



SKOS CSIAS COSAS

Schweizerische Konferenz für Sozialhilfe
Conférence suisse des institutions d'action sociale
Conferenza svizzera delle istituzioni dell'azione sociale
Conferenza svizra da l'agid sozial



Deutscher Verein
für öffentliche
und private Fürsorge e.V.



**Social benefit – developments, challenges, and
consequences.
A comparative perspective: Austria, Germany and
Switzerland**

Report

ICSW experts meeting
November 9 & 10, 2015
Basel
Switzerland

English

SKOS
Monbijoustrasse 22
3000 Bern 14

1. Introduction

On November 9 and 10, 2015, the Schweizerische Konferenz für Sozialhilfe SKOS (Swiss Conference for Social Welfare), the Deutscher Verein (German Association), and the ÖKSA (Austrian Committee for Social Work) met for the fifth time within the scope of a German-language area meeting of experts during the ICSW Europe. It was agreed to organize a SKOS meeting at the Hotel Bildungszentrum 21 in Basel. All three organizations are ICSW members.

The experts meeting is to serve cross-border knowledge exchange and discuss current sociopolitical topics with tried and tested experts in the German-language area.

Europe's economic crisis of the past years aggravated the spread of poverty poignantly. The high unemployment rates, the economic bottlenecks and the austerity packages in numerous countries led to significant emergency situations and limited perspectives for many. Furthermore, the current refugee crisis has placed additional requirements towards the countries and their populations. These developments are accompanied by a heated debate on the financing amounts and structuring of livelihood security from which wealthier countries such as Switzerland, Germany, and Austria are not excluded. Thus, amongst others, it is argued that social welfare benefits are too high and that the public sector needs to save costs. A public discrediting of social institutions and social welfare recipients accompanies the debate. Together with the demand for a cutting of social benefits, a discussion as to incentives to strengthen work integration was also launched. Within the scope of the debate, it is often forgotten that social aid not only means ensuring the livelihoods of individuals but also contributes significantly to social peace.

The meeting focused on political, economic, legal and societal developments and their impact on the current debate on the structure of social aid. Comparable trends, differences and strategies for action were discussed and analyzed.

Eighteen experts, representatives from the field of science, from the authorities, and from independent institutions participated. The program spanned two half-days to allow for travel, a compact setting, and an informal part, with a dinner.

2. Program

1st day: November 9, 2015

- 1:00 **Welcome address**
Dorothee Guggisberg, SKOS. Michael Chalupka, ÖKSA. Michael Löher, DV
- 14:15 – 17:30 **Social policy examined: social aid within the context of the current political, economic and legal developments in the three countries**
Keynotes:
Switzerland: Prof. Dr. Carlo Knöpfel, University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland
Austria: Mag. Dr. Marcel Fink, Institute for Higher Studies, University of Vienna
Germany: Prof. Dr. Gerhard Bäcker, University of Duisburg-Essen
Moderation: Dorothee Guggisberg, SKOS
- 15:30 Coffee break
- 16:00 **Plenary discussion:**
State of current discussion and developments in the three countries
- 18:00 Visit of and pre-dinner drinks at the work integration project OVERALL
- 19:30 Dinner at the Restaurant Fischerstube

2nd day: November 10, 2015

- 8:30 **Welcome and summary of 1st day**
- 9:15 **Impact of the political, economic and legal developments on social aid: Structure, scope of performance and perspectives for social aid**
Keynotes:
Germany: Reiner Höft-Dzemski, German Association
Austria: Mag. Andrea Otter, Labor Ministry, Vienna
Switzerland: Dr. iur. Claudia Hänzi, canton of Solothurn
Moderation: Michael Chalupka, ÖKSA
- 10:30 Coffee break
- 11:00 **Plenary discussion**
- Future-oriented models and practical solutions in the different countries
- Conclusions on social aid provided to persons impacted by poverty, institutional framework conditions, and sociopolitical perspectives
- 13:00 End of meeting

3. Participants

Switzerland

Dorothee Guggisberg	Managing Director of the SKOS
Dr. iur. Claudia Hänzi	Office for social security, canton of Solothurn,
Marianne Hochuli	Caritas Switzerland, Lucerne
Christin Kehrl	Expert Division Basics, SKOS
Dr. rer. pol. Carlo Knöpfel	FHNW – University for Social Work
Nicole Wagner	Social Aid Basel Town

Germany

Prof. Dr. Gerhard Bäcker	University of Duisburg-Essen
Reiner Höft-Dzemski	German Association, Berlin
Sabine Knickrehm	Judge at the Federal Social Court, Kassel
Michael Löher	Member of the Board of the German Association, Berlin

Austria

Mag. Michael Chalupka	President of the Austrian Committee for Social Work
Mag. Dr. Marcel Fink	Institute for Higher Studies, University of Vienna
Mag. Martina Kargl	Social expert for Caritas, member of the Austrian Conference on Poverty
Irene Köhler	Managing Director of the ÖKSA
Mag. Andrea Otter	Federal Labor Ministry, Vienna
Peter Stanzl	Health and Social Planning, Vienna
Dr. Christine Stelzer-Orthofer	Johannes Kepler University, Linz
Sandra Walz	Institute for Social Services, Vorarlberg

4. Report on the conference

The two half-days were structured in the same manner. Every country held one keynote speech in form of an introduction to the topic. The subsequent moderated discussion clarified questions and dealt with specific aspects to greater length.

The slides of the keynotes have been enclosed to this report and will therefore not be summarized herein.

Monday, November 9, 2015

Social policy examined: Social aid within the context of the current political, economic, and legal developments in the three countries

For quite a while now, social policy and social aid, in particular, have clearly come under closer examination in all three countries, with slight nuances to be made out. The achievements of the welfare state have been under pressure for a longer period of time.

Central aspects could be identified across borders: The increase of precarious and atypical forms of employment, lasting long-term unemployment, and the long-term provision of social aid by the corresponding institutions. The forecasts of all three countries lead to believe that the at-risk-of poverty rate will continue to increase in future, that the number of older social aid beneficiaries will grow, and that the labor market integration of persons with a performance impairment be increasingly difficult. The economic and societal changes in Austria, Germany and Switzerland are comparable: progressive deindustrialization and production relocation, developments in the low wage sector, and the demographic developments. Luckily enough, youth employment rates in all three countries are low in comparison to Southern Europe. Despite economic growth and a good employment situation, the social welfare quota remains on a constantly high level. An increasing gap between high and low -work intensity households, i.e. households with two incomes and households without an income, was also identified - neither politics nor legislation have reacted comprehensively to these trends. Focus is placed on individual measures to restrict access to benefits or to cut the latter, to restructure integration areas and concentrate on labor market integration. Generally, with regard to the social security system, you could speak of a shift from an insurance system to one that caters to covering needs as well as of a shifting of costs and performance reductions in all three countries.

Tuesday, November 10, 2015

Impact of the political, economic, and legal developments on social aid: Structure, scope of performances, and perspectives of social aid

Although social welfare benefits in Germany, Austria and Switzerland differ with regard to amounts, mechanisms, and structure, basically, all three countries have functioning aid systems. However, social welfare benefits have come under pressure throughout and will most probably be reduced. The political debates that coin social aid are the same in all three countries: It is claimed that the benefits are too high and too attractive for migrants, that the incentive to work is too low, that recipients are in a better position than persons with low incomes who do not request social aid.

Today, experts in all three countries endeavor to defend the status quo and prevent a further dismantling. There is a trend, albeit one that varies with regard to its implementation, due to the prevailing conditions and legal bases, to harmonize social welfare benefits throughout. All three countries are asking themselves similar questions with regard to the competencies of their governments, states, and municipalities. Currently, the discussion is strongly coined by the refugee crisis. It cannot be predicted whether the debate will intensify because of this. However, all countries fear that basic social security will be subjected to further reductions. The general focus on labor market integration neglects that a majority of the persons concerned cannot be integrated into the labor market. Poverty is also a question of education but the educational system cannot solve the problems on its own. Cross-discipline solutions that could be implemented in all political fields need to be defined. Consequently, there is need for the definition of a series of indicators to illustrate social aid performances and render them transparent.

Conclusion

In the details, the benefit systems of the three countries differ but basically, the political discussions are comparable – although, for instance, Switzerland was considerably less impacted by the refugee issue at the time of the meeting. Despite social benefits having come under pressure in most countries, in general, experts have identified a pronounced defensive debate. The consequences of a bare minimum of long-term social assistance on society are hardly discussed – nor is the societal impact of the uncoupling of certain parts of our society.

The participants agreed that the meeting was a success. The quality of the discussions, the contact with colleagues from other countries, the professional exchange and the possibility to foster the further development of positions were greatly appreciated.

The meeting allowed for the concrete discussion of the essential aspects of the ICSW program on regional level as well as making these aspects more visible. Knowledge exchange and the sharing of best practices proved to be very stimulating for all.

Bern, March 2016

Dorothee Guggisberg, Managing Director of the SKOS