

SOCIAL POLICY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Also by Linda Hantrais

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Social Policy in the European Union

Linda Hantrais



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Preface

In preparing for the twenty-first century, the European Union is facing a number of challenges which have confirmed the importance of social affairs for the policy agenda. Demographic trends in combination with technological and structural change, the prospects for enlargement of the Union and the extension of its sphere of influence have created new pressures on welfare systems and raised questions about the feasibility and desirability of achieving a common social policy. The ambivalence of member states over the Union's responsibility for social affairs, together with these other concerns, explains the enduring interest shown in the social dimension of the Union by policy analysts and justifies a wide-ranging review of developments in European social policy since the 1950s.

The primary aim in this book is to examine the interconnections between social policy making at European level and national policy formulation and implementation. By comparing the policy-making styles and objectives of national governments and by analysing the possible impact of social policies formulated by the Union on measures adopted by member states, an attempt is made to unravel this complex interactive process. Rather than describing national welfare systems one by one and subsequently comparing them across member states, the book is organised thematically. The main areas of social policy that the Union has addressed are examined using international comparisons to exemplify the measures introduced in different member states in response to similar social problems. Cross-national comparisons afford an opportunity to gain a better understanding of conceptual variations in the frameworks created by national systems of welfare while also illustrating the specificity of each country and the effect of cultural embedding.

This approach is based on the assumption that students and analysts of comparative social policy are concerned with identifying the social determinants of policy and are looking for 'culturally specific causes, variables, institutional arrangements and outcomes' (Higgins, 1981, p. 14). They will also want to be aware of the range of policy options available (Room, 1994, p. 23). The underlying hypothesis in the book is that national governments differ in their policy responses to common social problems. All member states have had to tackle broadly similar

issues over the period since the European Economic Community (EEC) was created in 1957: for example how to prepare their workforce for rapidly changing labour markets in a context of widespread unemployment and marginalisation; or how to cope with the growing demand for ever higher standards of health care, particularly amongst older people during retirement, in the face of the rising cost of providing services. The solutions adopted to common problems reflect varying socio-economic conditions as well as differing political ideologies and conceptions of the legitimacy of state intervention.

The first chapter provides an insight into the factors shaping European social policy by charting the Union's social remit over time. A major obstacle to effective social policy making at European level has been the lack of a common understanding of central concepts and the societal contexts within which social policy is formulated and implemented. In both the first and second chapters a number of questions are therefore raised about the status of social policy in the Union and the problems associated with harmonisation and convergence of national systems: Why has the Union developed a social policy? What are its aims and objectives? How does it operate? Should it be aimed at achieving a minimum or maximum level of protection? These questions lead on to the debate about citizenship versus workers' rights, equalisation, competition, economic and social cohesion, including discussion of the notions of social dumping, welfare tourism and social devaluation.

The social protection systems of the six original EEC member states can be considered as variants of what has come to be known as the continental model of welfare. The new members which joined the Community in the 1970s and 1980s did not share the same welfare models. While the goal of harmonising social protection would seem to have become more pressing with the move towards the Single European Market (SEM), economic and monetary union, doubts were increasingly expressed about the feasibility and desirability of harmonising very different welfare systems. In the second chapter the main obstacles to harmonisation are examined, and the shift away from the original policy aims is charted through co-ordination, co-operation, cohesion, mutual recognition and convergence, leading to an analysis of national welfare systems in the context of the three waves of membership of the Community in the 1950s, 1970s and 1980s.

Education and training provide a good example of the shift towards a more pragmatic approach to harmonisation. After many years work comparing the content and level of qualifications across the Commu-

nity in an attempt to reach agreement over transferability from one member state to another, general directives were issued on the mutual recognition of the equivalence of diplomas. Measures of output suggest, however, that recognition does not mean vocational and educational training have been standardised. In the third chapter, after a review of the lengthy process leading to the mutual recognition directive and a survey of initiatives at European level to encourage mobility amongst students and young workers, comparisons are made of developments in the educational and training systems of individual member states.

Several articles in the EEC Treaty were devoted to the improvement of living and working conditions as a means of equalising opportunities and promoting mobility. Despite the early interest shown by the Community, comparisons of working conditions and health and safety at work, as governed by national labour law, demonstrate that member states are far from sharing common standards. In the fourth chapter attention is given to the relationship between European regulations and national policies for health and safety at work, work-time arrangements and public health.

Family policy is only indirectly affected by employment rights. It is therefore an area where member states have been reluctant to seek agreement on a common policy and where the Commission, like many national governments, has preferred to monitor the situation rather than prescribing family policy measures. Although some convergence in family patterns may be occurring spontaneously due to common demographic trends, member states have continued to hold differing views on what constitutes the 'benefit' family and on the aims and objectives of family policy. In the fifth chapter family policies are situated in relation to demographic trends in an attempt to assess the extent of convergence, whether automatically or as a result of intervention at European level.

The employment model of social protection that has become increasingly dominant in the Union puts women at a disadvantage in access to welfare. It also raises the issue of eligibility for social citizenship rights. Directives on equal opportunities in respect of equal pay for work of equal value, equal treatment and employment-related social insurance rights have sought to redress the balance for women who are economically active for the greater part of their working lives. Not all women, however, remain in paid employment, and European law has not properly responded to the needs of women as mothers. In the sixth chapter the relationship between European and

national policies is analysed with regard to the situation of women as recipients of social welfare.

In a context where greater life expectancy has been accompanied by heavy demands on health and care services, member states have become increasingly concerned, individually and collectively, about the effects of the ageing of the population on social protection systems. In the seventh chapter the focus is on different forms of provision for older and disabled people, including maintenance and caring, arrangements for transferring rights for mobile workers and pensioners and the overall impact of policy on living standards.

The effects of the emphasis placed on employment rights by most member states in a context of economic recession, rising unemployment and demographic ageing may have been offset to some extent by the Structural Funds. In the 1970s the core-periphery debate intensified, as the problem of poverty moved onto the policy agenda. Much of the discussion focused on the question of whether social insurance should provide a minimum or maximum level of benefits. The prospect of greater freedom of movement heightened concern about welfare tourism and the exporting of poverty from one member state to another. In the eighth chapter these issues are examined with reference to the process of marginalisation, attempts to define and measure poverty and policies designed to combat social exclusion.

Co-ordination of social protection systems, mutual recognition of qualifications, the general improvement of living and working conditions, monitoring of family policy, directives on equality of access to social benefits and measures to reduce poverty at European level were all intended, at least in part, to break down barriers to the free movement of workers within the Union. Information about intra-European mobility suggests that, despite changes in the pattern of labour flows, net mobility has remained relatively low. Even if the Union's policies on the recognition of qualifications or the co-ordination of social protection systems may have some impact on the formal obstacles to mobility, other difficulties associated with linguistic and cultural traditions may be more resistant to European social policy initiatives. In the ninth chapter these issues are considered with regard to both intra-European and non-European mobility.

In the final chapter the progress of the social dimension of the Union is tracked across the topics which are identified in the introductory chapters and recur throughout the book in discussion of different areas of social policy: the unequal weight given in policy measures to the social dimension in relation to economic aspects of the internal market;

the centrality of workers' as compared to citizenship rights in the provision of welfare and income maintenance; the shift away from the objective of harmonisation towards a convergence strategy; disparities between national social protection systems as an obstacle to convergence and the development of different models of welfare from one policy area to another; the interconnections between European and national policies; the coherence and autonomy of European social policy and the Union's competence as a social actor. In retracing these themes an attempt is made to show how European social policy has been shaped and constrained by strong national policies while, nonetheless, developing a focus of its own. In conclusion the prospects are examined for a more broadly based European social policy by the end of the twentieth century.

Although the chapters in the book are linked by common themes and approaches so as to provide a cumulative and wide-ranging overview of social policy in the Union and its member states, each of Chapters 3 to 9 can be studied independently by readers wishing to explore any one policy area in isolation. To supplement the Bibliography which covers works cited throughout the book, separate lists have been compiled of the key policy documents and legislation referred to in each chapter. Throughout the text, references in square brackets indicate the Union documents cited in the boxes at the end of chapters. The appendices briefly describe the Union's policy-making framework and the main organisational features of the welfare systems in the member states that were signatories to the Maastricht Treaty in 1992.

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