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Peer Country Comments Paper - Norway

**Social activation
Norwegian policies and practices**

Online, 25-26 February 2021

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1. Introduction

This paper has been prepared for the Peer Review on "Social Activation". It provides a comparative assessment of the policy example of the Host Country and the situation in Norway. For information on the host country policy example, please refer to the Host Country Discussion Paper.

2. Situation in the peer country

Compared to a number of European countries, Norway has a low level of unemployment, with an unemployment rate between 3-5% during the latest decades. Since year 2006, the highest unemployment rate, 5.2%, was recorded in October 2020, as a consequence of the Covid 19 crisis (Statistics Norway, 2020). However, unemployment is not equally distributed. Among immigrants, the unemployment rate is with 9.5% (October, 2020) significantly higher than among the general population (Statistics Norway, 2020), and several studies have demonstrated that immigrants face various barriers to entering the labour market, including language difficulties and discrimination from employers (Straiton et al, 2019; Midtbøen, 2014; Hoen, 2020).

Norway aims at an inclusive labour market and has one of the highest employment rates in Europe (OECD, 2020). Recently, strategies for an inclusive labour market policy emphasising work inclusion of disadvantaged groups (IA Agreement) (Norwegian Government, 2020) have been implemented. The goal of the agreement is to facilitate 'a working life with room for everyone', that includes working conditions ensuring that as many people as possible can work as much as possible, and for as long as possible.

There are several similarities and differences between Norway and the host country, Belgium. Both countries are small open economies with developed social welfare structures (Hemerijck and Marx, 2010). However, compared to the host country, Norway has a lower unemployment rate and a higher employment rate. In Belgium the employment rate was 64.9% in October 2020, while it was 74.2% in Norway (OECD, 2020). Long-term unemployment (unemployed over 12 months, as percentage of all unemployed) is with 24.1% (2019) significantly lower in Norway, than 43.5% in Belgium. Furthermore, Belgium spends more on passive than on active labour market policies, while the opposite is the case in Norway. According to OECD data, public spending on active and passive labour market policies in the host country is 0.88% and 1.23% of GDP respectively. In Norway, the numbers are 0.42% of GDP for active measures and 0.37% for passive measures.

Nevertheless, these country comparisons can be demanding, as statistics may not always be fully comparable or give the whole picture within a given policy field.

3. Assessment of the policy measure

There are two important acts that relate to the social activation of welfare recipients in Norway: the Labour and Welfare Administration Act and the Act of Social Assistance. The Labour and Welfare Administration Act has a stronger work-orientation where recipients should get the assistance needed to achieve employment, in all cases where it is possible. The act also states that adverse outcomes of unemployment should be reduced. Seen from this perspective, this act also allows labour and welfare offices to offer recipients social activation measures.

The Act of Social Assistance includes the goals of helping recipients live independently, improve their transition to work, promote social inclusion and an active participation in the society. Social assistance is a means-tested benefit and the last resort of welfare benefits for those who do not have the right to other benefits. Social assistance also involves the activation of recipients. For instance, recipients under 30 years have the duty to participate in activation measures, which can, for example, be practice at a workplaces, courses or social activation measures (NAV, 2020). Although social

assistance is aimed to be a temporary benefit, 14% of those receiving social assistance in 2019 were long-term social assistance recipients and had received the benefit for 12 months or longer (Statistics Norway 2020).

Active labour market policies are to a large degree work-oriented with the goal of increasing labour market participation. The emphasis on active labour market programmes derives from the fundamental thought that high employment rates are necessary to fund universal and comprehensive welfare structures. Active labour market programmes usually aim at providing opportunities or increasing qualifications through courses or work training. Lately, there has also been increased emphasis on supported employment programmes, described as 'place and train' rather than 'train and place' and where employers also have a significant and active role in the inclusion process (Mandal et al., 2019).

Even though they are focused on bringing people into employment, municipal and state-level activation programmes aim to include an individual and enabling perspective including bureaucratic and professional discretion (Andreassen, 2019). There is also a strong view of that participation in the labour market is beneficial for people's health and well-being, even for people with disabilities or longer-term health problems. Håvold et al (2018) define this approach as an 'asset' model of activation. However, studies have also shown that the goals of individualised and enabling activation approaches can be difficult to implement in practice. A study by Hansen and Natland (2017) showed that professionals carried out their follow-up of recipients on a continuum between empowering and coercive practices. Similarly, a qualitative study by Khoronzhevych and Fadyl (2020) showed that the strong work-orientation of the active labour market programmes in some cases hampered the goal of providing individualised services.

There is an acknowledgement among Norwegian policymakers that some people need comprehensive longer-term support and for whom the path to employment is further away, if ever reachable. For these persons the Qualification Programme has been implemented across municipalities nationwide. The programme is offered as a part of the ordinary active labour market policies. The target group is people who have a reduced working capacity and a need for comprehensive long-term support. The Qualification Programme is a tailor-made, full-day programme with the primary goal of increasing qualifications for work. However, depending on the individual participant's needs the programme can also include social activation measures, such as taking care of an elderly parent, voluntary work or physical exercise. As such, even though the programme is primarily work-oriented, it also has a social activation perspective. The period of participation is for one year, but it can be extended with another year. During this period, participants receive qualification allowance (NAV, 2020).

In addition to ordinary state-level or municipal active labour market policies, major parts of the Norwegian social activation programmes are organised through various governmental grants for municipalities, NGOs and other organisations. Through regional and local projects for various target groups, departments and directorates of the central government (for example the Directorate of Labour and Welfare, the Directorate of Children, Youth and Family, the Directorate of Integration and Diversity, the Directorate of Health and the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development) offer grants for social activation measures within their respective policy areas. These include for example user-led activities to reduce poverty, and grants for various projects with an aim to increase social activation, social inclusion and to decrease poverty.

The governmental grants constitute an important form of funding of all social activation measures. For instance, the evaluation by Skutlaberg et al (2019) showed that within the area of preventing poverty and social exclusion, as many as 75% of the NGOs (N=24) received funding from governmental grants.

Hence, NGOs, municipalities and other organisations have a central role in the area of social activation, especially for people who do not, due to health or social problems, qualify for the ordinary state-level or municipal active labour market programmes. Examples of larger NGOs that arrange social activation are the Salvation Army and the Red Cross. In these social activation programmes, participation itself is the goal and the threshold for participation is low. Projects run by the Salvation Army are for instance 'project inclusion' which helps immigrants to become socially included in the community through language training and social activities. Also, the Red Cross has a number of social activation measures for children and young people, but also measures to reduce loneliness in all age groups. The battery (Batteriet.no) is an NGO with important activities to improve social activation. The battery is a centre for self-organisation, self-help and advocacy work which offers meeting places for immigrant organisations, activist groups and other grass-root organisations concerned with preventing poverty and social exclusion. Several other NGOs have social activation projects, for instance working with ceramics or recycling, and through various activities for instance within bicycle repair shops. Also, social entrepreneurs have an important role for certain groups, such as immigrant women. Social entrepreneurs have a unique position and collaborates closely with employers (for instance IKEA). While some of these programmes are employment-oriented, others are more focussed on social activation. Municipalities also often run social activation programmes such as workshops for young people that are not in education or employment.

4. Assessment of success factors and transferability

Based on the host country paper, Belgium seems to have a stronger emphasis on social activation *within* active labour market policies than Norway. In Norway, especially the Act on Labour and Welfare Services is strongly work-oriented, while the Act on Social Assistance to a larger degree also includes social activation measures.

Similar to Belgium, the autonomy of the local welfare agencies and professionals is high in Norway. This means that services across municipalities can vary and that municipalities have discretion in evaluating the needs for the various recipient groups (Billbo et al., 2014). Although, the Norwegian active labour market policy is work-oriented, it aims for individualised and tailor-made services.

In Norway, the social activation programmes are in many cases arranged through grants from departments and directorates from various policy fields that municipalities and other organisations, such as NGOs, can apply for on a yearly basis. The organisation and implementation of these grants has been evaluated. An evaluation by Grødem (2012) showed that although the municipalities were able to implement interesting projects which they would not otherwise have been able to implement, the grants provided only temporary financing and made the municipal efforts somewhat fragmented. Another evaluation of social activation grants in the health area (Deloitte, 2020) also demonstrated that the grants were important for the municipalities and target groups. However, the study showed that the evaluation of the various projects' goal attainment could have been improved, as the municipalities did not always know if their projects had succeeded or not. An evaluation of governmental grants to NGOs by Lorenzen (2010) demonstrated that the grants allowed governmental actors to define the activities of the NGOs in such a way that they supported the government's policy goals, which was not always experienced as positive by the NGOs. Another evaluation (Skutlberg et al, 2019) of the grants for NGOs showed that the grants were important for the NGOs, their projects and service users. However, also this evaluation showed that there was a need to define goal attainment more precisely.

According to the Host Country Paper, there are three groups of social activation policies in Belgium: 1) activities promoting social participation, 2) collective modules, and 3) measures against child poverty where the federal government provides yearly

grants for local welfare offices. In Norway similar elements of social activation can be identified, such as grants from departments or directorates to reduce child poverty.

Like in Belgium, little is known regarding the outcomes of social activation measures in Norway. Furthermore, it is difficult to estimate what a successful outcome is. To some extent it seems that -- both in the host country example and from a Norwegian perspective -- social activation measures are important in their own right and, thus, their effects for participants have seldom been systematically evaluated.

Nevertheless, having a clearer definition of success for social activation measures could be useful. Do we define it from a broad and preventative perspective, including measures for children and young people or merely as social activation measures within the context of active labour market policies? Also, within the context of active labour market policies, does social activation merely have a preventative nature, and when exactly may social activities prevent adverse outcomes like longer-term unemployment or poverty?

Similarly, it is important to acknowledge the importance of the adequacy of minimum income schemes. When the basic needs are sufficiently taken care of, various social activities can be implemented, either as means to support later labour market inclusion or as merely socially oriented measures in their own right. The Qualification Programme mentioned earlier in the paper includes both perspectives (minimum income benefits and social activation). With a mix of social activation elements and work-oriented elements, the programme offers a longer-term perspective with a combination of economic security benefits and activation requirements. A quasi-experimental evaluation by Markussen and Røed (2016) identified positive effects of the programme on employment. The authors explained these positive results by efficient poverty alleviation combined with a comprehensive longer-term activation.

Although the governmental grants are especially important for the field of social activation, their overview and coordination should be improved. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that there has been some development in this area. An important example of substantial collaboration and coordination between various policy fields is the '0 to 24 collaboration' with the aim to coordinate the social activities for children and young people across governmental actors (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2021). Also, the Norwegian Government has announced a White Paper which will discuss problems and present solutions regarding the coordination of social activation measures between various policy fields (Arbeids- og Sosialdepartementet, 2020). Furthermore, in some cases the governmental grants have been used in a coordinated and systematic way, to implement and evaluate measures, for instance for low-income families (Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2017)

To sum up, the Norwegian labour market policies are work-oriented, however with an aim to meet the individual needs of welfare recipients. Moreover, certain active labour market programmes such as the Qualification Programme include elements of social activation combined with work-oriented elements. Governmental grants offer funding for municipalities, organisations and NGOs enabling local social activation projects for disadvantaged groups. However, evaluations of the organisation and implementation of these grants have shown that there is a need to better coordinate the use of these grants within and across the various policy areas in order to ensure stability and long-term efforts.

Seen from a Norwegian perspective, three learning aspects can especially be emphasised:

- Active labour market policy are primarily work-oriented, but an individualised follow-up of recipients is emphasised. In that sense, the programmes can also include social activation measures. This seem to be a good policy, given the rather well-functioning labour market. However individualised activation services require low caseloads, high quality measures and qualified and motivated staff.

- Social activation programmes are also organised by municipalities, NGOs and other organisations, often funded by governmental grants from various policy fields. In many cases these projects support target groups that cannot benefit from ordinary municipal or state-level active labour market programmes. Evaluations have demonstrated that these grants enable the various actors to implement social activation measures they would not otherwise have been able to implement. However, their goal attainment and evaluation should be improved.
- The grants are offered from several policy areas and for various target groups. In some cases, the target groups are the same, but the anticipated outcomes vary based on the policy field of the Department or Directorate. Thus, a better coordination of the grants across various policy fields should be emphasised, also to increase stability of efforts and decrease fragmentation.

5. Questions

- Do social activation measures (within labour market policies) also need to promote labour market opportunities?
- More precisely, what is meant by collective modules, that is the second line of action presented in the Host Country Paper?
- Are those receiving early retirement schemes also taking part in social activation measures?
- Are there social activation grants from several policy areas, if yes, how are they coordinated?

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Annex 1 Summary table

The main points covered by the paper are summarised below.

Situation in the peer country

- Low unemployment.
- Comprehensive welfare structures.
- Individualised and tailor-made services.
- Work-oriented active labour market policy, but with integrated social activation measures.
- Social activation measures are also funded by governmental grants.

Assessment of the policy measure

- In Belgium social activation seems to be a more defined part of active labour market policies than in Norway where social activation is mostly understood as an integrated part of work-oriented active labour market policies.
- Major parts of the Norwegian social activation programmes are organised through various governmental grants for municipalities, NGOs and other organisations.
- The grants enable local projects, often for target groups that cannot benefit from ordinary state-level or municipal activation policies.

Assessment of success factors and transferability

- Definitions and goal attainment of social activation programmes need to be improved.
- Coordination between various policy fields offering grants for social activation programmes needs to be improved.

Questions

- Is there a goal that the social activation measures (within active labour market policies) also need to promote labour market opportunities?
- More precisely, what is meant with collective modules, that is the second line of action presented in the host country paper?
- Are those receiving early retirement schemes also taking part in social activation measures?
- Are the social activation grants from several policy areas, if yes, how are they coordinated?

Annex 2 Example of relevant practice

Name of the practice:	The Qualification Programme
Year of implementation:	2007
Coordinating authority:	The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration
Objectives:	Long-term qualification, where elements of social activation are included dependent on individuals' needs. The main objective is to bring people closer to the labour market, but also with the help of social activation measures.
Main activities:	A full-day programme, tailor made based on individuals' needs.
Results so far:	In a quasi-experimental design Markussen and Røed (2016) identified positive effects of the programme on employment.

