with a withdrawal rate of 100%. The SKOS guidelines recommend the adoption of an earnings threshold in the range of CHF 400-700 per month (EUR 370- 648) for a claimant aged 16 or more working full time.

In addition, all payments received from social assistance are exempted from income tax and protected from creditors. In case of debt, creditors cannot request any repayment from people who are on social assistance. As a result, incentives to exit can be particularly thin, especially for those who have large outstanding debts.

# **3 Links with other social benefits and services**

## **3.1 Components covered by MI schemes**

Social assistance covers all expenses that are considered necessary for a dignified existence. This includes housing costs, private health insurance, and dental care. For individuals with special needs, such as some disabled people, social assistance covers also disability-related costs. Since in principle disability insurance should cover this type of costs, the role of social assistance is limited to those who are not entitled to disability insurance.

The SKOS guidelines recommend that social assistance should also cover expenses that are important for child development, such as quality childcare for small children and activity expenses for older children and adolescents such as playgroups, sports, games, music, etc.). School-related additional expenses (i.e. a ski camp) should also be covered.

## **3.2 Other means-tested benefits**

There are in Switzerland a range of other important means-tested benefits, which in general are available to people with earnings slightly above the social assistance level. These include:

- individual subsidy for private compulsory health insurance. This is a federal/cantonal programme. High health insurance premiums can be a problem for low income families, and all cantons provide some subsidies on a means-tested basis. Financial responsibility is split between the canton (50%) and the Federal government (50%), but there is substantial variation across cantons in the amounts paid.

- housing benefit/social housing. Most cantons provide some form of help with housing costs for low income individuals and families. A small number provide a means-tested housing benefit (Vaud, Geneva, Zug). Other cantons provide social housing, accessible only to individuals with income below a threshold, or charge more to those who exceed that threshold.
- Means-tested invalidity pension supplement. Individuals who are entitled to invalidity pensions, but for whom the pension is insufficient to cover basic needs are not forced to turn to social assistance. Instead they receive a means-tested supplement, which is more favourable than social assistance (Ergänzungsleistungen/ Prestations complémentaires).
- Means tested supplementary benefit for families. Some cantons (Geneva, Vaud, Solothurn, Ticino) provide means-tested benefits for working families. These have been introduced in recent years in response to rising numbers of social assistance clients with jobs. Recent developments have shown two main problems with these schemes: first, they require a certain level of income stability. Individuals with unstable earnings tend to prefer social assistance. Second, the withdrawal rate, though lower than 100%, tends to be very high (in excess of 80%). This may constitute a strong disincentive to increase earnings.

### **3.3 Passport to other services and benefits**

The two most important advantages provided to social assistance clients are tax exemption and the protection from creditors in case of outstanding debts. Since social assistance is supposed to cover all basic needs, there are no additional benefits linked to it. What is more, if some additional benefits are received (for example by a different level of government), social assistance will be reduced by the corresponding amount. This (rare) situation can happen when social assistance is cantonal and municipalities offer some cash benefits, for example to poor families.

## Part II - Analysis of Minimum Income Schemes

### 1 Assessment of adequacy, coverage, take-up and impact

#### 1.1 Adequacy

Table 2 provides the result of benefit simulations for the four reference household types. As can be seen, the proportion of disposable income replaced is roughly similar at around 47-48% for the first three households. It is slightly higher for the fourth household, essentially because it receives an "integration supplement" (see fn. 1 above). It clearly falls below the 60% at-risk-of-poverty threshold. It should be noted, however, that the figures provided are averages. Residents of urban areas most likely receive higher benefits because of higher accommodation costs, and the majority of social assistance clients live in urban areas. In addition, the calculations in table 2 do not include additional cash benefits such as the "integration supplement", paid if clients accept to participate in social/activation programmes, or additional benefits, such as dental care.

**Table 2: Social assistance monthly benefits relative to disposable incomes (in CHF)**

Household type	Living expenses benefit CHF	Health insurance	Accommodation	Total	Eq. disposable income (EDI)	% of EDI
Single adult, no children	986	411	727	2,124	4,472	47%
Two adults, no children	1,509	822	976	3,307	6,913	48%
Two adults, two children below 14	2,110	1,012	1,449	4,571	9,550	48%
One adult (divorced), one child	1,709	506	976	3,191	5,785	55%

Source: Own calculations.

Notes:

- Since what is important are relative amounts, the amounts above have not been converted into euros. This facilitates further revisions and updates. The exchange rate fluctuates anyway between 1 EUR = 1 CHF and 1 EUR = 1.10 CHF.
- living expenses benefits are taken from the SKOS guidelines, without any supplement
- health insurance premiums are national averages for 2015<sup>2</sup>
- accommodation expenses are national averages. Dwellings with as many rooms as persons were attributed. Heating and other charges were estimated at 15% of the rent<sup>3</sup>.
- For disposable income, figures were obtained from the Swiss statistical office<sup>4</sup>. In order to ensure comparability with social assistance benefits, health insurance premiums showed in column 2 were added (health insurance premiums are deducted from disposable income).

Whether the above benefits are adequate or not is of course a value question that cannot be answered scientifically. Readers can be reminded of the fact that benefit levels are meant to reflect the living standards of the 10% poorest households. The simulation presented above shows that this objective is broadly attained. In 2013 the upper limit of the 1<sup>st</sup> decile was CHF 2,343/month (equalised), just above the amount of the benefit level received by the first reference household. It seems thus that current benefit levels are sufficient to guarantee a standard of living similar to the one

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.bag.admin.ch/themen/krankenversicherung/00261/index.html?lang=fr>, visited 18.10.2015.

<sup>3</sup> Source: <http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/fr/index/themen/05/06/blank/key/einfuehrung.html>, visited 18.10.2015.

<sup>4</sup> Information obtained on 18.10.2015 on [http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/fr/index/themen/20/01/new/nip\\_detail.html?gnpID=2014-477](http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/fr/index/themen/20/01/new/nip_detail.html?gnpID=2014-477)

experienced by low income workers. This proximity between the incomes of social assistance clients and low-paid working individuals has come under attack for failing to provide incentives to work. It is one of the main reasons behind the reduction in benefit amounts recommended by SKOS that have been in force since 2016 (see above).

## 1.2 Coverage

Social assistance is a last-resort subsidiary scheme. It covers all those who do not obtain a sufficient income from other sources. This means that, in principle, coverage is universal. This observation requires a number of qualifications. Firstly, asylum seekers, temporarily admitted persons under the asylum law, and asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected and are expected to leave the country do not have access to standard social assistance, but receive some form of help that is set a much lower level, and can be in kind (shelter, food, medical care). Secondly, individuals who are not legally resident are also excluded. Thirdly, in some cantons, among the qualifying conditions for social assistance is “doing whatever one can to recover financial autonomy”. There is evidence that in some cases this provision has been used to exclude clients whose efforts to re-enter employment were considered grossly inadequate. These cases, however, are probably very rare.

## 1.3 Take-up

The available evidence suggests that a sizeable minority of individuals who would be entitled to social assistance do not receive it. On the basis of survey data Crettaz et al (2009) estimate the non-take up rate for social assistance at around 28%. These are households that declared incomes below the SKOS guidelines presented above, who most likely are entitled to social assistance. However, it should be noted that some of them may be subject to a less generous regime than the SKOS guidelines, and as a result not be entitled. The incidence of non-take up varies by socio-demographic group. It is highest among childless couples (35%) and lowest among couples with 3 or more children (22%) (Crettaz et al. 2009: 17).

Schuwey and Knöpfel estimate the non-take-up rate for social assistance as comprised between 30% and 50%. The methodology leading to this estimate, however, is unclear (Schuwey and Knöpfel 2014: 81).

## 1.4 Impact

To the best of our knowledge, there are no nationwide or cantonal studies on the impact of minimum income protection on poverty<sup>5</sup>. One reason for this is the fact that social assistance being fragmented across cantonal/municipal lines, it is rather complex to model.

## 2 Links to other two pillars of active inclusion

The decentralised quality of social assistance in Switzerland means that both activation efforts and the accessibility of services vary substantially across cantons. In addition, the SKOS guidelines are less focused on these two areas than they are on cash benefits. As a result, it is reasonable to assume that variation in these two areas is even bigger than in relation to cash benefits. This part of the report is based essentially on two studies carried out by SKOS (Pfister 2009) and by independent researchers (Bonoli and Champion 2013). Unfortunately, these studies provide only limited information on what is being done in terms of activation in a selection of cantons/municipalities (Pfister 2009) or in the shape of cantonal overviews (Bonoli and Champion 2013).

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<sup>5</sup> Information confirmed by poverty expert Eric Crettaz, University of applied sciences, Geneva.

Information with regard to access to services is even more difficult to obtain, as the relevant services are organised mostly at the municipal and more rarely at the cantonal level.

## 2.1 Inclusive labour markets

Like most of its European counterparts, over the last 10-15 years the Swiss welfare system has undergone a major transformation that can be qualified as an “activation turn”. This transformation has concerned above all unemployment and invalidity insurance, which have gone through a series of rapid and far-reaching reforms. Things have evolved differently in social assistance. In spite of a more or less constant increase in caseloads, the activation turn in social assistance has been rather limited and uneven across the country. Broadly speaking, large cities and the west part of the country (French speaking) have gone further in this direction, while the rest of the country has been lagging behind.

However, relative to other European countries and relative to other social programmes in Switzerland, the reorientation towards activation in the Swiss social assistance system has been rather limited. A study published in 2009, which had surveyed 20 cantonal and municipal social service agencies in order to ascertain the extent to which social assistance clients had access to labour market programmes, found a rather contrasted picture. On the one hand, virtually all agencies provided some form of re-integration/re-insertion programme. However, when looking at the details, it appeared that most of these had social objectives rather than labour market (re-) entry as a main goal (Pfister 2009). Of the 20 agencies surveyed, for instance, only six provided coaching services for job search (2009:33).

Bonoli and Champion (2013) try to estimate the proportion of social assistance clients who have access to activation measures or other labour market programmes. On the basis of data collected by the Swiss statistical office and of their own survey, they estimate the proportion of non-working clients who participates in measures somewhere between 8% and 15% (participation rate)<sup>6</sup>. Even though they acknowledge that it is rather difficult to provide a precise and reliable estimation, they argue that it is clearly only a minority of clients who participate in activation. This figure is considerably lower than the one for unemployment insurance, where around 30% of clients do participate in some programme (Erb 2010). Considering the fact that, on average, social assistance clients require more help than unemployed people to re-enter the labour market, it can be argued that the activation effort made within social assistance is probably insufficient.

National averages of participation rates in activation measures by social assistance clients hide important cross-cantonal variations. In her survey, Pfister found big differences across the social service agencies she contacted. At one extreme, the canton of Nidwald (rural, German speaking) had a participation rate of 4% only, while in the city of Neuchâtel (urban, French speaking) the proportion was 34% (2009:33). Big variations in participation rates were also found in the estimates provided by Bonoli and Champion, between a low of 2% in Appenzell Innen-Rhodes (rural, German speaking) and a high of 24% in Basel-City (urban, German speaking). Estimates were available for 12 cantons only (Bonoli and Champion 2013: 20).

Participation rates are only one aspect of active inclusion. The content of the programmes available is also very important. As already mentioned above, most programmes offered can be qualified as social integration programmes rather than labour market programmes. For example job subsidies for employers, a measure that in the ALMP literature has been identified as rather promising for hard to place jobseekers, are available only in 9 out of 25 cantons<sup>7</sup>. However, in some cantons, this

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<sup>6</sup> The participation rate is defined as the number of clients who have been in a programme divided by the total number of adult non-working clients. For a discussion on how participation rates are calculated, see Bonoli and Champion 2013).

<sup>7</sup> The total number of cantons is 26, but one canton (Lucerne) did not take part in the survey carried out by Bonoli and Champion 2013.



tool is available only in some cities/municipalities. Pfister found that it was available in only 3 of the 20 agencies surveyed. In some cantons, social assistance clients have access to this type of measure through the public employment service (PES), but this requires that social assistance clients register with the PES, a practice which is far from being widespread (Bonoli and Champion 2013).

With regard to the conditionality of participation in social and/or labour market programmes, information is also scarce. In theory, participants can be sanctioned in all cantons, if their behaviour is deemed inappropriate in order to increase the likelihood of recovering financial independence. The refusal to participate in a programme can lead to a sanction, but it is difficult to know to what extent sanctions are actually used. In their survey, Bonoli and Champion requested sanction rates. These were provided only by 4 (four) cantons out of 26. Of them, two did not attribute any sanction between 2008 and 2010 (2013:18). While information is patchy and difficult to obtain, the impression is that pressure and conditionality are not key features of social assistance in Switzerland.

Overall the available evidence on active inclusion in Swiss social assistance, suggests three conclusions:

First, the activation turn, which has characterised minimum income policy in the rest of Europe and in other social programmes in Switzerland, has been largely absent in the field of social assistance. This is testified above all by the low rate of participation in inclusion programmes, whether aimed towards social or labour market inclusion.

Second, the programmes available to social assistance clients seem to be mostly of the social inclusion type and consist of job creation programmes in the public or voluntary sector, with little connection to the unsubsidised labour market. Key measures that in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century are part of the activation toolkit are available only in a small number of cantons. Job subsidies for employers, for instance, exist in only 9 cantons.

Third, notwithstanding the above, there are substantial cross-cantonal variations with urban areas having gone further in the reorientation of minimum income schemes towards activation.

## **2.2 Access to quality services**

While survey-based evidence is available on the participation of social assistance clients to activation measures, very little is known about access to quality services. To date, no national or even sub-national survey has been carried out. The SKOS guidelines do mention access to good quality services for children as an important role of social assistance (see above). However, the information provided in the guidelines is limited, and no information is available on access to services across cantons and municipalities.

For this reason, the information provided below concerns the canton of Vaud (French speaking, urban and rural) only. This canton has often been at the forefront in various social policy developments. As a result, it may be the case that the situation described below reflects the “best case scenario” that one can find in Switzerland.

With regard to childcare services, cantonal legislation prescribes that municipalities must join forces and set up “networks” that provide subsidised childcare services. Since there is a chronic shortage of childcare slots, networks must use and publish criteria for their allocation. In most of the 29 childcare networks that exist in the canton, both parents being employed is a precondition for being considered (or the parent in the case of single parent households). In some networks the notion of “in employment” is expanded to include education and training and/or job seeking.

As a result, children whose parents are on social assistance and have a low connection to the labour market tend to be excluded from childcare services. In response to this, childcare providers have agreed to make a small number of slots available to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Essentially, the slots offered are those in periods of low demand, typically Wednesday afternoon and Friday. These slots are sometimes

offered to social services so that they can open them to children of non-working social assistance clients (Champion and Bonoli 2015).

Given the overall situation of shortage and the limited effort made to reach children from a disadvantaged background, the access to childcare in the canton of Vaud is characterised by a rather strong social gradient. In part, it is explained by the rather regressive fee schedule applied in many childcare networks (Abrassart and Bonoli 2015).

Beside childcare, social assistance clients can access other services, as can the general population. These pertain to healthcare, reproductive health, help for victims of crime, help with addictions etc.. Being in regular contact with social workers, social assistance clients may actually have an advantage relative to other disadvantaged groups in terms of access to these services. In addition, social assistance clients have access to private dental care paid for by social assistance. Since in Switzerland dental care is not covered by social insurance, here too social assistance clients have an advantage relative to other disadvantaged populations.

### 3 Summary table

The table below is a summary of the report's assessment of Swiss minimum income schemes. In the column "Evolution over time": P = Positive evolution; SQ = Status Quo; N = negative evolution"

Assessment of MI scheme(s)				
	Assessment			Evolution over time
<b>Adequacy</b> How adequate is the level of MI benefits?	Adequate	Somewhat inadequate	Very inadequate	
	<b>X</b>			<b>SQ</b>
<b>Coverage</b> How extensive is the coverage of people in need?	Fairly comprehensive	Partial	Very limited	
	<b>X</b>			<b>SQ</b>
<b>Take-up</b> How complete is the take-up of MI benefits by those entitled to them?	Fairly complete	Partial	Quite limited	
		<b>X</b>		<b>SQ (?)</b>
<b>Impact on Poverty Reduction (1)</b> What is the impact of MI provision in reducing the at-risk-of-poverty rate?	Strong impact	Partial impact	Very limited impact	
				<b>n/a</b>
<b>Impact on Poverty Reduction (2)</b> What is the impact of MI provision in reducing the at-risk-of-poverty depth?	Strong impact	Partial impact	Very limited impact	
				<b>n/a</b>
<b>Link to Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP)</b> In practice, how effective are the links between MI scheme(s) and ALMP measures?	Very effective links	Mediumly effective	Very ineffective	
		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>P</b>
<b>Link to Adequate Services</b> In practice, how effective are the links between MI scheme(s) and access to adequate services?	Very effective links	Mediumly effective	Very ineffective	
		<b>X</b>		<b>SQ</b>

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