



# SOCIAL POLICY REVIEW 36

**Analysis and Debate in Social Policy, 2024**

In association with the Social Policy Association



Edited by Božena Sojka, Stephan Köppe,  
Andrea Parma and Ruggero Cefalo



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# Introduction: New agendas in social policy research

*Bożena Sojka, Stephan Köppe, Andrea Parma and Ruggero Cefalo*

As we stand at the threshold of a new phase for the Social Policy Review, it is both exciting and inspiring to envision the future directions that will shape our editorial journey. As new editors, we (Bożena Sojka, Stephan Köppe, Andrea Parma and Ruggero Cefalo) want to share some thoughts on the overarching themes that we aim to weave into the fabric of our upcoming issues. First, we aspire to broaden our horizons and transcend geographical boundaries by fostering more comparative analyses and embracing a truly global perspective. Our commitment to inclusivity and diversity extends to the content we publish, as we seek to engage with a diverse range of scholars, practitioners and perspectives worldwide. Second, while rooted in the UK, we recognise the importance of contextualising our narratives within a global framework. By positioning the UK's experiences, policies and research within a broader international context, we aim to contribute to a richer understanding of global dynamics and interconnected societal challenges. Finally, the Social Policy Review has always thrived on its multidisciplinary approach, but as social policy scholars, we aim to put our discipline at the core. Across the UK, social policy departments have vanished or have been amalgamated into other schools, and we plan to put social policy concepts, approaches and methods at the core of each contribution within the Social Policy Review. Within that context, we will continue to encourage cross-disciplinary collaborations and welcome submissions that bridge various academic realms; we aim to create a vibrant space where diverse perspectives converge to address complex social issues. These ambitious goals align with our vision of fostering a book series that not only reflects the evolving landscape of social policy but also actively contributes to shaping it. We believe that by embracing a global outlook, contextualising the UK's experiences and nurturing a robust social policy discipline in a multidisciplinary context, we can offer our readers and contributors a platform that is intellectually stimulating, inclusive and at the forefront of scholarly discourse.

*Social Policy Review 36* includes three sections, which explore local and multilevel trends in social policy, discuss policy responses to working-age risks and analyse social policy developments and transformations, such as welfare developments in the Asia-Pacific region and policy responses

to forced migration due to persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations. While we maintain strong analyses of UK developments, within this edition, we also strongly feature social policy trends in Europe (Austria and Italy) and Asia (Thailand and Japan), with a comparative frame throughout all chapters. The landscape of recent and ongoing social policy reforms in the UK is richly woven with contemporary issues that resonate throughout the chapters of this book. As we delve into the intricate fabric of current political developments, the imminent general election in the UK serves as a compelling backdrop against which critical facets of policy challenges and societal implications are dissected by Colliver, Hudson, Lunt and Meers, by Telford and Wistow, by Cameron, by Haux, and by Fakoush and Machin. Sukhampha, Cittadini, Giannoni and Kato all provide further insights on the implications of policy developments in Europe, Asia and Australia that could also be significant for the British social policy landscape.

Colliver, Hudson, Lunt and Meers ([Chapter 1](#)) analyse measures aimed at countering the rising cost of living in England, spotlighting the role of local governments. The response to the cost-of-living crisis (COLC), primarily devolved to local authorities, reveals a landscape fraught with short-term programmes and inadequate financing. The intricate interplay of limited funds, uncertain time frames and insufficient planning has resulted in path dependencies, constraining local authorities in crafting flexible and impactful schemes.

Telford and Wistow ([Chapter 2](#)) turn their lens on the effects of the Conservative government's Levelling Up agenda. Through profound interviews with residents in a neglected region of Northern England, they provide a vivid account of lived experiences marred by spatial inequalities, marked by feelings of neglect, job loss and high crime rates. Despite past policy failures, spatial inequalities remain a contested issue for the upcoming general election, with the looming risk of discontented residents turning to extreme populist parties.

Cameron ([Chapter 3](#)) explores the stories of alleged perpetrators within the framework of antisocial behaviour (ASB) policies in social housing in England and Wales. By underscoring the intersecting vulnerabilities often overlooked in behaviour-focused interventions, Cameron warns against discriminatory practices. The chapter exposes the potential pitfalls of demanding behaviour change without considering underlying vulnerabilities, especially for those with disabilities or experiencing abuse.

Sukhampha ([Chapter 4](#)) dissects the gradual decentralisation of primary healthcare in Thailand, emphasising both opportunities and concerns for health workers. While the shift allows for more agile service delivery, fears of growing power among local politicians and untrained civil servants persist. The lack of clear guidelines regarding devolution contributes to

resistance from local authorities, highlighting the delicate balance between decentralisation and centralised control.

Cittadini (Chapter 5) takes an intersectional perspective on minimum income schemes, exposing gaps in the existing literature. While the literature has flourished in addressing eligibility, adequacy, conditionality and impact, the concept of intersectionality remains largely overlooked. Cittadini's chapter lays the groundwork for her upcoming empirical research, which aims to bridge this gap and provide a more nuanced understanding of the intersectionality within minimum income schemes.

Giannoni's (Chapter 6) scrutiny of the governance structure of youth labour market policies in Italy and Austria unveils disparities in coordination and implementation. Italy's decentralised approach, marred by weak coordination and a lack of uniform activation at the local level, contrasts with Vienna's well-structured coordination, involving federal and regional levels. The analysis sheds light on the varying success rates in intercepting young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) and the role of local context in compensating for weaknesses.

In a meticulous examination, Haux (Chapter 7) conducts a structured review of childcare reform proposals, revealing three pivotal challenges: affordability and access for parents; inadequate government support for providers; and workforce shortages. The impending general election sets the stage for heated debates on the reform proposals issued by political parties and think tanks, which collectively aim to bridge gaps in parental support and childcare provision. The discussions will orbit the pivotal question of achieving affordability and identifying the beneficiaries of these proposed reforms.

Kato (Chapter 8) examines the development of welfare states in Japan and Australia, emphasising the shift from postwar models to contemporary reforms. While traditional comparative welfare state research views both countries as having residual models based on institutional features and the scale of social expenditure, the chapter challenges this perception. By considering alternative concepts like 'social protection by other means', 'functional equivalents' and 'welfare through work', the analysis reveals nuanced differences in their approaches. Also, the chapter underscores the significance of focusing on differences within specific welfare state models before globalisation and post-industrialisation to comprehend the dynamics of radical reform. While Australia and Japan shared the same 'employment-based welfare state', their distinct policy measures concerning international competitiveness influenced the sustainability and timing of reforms. Policy legacy impacted reform timing, but political decisions made within given political institutions and ideational contexts played a decisive role in shaping the course of reform.

Finally, Fakoush and Machin (Chapter 9) delve into the social, human and economic implications of bespoke resettlement policies in the UK,

focusing on three initiatives. Their analysis scrutinises the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), the Hong Kong British Nationals (Overseas) visa scheme and the Homes for Ukraine scheme. The differential treatment among resettled individuals raises concerns about the selective nature of these programmes and their alignment with broader trends in UK immigration policy.

As we navigate this compilation of insightful chapters, the multifaceted nature of contemporary policy challenges and their societal impacts unfolds, offering readers a comprehensive understanding of the complexities shaping the current social policy landscape in the UK, within Europe and across the globe.

## Part I

# Local and multilevel trends in social policy

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# Passing the buck from Whitehall to town hall: local government responses to the cost-of-living crisis in England

*Kit Colliver, John Hudson, Neil Lunt and Jed Meers*

## Introduction

Previous editions of Social Policy Review illustrate Janus-faced dynamics in the UK welfare state. Facing one way are efforts to centralise and standardise means-tested support. Academic critiques of an overly centralised welfare system stretch from the Thatcher era through to New Labour governments (Clegg, 2005). Spicker's (2013: 3–23) review of the 2010–15 Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government's flagship Universal Credit reforms demonstrates how narratives of simplifying, standardising and digitising social security have been tied to a centralisation agenda, a point echoed in critiques of 'centralised control' across the austerity agenda of the Coalition and Conservative governments of the 2010s (Etherington, 2020: 53).

Facing the other way has been a parallel process of localisation around certain kinds of welfare provision. The contributions on 'rescaling social policy' in *Social Policy Review 21* (see, for example, Keating, 2009; Wallace, 2009) foreshadowed the coupling of localisation and austerity – characterised by Lowndes and Pratchett (2012) as 'austerity localism' – where a 'cut and devolve' approach characterised the abolition of the Social Fund, the replacement of Council Tax Benefit with localised schemes and the reliance on Discretionary Housing Payments to mitigate large-scale reductions to Housing benefit (Hick, 2022). Here, the central government 'passes the buck' to local authorities to mitigate reductions to centrally administered entitlement (Meers, 2019: 41–2; Meers et al, 2024). Local government has come to play a central role in providing welfare support in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 'cost-of-living crisis' (COLC), through the COVID Winter Grant Scheme, the COVID Local Support Grant and subsequently the Household Support Fund (HSF) and a patchwork of other schemes.

Building on research exploring local responses to the COLC in the context of these constraints, this chapter examines the welfare localisation dynamic between central and local government in England during the COLC, arguing that this case illustrates a substantial policy shift in responsibilities for the design and distribution of state support. First, we sketch the background of the COLC response at the local level in terms of both policy challenges and responses. We then outline the research methods we use to explore the local responses to the COLC, before presenting findings on three key themes: the move to welfare localism in the context of depleted local authority capacity and resilience; pressures on local welfare scheme design and delivery; and the expanding role of the local welfare ecosystem. The chapter concludes by offering some wider reflections on the implications of these trends.

## **The COLC at the local level**

### *Operating in a context of crisis*

UK local authorities have faced a decade and a half of successive crises, bookmarked at one end by recession triggered by the Global Financial Crisis and at the other by a sustained inflation-driven COLC that began in early 2022, with a prolonged period of public sector austerity, the uncertainty arising from Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic in-between. These crises have squeezed local authorities from two sides, as they have been subject to cuts in funding by the central government and reduced spending power due to inflation, alongside increases in demand for statutory and non-statutory support services among local residents. This extended period of turbulence forms a crucial context for our analysis of local responses to the COLC for two key reasons.

First, while recent inflationary pressure is historically significant, prolonged economic stagnation and public sector retrenchment had already dented the living standards of many. In October 2022, the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) reached its highest level for over 40 years (at 11.1 per cent) and sat above 5 per cent for almost two years from November 2021 ([Harari et al, 2023](#)). Rising energy costs placed many under significant pressure, even after government schemes mitigated increases, with 15 per cent of households affected by fuel poverty and 46 per cent by fuel stress in April 2023 ([COLG, 2023](#)). As the left-wing British think tank the Resolution Foundation notes, stagnating incomes and persistently high inequality have dogged UK living standards for two decades; between 2007 and 2018, median disposable household income before housing costs fell by 2 per cent in the UK but grew by 27 per cent in Germany and 34 per cent in France, with the Gini coefficient after housing costs remaining large and the highest among all European nations apart from Bulgaria ([Corlett et al, 2022: 19–22](#)).

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF's) annual UK poverty audits show complex trends beneath the headline figures, with growing gaps in the social safety net representing a key factor in rising severe hardship. The proportion of households classed as being in very deep poverty increased from 37 per cent in 2002/03 to a high of 47 per cent in 2018/19 (JRF, 2023b: 27), and destitution has risen sharply in recent years, doubling between 2017 and 2022, affecting an estimated 1.8 million households in 2022 (Fitzpatrick et al, 2023: 2). Food insecurity has increased significantly, including a very sharp increase in the use of food banks: the Trussell Trust recorded a tenfold increase in its distribution of emergency food parcels between 2012/13 and 2022/23, from around 0.3 million to 3 million (Pratt, 2023: 4). While the COLC has exacerbated these pressures, they do not reflect the short-term impacts of rising inflationary pressures alone.

Second, while the sharp increase in inflationary pressures created significant budgetary challenges for local authorities, raising difficult questions about which areas of activity to prioritise over others, it did so following a long period of cuts in central government funding for local government activity that significantly altered the profile of spending and the financial resilience of local authorities. Post-2010 austerity agendas were the central factor in a 17.5 per cent reduction in the spending power of local authorities in England between 2009/10 and 2019/20, and while a more generous settlement was determined for 2020/21 – before the pandemic upturned all plans – this was still some 10 per cent below 2009/10 levels (Atkins and Hoddinott, 2023). While one strand of local government research positions English local authorities as having strong anticipatory capacities, contributing to financial resilience in the face of crisis by pre-empting shocks before they arrive (Barbera et al, 2017, 2021), others (see, for example, Ahrens and Ferry, 2020) have argued that the COVID-19 pandemic represented a more acute form of financial stress than the 'slow burn' of austerity politics, one to which local authorities were less equipped to respond.

The profile of local spending has shifted as a consequence of these trends, with an even greater emphasis now placed on statutory activity, such as children's and adult social care, as discretionary activity has been cut to make budget savings (Harris et al, 2019). This trend has likely been amplified by additional social care spending during the pandemic (Ogden and Phillips, 2020; Atkins and Hoddinott, 2023) and rising inflationary pressures since 2022 (Sandford, 2023). Perilous finances have led a number of local authorities to issue Section 114 notices because there is no prospect of staying within the budget for a particular financial year (Hoddinot, 2023), typically as a result of a fall in grant income, rising costs and settling equal pay claims (Sandford, 2023). In September 2023, Birmingham, one of the largest local authorities, issued such a notice, and the Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities (SIGOMA),<sup>1</sup> representing municipal councils,

suggested that one in ten were facing Section 114 notices, with its chair warning: ‘The funding system is completely broken. Councils have worked miracles for the past 13 years, but there is nothing left’ (SIGOMA, 2023). In a similar vein, the chair of the Local Government Association earlier warned that ‘many of the vital services [local authorities] provide face an existential crisis’ because of rising budgetary pressures and the lack of a viable plan to address the long-term pressures they face (Kenyon, 2022).

In short, going into the COLC, many local authorities were already in a position whereby they were operating, on the one hand, in a context of heightened need and, on the other, in a context of significant budgetary constraint. These dual pressures were significantly heightened by rapidly rising inflation from late 2021 onwards.

### *Delivering a cost-of-living response*

Despite these difficult circumstances, central government has asked local authorities in England to develop and/or implement important new systems of locally administered welfare support as a key part of the COLC response, devolving significant discretion to them in determining how to use additional central government funding during this period. The largest component of this new landscape has been the HSF, which provides funding for local authorities to support ‘vulnerable households with essentials’ (DWP, 2023 [2021]). To date, there have been four waves – October 21–March 22, April 22–September 22, October 23–March 23 and April 23–March 24 – with total funding of around £2.5 billion (DWP, 2023 [2021], 2023). An earlier review by Colliver et al (2023) found evidence of efforts to target low-income households, via eligibility for free school meals or council tax support, or those who might be struggling (as evidenced by council tax debt or the use of energy prepayment meters). Westminster guidance instructed local authorities to allow direct applications for support from households in need; some did through their own means-tested allocations, while others allotted portions of funding to their existing local hardship/discretionary and/or crisis funds. Very few councils targeted households based on demographic criteria alone, but exceptions included funding directed at families with children, hospital discharges, care leavers and young people. A second key scheme with a discretionary component was the council tax energy rebate scheme; this primarily comprised mandatory payments of £150 to all households in council tax bands A–D<sup>2</sup> but also included £144 million of discretionary funding for authorities to provide additional support for vulnerable households. Colliver et al (2023) showed that the vast majority of councils used existing council tax categories to allocate their discretionary council tax energy rebates, with only a small proportion

targeting households according to their demographic status or allowing open applications from any households in hardship.

These centrally funded but locally administered schemes sat alongside a range of other local responses to the COLC. For instance, most councils set up cost-of-living ‘information and advice’ webpages early on in the crisis, and many adopted schemes like ‘Warm Spaces’ that utilise council-owned spaces like libraries or supported community partners to make provisions (COLG, 2023; Colliver et al, 2023). Pre-existing local welfare systems often played a key role, sometimes with additional resources raised to bolster activity, and some authorities declared a cost-of-living emergency (Colliver et al, 2023).

As this shows, there has been significant policy development at the local level in response to the COLC. However, there has been little written to date on this fast-moving area, and there are important questions to be asked about both the efficacy of the approach that has been adopted and the capacity of local authorities to play a lead role in COLC responses after being buffeted by more than a decade of crises and cuts.

## **Methods**

The following analysis draws on two sets of data: surveys with elected councillors and interviews with local authority staff. We surveyed elected councillors on topics including: the impact of the COLC on their local area; the effectiveness of key organisations and COLC initiatives; the groups at risk of destitution; the risk of closure for local businesses; the sufficiency of resourcing in local public services; the capacity of the local authority to respond to future shocks; and satisfaction with local council and Westminster government COLC responses. The surveys were administered by Survation on behalf of the research team. Councillors registered on their database were invited to complete the surveys online over two periods: 23 December 2022–11 January 2023 (Wave 1,  $n = 701$ ) and 7–31 August 2023 (Wave 2,  $n = 717$ ). Survation weighted the response data to the profile of elected councillors in the UK according to political party and region using demographic targets derived from Open Council Data UK.

We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with senior council officials ( $n = 25$ ) across 21 English local authorities between April and August 2023. Officials were recruited following a purposive sampling strategy to provide diversity across: (1) local authority type (that is, whether unitary, county council or a London borough); (2) size (determined with reference to their overall HSF budget allocation for the 2022/23 and 2023/24 financial years, with authorities divided into five quintiles, from the largest budgets to the lowest); and (3) political control. The distribution of participants across types of local authority and geographical region is summarised in [Table 1.1](#). Topic guides covered: the current impact of the COLC in the local

**Table 1.1:** Overview of interview participants

Interviews by local authority type		Interviews by region	
Unitary authority	10	North East	3
Metropolitan council	2	North West	2
District council	2	East Midlands	4
Combined authority	1	West Midlands	2
London borough	2	South East	6
County council	4	South West	4

authority area; political and practical challenges and adaptations, including budget changes, policy innovations and interactions with the national COLC response; the current and future capacity of their local authority to cope with crises; and – for those staff involved in the administration of local welfare support – questions about the design and operation of local responses (such as the use of HSF support). Interviews took place online using Zoom, lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and were digitally audio recorded, professionally transcribed and analysed thematically in NVivo 12.

## Findings: local authority capacity and the local welfare ecosystem

### *Welfare localism in a time of crisis*

Local variations in welfare provision have sometimes been championed as the best way of responding to geographical variations in need (Grover, 2012: 359). It is this logic that has characterised the increasing reliance on local authorities to meet the needs of households as centralised social entitlement falls short. When setting out the rationale of the HSF in 2022, then Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak underscored that the money was targeted at local authorities because they ‘are best placed to help those in need in their local areas’ (HC Deb, 23 March 2022, vol 711, col 451), a sentiment since echoed routinely by government ministers when challenged about the scheme in Parliament, underscoring that ‘local authorities, with their local ties and knowledge, are best placed to identify those most in need’ (HC Answer, 6 June 2022, vol 715). This has been a familiar playbook since the Welfare Reform Act 2012, where localised provision was tied to a series of reductions in support, a so-called ‘cut and devolve’ approach (Meers, 2019: 41–2).

Although a localised form of welfare provision could have much to commend it (for their articulation of ‘progressive localism’, see, for instance, Featherstone et al, 2021), local authorities are not being provided with sufficient financial support to meet either the wide-ranging obligations they are being tasked

with or the huge scale of demand in their local areas. Our surveys of elected councillors offer a sense of how the COLC has been experienced at the local level, with stark concerns about the risk to vulnerable groups – for instance, with eight in ten councillors expressing fears that children in low-income families were at risk of destitution – together with the under-resourcing of key public services and doubts about their local authorities' capacity to withstand future shocks (see [Figure 1.1](#); see also [COLG, 2023](#)).

Interviewees expressed concern about the longer-term capacity of local authorities if the current direction of travel remained unaltered, seeing risks both in terms of further cuts to local authority provision and of the impact of growing unmet needs on future service demands:

'I think we're seeing, now starting to see that wider impact of not only those basic essentials not being met in terms of eating and heating, but we are now starting to see big rises in people who can't afford their mortgages, their rents, are having to give up their homes, and we're starting to see a big increase now in people presenting at homelessness as well. So, the impact then on the wider system in terms of children's services, adult services is absolutely huge, and I think the cost to the local authorities is huge as well.' (Local Authority 8 [LA8])

'We have a very generous local welfare provision budget as well, and those have all pretty much been protected over the last few years, and I think that has made a really big difference in terms of us being able to stand up a response cos it's those sorta services that have come to the fore when the cost-of-living crisis impacted and also through the pandemic. I think where the concern is is the future because, obviously, we know the council budget's not gonna get any better and there will be a need to make more savings next year.' (LA4)

'So, we are entering quite choppy waters financially in local government, and I think it will be, it is a real pressure because we've got to make huge savings for the next two years, and actually sustaining the additional funding that's going in at the moment, which we have got budgeted for the rest of this year, I am quite concerned that we won't be able to sustain, and then we will be into sorta rationing the support that we're able to offer to people, which is not a good place for us to be really.' (LA6)

As these local authority reports illustrate, the impact of the COLC on local government was twofold, as increased demand from below collided with the



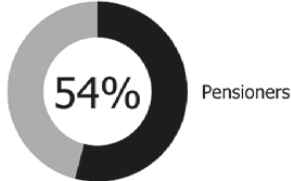
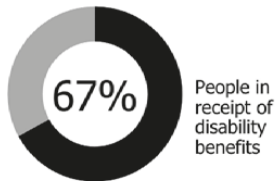
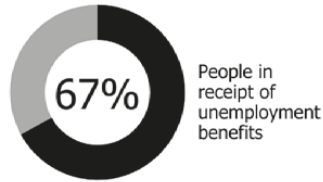
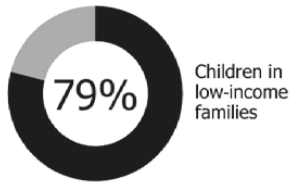
Figure 1.1: Local councillors' perspectives on the COLC

# What do local councillors say?

Survation poll of 717 local authority councillors conducted on behalf of the University of York, 07–31 August 2023

**Destitution refers to circumstances in which someone does not have the essentials necessary to eat, stay warm and dry, and keep clean**

To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree that the following groups in your local authority are at risk of destitution due to the rising cost of living?



**Local councillor views on the adequacy of public services resources and future resilience**

**75%** say their local authority **does not have sufficient resources** to respond to the rising cost of living

**73%** say their local authority **would not be well equipped** to respond to another financial shock in the future

**76%** do not feel that **health and social care services** in their local authority have sufficient resources to cope with current pressures

sustained erosion of resources. Consequently, many councils passed motions declaring a ‘crisis’ or an ‘emergency’ in the early stages of the COLC.<sup>3</sup> LA2 described this as a “declamatory act”, which simultaneously underpinned a need to draw on emergency planning structures within the council and fulfilled a political goal of signalling the scale of the upcoming challenge to central government: “It’s a very easy get-out for, for the central government to just say, ‘Oh, apply to your local council; they’ve got some money, you know, we’ve given them funding.’ But it’s not enough.” It is clear that some local authorities have experienced the central government’s choice to put discretionary local provision at the forefront of the cost-of-living response as an attempt to ‘pass the buck’ by shifting responsibility for delivering welfare support away from Westminster.

### *Pressures on local welfare scheme design and delivery*

Localised welfare provision in the UK is currently tasked with mitigating a deficient centralised means-tested social security system, which is failing to keep pace with the cost of living (JRF, 2023a). There has long been a form of localised welfare assistance in the UK to meet needs ‘of a more one-off nature’ alongside the mainstream benefits system, generally known as ‘exceptional expenses’ support (Royston, 2017: 240). As Royston (2017: 240) argues, ‘it is crucial that there is some form of safety net, outside of standard provision, which exists to give aid in a crisis’. However, that is not the role these funds are serving. Instead, a cash-limited discretionary pot – which falls far short of local need – is being tasked with supporting households ‘most in need’, with an explicit remit to direct support at those ‘falling through the cracks of national schemes’ to mitigate the COLC, such as the one-off ‘cost-of-living support’ payments given to those on Universal Credit (HC Deb, 15 June 2023, c451). Here, localised welfare support is not about the content of rights and entitlements; rather, it is a discretion to firefight the COLC with insufficient funds. In the same spirit as Grover (2012: 360), our concern is ‘not with localism *per se*’ but instead with the ‘wider policy environment in which localism operates’ currently. Two factors in particular emerged as challenges to the effective design and delivery of local authority welfare schemes: the short-notice and time-limited nature of the welfare funds distributed to local authorities by central government and the impact of long-term reductions in capacity on in-house staffing resources.

### *Strategic decision making*

At the time of writing, the HSF is in its fourth wave; even without accounting for its prior iterations under the COVID Winter Grant Scheme and COVID Local Support Grant. The lack of permanence or even predictability over

a window of a few years caused significant problems, preventing the more long-term thinking that many wanted to undertake about their scheme design. LA9 characterised this as “lurching” between short-term supports:

‘All we’ve got at the moment is we’re just lurching from six months to six months, and now we’re all really thankful that we’ve got it for a year. Well, a year’s nothing. A year doesn’t allow you to put proper resource in place. A year doesn’t really give ... you know [sighs], it doesn’t give people sustainable support.’ (LA9)

‘If you look at Household Support Fund, which started back in September ‘21, that came along, for us, that was [several] million for a six-month period, you literally had weeks to set up a response. You know that if you don’t spend that allocation of money, there’s gonna be a criticism because you’ve been given the money to support people in the community that are vulnerable.’ (LA6)

Participants underscored the difficult opportunity costs at play in terms of scheme design. In an environment where not enough money is available to meet obligations, the shape of individual schemes was rarely configured in line with local factors. Instead, schemes were designed in line with other pressures, such as concerns about changing the support offered between waves. The most prominent example of this was in respect of free school meals provision outside of term time. Following a high-profile campaign by footballer Marcus Rashford (Parnham et al, 2023: 333–5), the predecessor funds to the HSF were used across almost all local authorities to provide free school meals support, often by way of a food voucher, for eligible households outside of term time. Respondents were concerned about removing this support after households had become dependent on it, even if the money may be better targeted elsewhere:

‘I know some authorities are thinking of ditching the free school meal vouchers effectively. We’re not quite sure that’s a good idea because we feel there may have been some dependency created on those, and we’d like DWP [the Department for Work and Pensions] to come up with the exit strategy for that if they want local authorities to move away from that because that is really what the scheme was originally all about. It was about free school meals in the school holidays.’ (LA11)

For local authorities, this is a significant ongoing expense, often accounting for a large component – or sometimes even the majority – of their HSF budget. As LA12 described:

‘Each wave, roughly 50 per cent of every wave of household support has gone on free school meals, so people who receive free school meals, when it’s come to term times, we provide vouchers for all of those families to cover the children in term breaks. And that is I suppose between 45 and 50 per cent of any fund.’ (LA12)

When pushed on why they were continuing to spend such a large component of the overall budget on free school meals, the participant noted the lock-in of having provided this support in the past:

‘Are we being honest? Because politically we have to. We do not like it. We would prefer not to do it. We would like it removed and for schools to be adequately funded to be able to cover people or children in term times, like they have programmes, and the half-term programmes that the education service and LA [local authority] runs ... but politically, if you don’t do it, the uproar from residents and [elected] members who then get an earful from the residents is too much, so we gave up asking for it to be removed.’ (LA12)

As such, the tight time frames within which local authorities were obliged to formulate their cost-of-living responses, together with existing political pressures, have created conditions that favour path dependency and may undermine strategic decision making and curtail opportunities to address local need efficiently and effectively.

### *Staffing*

The administration of cost-of-living funds requires staffing resources, but this emerged as a key element within the broader picture of reduced local authority capacity. Staffing freezes, particularly for ‘non-essential’ posts, have been a common cost-saving measure employed through austerity-era budgeting and into the COLC response:

‘We’ve got an administrative support team out here, and I think probably every vacant post that they brought forward, we kicked into touch and said, “We can’t afford to do it; we know that that’s gonna have an impact on you, and we know it’s gonna put more workload on the people that are left behind, but we don’t think it’s essential, and we think you can temporarily manage”.’ (LA2)

Interview participants reported difficulties in staff recruitment and retention, as public sector pay has failed to match rising market rates. This has resulted in understaffing, loss of expertise and knock-on effects on staff morale:

‘We are starting to look at, we’ve paid one set of people retention payments to stay with us, one team; we had to because out in the open market, they would, they would probably get £3 or £4 [more] an hour; we were paying them below a rate that supermarkets pay.’ (LA3)

‘So, we’ve lost some very experienced people from the authority, and then trying to replace those people and bring that new resource in has been really challenging.’ (LA4)

‘I think there’s, there’s definitely fatigue now, you know, there’s the fatigue among staff morale.’ (LA5)

Staffing limitations, combined with the short-term nature of government support schemes, created significant difficulties in the administration of the cost-of-living funds and local welfare provision more generally. Tight delivery timescales meant that it was not always possible to recruit additional staff to support scheme roll-out. In some of our sample, staff were balancing this welfare administration role alongside other obligations (such as community engagement) or teams were small (often only one or two members of staff). LA10 raised this as their most significant challenge:

‘Yeah, it’s so key, and, as I said, it affects everything. You know, the expertise that you build to deliver it in the best way; just the time on recruitment activities is really challenging; the staff well-being – if they don’t know they’ve got a job, that’s really difficult as well. So, just knowing, I can’t overemphasise how much of an impact it has on everything, really.’ (LA10)

Downward pressures on staffing numbers and the negative impact on local authority capacity are not new. Pre-pandemic, [Glennon et al \(2018: 216\)](#) identified this trend as a critical limitation on the capacity of local authority staff to deliver services. However, the pandemic and COLC have acted as compounding factors, causing a substantial increase in demand for local authority services at a time when their capacity is substantially diminished, with stark consequences for in-house service provision.

### *From ‘mediators’ to ‘distributors’: the expanding role of the local welfare ecosystem*

As centrally administered social entitlement has failed to keep pace with the cost of living and local government has faced the successive crises outlined earlier, the voluntary and community sector is playing an increasingly

important role in providing support for struggling households. This smorgasbord of organisations, characterised by Edmiston et al (2022: 787) as the ‘local welfare ecosystem’ – including welfare and debt advice charities (such as Citizens’ Advice), food banks, and housing associations – has taken on ‘additional roles and responsibilities’ over the last two decades, leading to a ‘much more fragmented and contingent’ welfare state than the caricature of a centralised system of cash transfers.

All our interview participants described turning to increasingly close working relationships with partner organisations as key to their strategy for administering the HSF. Numerous councils held cross-sector ‘cost-of-living summits’ to determine local priorities and help extend or develop collaborative working to target support. Several interview participants indicated that they were able to draw on partnerships established during or prior to the COVID-19 response, while others appeared to be forging new or stronger working relationships. Utilisation of links with partner organisations was described as a strategy for both extending the reach of the COLC response and making available funds ‘go further’:

‘We offered a grant to organisations to provide a warm and welcoming space; I think we called them, and we asked them to match-fund it. So, these were people at town and parish councils who have a certain level of funding and reserves themselves. So, we were able to have more impact because we said, “We’ll put in some money if you put in some money.”’ (LA6)

‘As a council, there is no way we would have been able to deliver a response in terms of the level of depth and the reach that we’ve been able to get because of the partnerships.’ (LA4)

Some local authorities went further still, bringing partner organisations ‘in-house’ to design and coordinate the COLC response:

‘[We seconded a] partnership manager, and she pulls all the charities and supports together, so I work very closely with her as well so that we know who’s doing what.’ (LA3)

‘We brought external partners into the senior strategic decision-making group for this project, so what I call the “strategic response group”, which I chair, has the deputy chief executive of the Integrated Care Board and the chief executive of the Voluntary and Community Services Organisation, which is the most umbrella organisation of the voluntary and community sector in the city.’ (LA7)

While the incorporation of partnership working to strengthen strategic decision making was one important motivating factor, LA2 describes how it also represented a pragmatic adaptation responding to the short-termism of the government funding cycle:

‘I think it is a challenge just getting that amount of money out, and I think, from my point of view, I absolutely hate having to give any money back to government; so, if we can get other agencies employed, like university, like voluntary sector, to help us get that money out in time so we don’t have to give it back, then we do that.’ (LA2)

Research to date has emphasised the important ‘mediator’ role this ‘local welfare ecosystem’ plays in accessing social entitlement. Here, researchers underscore how the advice sector and other charities help claimants to make and sustain their social security claim, particularly for the UK’s flagship means-tested support, Universal Credit. This leads [Edmiston et al \(2022: 788\)](#) to describe the voluntary and community sector as ‘intermediary actors in the claims-making process’ and [Raso \(2023: 168\)](#) to identify the ‘wide web of actors’ that help claimants ‘interact with the Universal Credit system’. These arguments sit alongside a broader literature that identifies the importance of social welfare advice, particularly for digitally excluded groups and individuals with complex needs (see [Creutzfeldt and Sechi, 2021: 170–1](#)).

Our data suggest that in addition to this important ‘mediator’ role, the ‘local welfare ecosystem’ is increasingly providing support on behalf of local government. Put another way, voluntary and community sector organisations are increasingly ‘distributors’ of state support in their own right, as well as ‘mediators’ for the mainstream benefits system. Across our sample, almost all local authorities were working in partnership with third sector organisations to distribute support. This took two forms. The first was providing a mechanism for specific organisations to refer individuals and/or households to established mechanisms in the local authority for providing support. For instance, LA13 described how their “accredited partners” (chiefly local welfare advice organisations and charities) were able to refer individuals for food vouchers distributed by the local authority without the additional assessment process that would ordinarily be required of applicants:

‘We’ve given the facility for our, kind of, accredited partners to give additional evidential weight and that to start with, that will probably look like the advisory agency, so [a local welfare rights organisation], they have a code so they can enter the information on behalf of the applicant, and that gives additional weight because it’s a body we know is already engaged.’ (LA13)

The same approach was adopted by LA1 and LA14, who explained the role of the local welfare ecosystem in their “referral routes” across the locality to escalate claims in their “existing mechanisms” for cost-of-living support:

‘We thought about, “Well, how can we target it most effectively, and how can we try and make a bit more of that money?” And so, what we’ve tried to do is to link it into wider support and advice; so, we’re working with, now it’s 14 different partners, which is our food banks, it’s baby banks, the main social housing providers, our social prescribers from the NHS [National Health Service], our own children’s services and adult services, and various others. So, what they do is they identify people that they’re working with who are in financial need. ... So, we’ve basically taken quite a flexible approach and we’ve given all of those people working with communities a kinda freedom and responsibility for identifying eligible people.’ (LA1)

‘So, some of that is these are existing mechanisms for dealing with people who need financial support. So, referring and the council will give out the money through our established referral routes. So, [local welfare rights organisations] refer through to our customer contact centre, who then issue the money.’ (LA14)

The second approach is more direct: local authorities provide a budget to individual voluntary and community sector organisations to make grants or administer vouchers themselves, in line with guidance from the local authority and corresponding reporting and monitoring obligations. As LA15 put it:

‘Because they’re [the local welfare advice organisation is] doing the income and expenditure and they know – they’ve looked at maximising income as much as they possibly [can]. When they’re going through all of that, they’ll see. And rather than referring to us for LWS [local welfare support], well, they can deal with it themselves, can’t they?’ (LA15)

The motivation for this direct approach was rooted in both the significant resource and capacity problems facing local authorities outlined earlier and a recognition of the proximity of the voluntary and community sector to households in the greatest need. LA16 explained the rationale as a combination of these two factors:

‘So, thinking about how little capacity we’ve got to administer it and how we can do it most effectively, and our partnerships with



the voluntary sector, we just, kind of, make sense to administer it through the partnerships that we've got really. ... I do think the partnership, working with the voluntary sector, is really good. I think, if we just administered it all directly ourselves, I think we would lose a lot. They're really working on the ground; they know the people who are in need and they sort of support them as well.' (LA16)

As they go on to explain, working with the voluntary and community sector in this way helps to provide a more 'holistic' approach, where the individuals receive considerable additional support without cost to the local authority (or, indeed, central government):

'They're doing a holistic approach. So, they're doing a financial assessment, looking at somebody's debt, helping them with that debt and maximising their income. Doing all those things that go along as part of the package. And then the Household Support Fund is there to help with that. ... If we were just sending out a payment with a letter saying, "Here you go, have some money", they would miss out on all of that ... the government are getting all that for free really; it's like the value-added amount we're getting from those organisations, we're getting for free in addition to the Household Support Fund.' (LA16)

This evolution from 'mediators' to 'distributors' is an important ongoing shift in the functions being served by the local welfare ecosystem in the modern welfare state that we turn to now.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has traced the dual pressures on English local authorities as they deliver cost-of-living support, responding to stark escalations in household need in the context of significantly reduced operating capacity following long-term financial constraint. The localised welfare provision illustrated in our data is not taking place in a policy context in which local authorities have the freedom, flexibility and capacity to design schemes to reflect local priorities and needs; rather, authorities are simply doing their best to distribute very limited funds in the face of the COLC. Far from a realised ambition of local welfare based on 'local ties and knowledge' so as to 'be best placed to identify those most in need' (HC Answer, 6 June 2022, vol 715), these are instead decisions determined by the reality of the situation in which they find themselves: too little funding for an uncertain time frame

and schemes unable to meet the scale of demand, leading to pressures of path dependency.

As the voluntary and community sector mobilises to plug growing gaps in central and local welfare provision, local authorities have relied heavily on partnerships with these organisations to deliver cost-of-living support. In some cases, we have seen that this relationship extends to bringing partners ‘in-house’ or delegating assessment and distribution responsibilities. However, as Edmiston et al (2022: 778–9) argue, the ‘mediator’ role of the local welfare ecosystem brings with it concerns about ‘displaced discretion’: how third sector organisations ration access to the support they provide requires similar discretionary decision making as seen elsewhere on the front line of the welfare state, though without the same accountability mechanisms that exist within the public sector. However, the arm’s-length support provided in the far more expansive ‘distributor’ role we identify here significantly extends these concerns. Here, local government is transferring powers for determining access to support (in the case of the referral mechanisms earlier) or even providing a cash budget, coupled with a wide-ranging power to make grants on a case-by-case basis. The blurring boundaries between state support and charitable provision raises crucial questions about transparency, accountability and discretionary decision making that warrant far greater scholarly exploration.

Arguments for a more detailed examination of these issues are strengthened further by widespread concerns about the growing ‘cut-and-devolve’ approaches as a form of ‘blame avoidance’ decision making that has represented an important dynamic in facilitating welfare retrenchment and austerity (Meers, 2019). At the same time, our study has identified examples of innovative local responses to the COLC, including instances of partnership working described earlier, which look to safeguard or even expand social protection, reminding us that local responses can act as a form of resistance to retrenchment agendas.

Debates about local social security have not featured prominently in UK social policy analysis for some time, but shifting modes of governance and changes in social policy of the type we have analysed here increasingly problematise this lacuna. Is it time to bring the local ‘back in’ to the analysis of UK social policy in a more serious and systematic fashion?

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> SIGOMA is a special interest group of 45 urban authorities in the northern, midland and south coast regions of England.
- <sup>2</sup> English council tax bands A–D are assigned to domestic properties based on their value on 1 April 1991 (see: [www.gov.uk/guidance/understand-how-council-tax-bands-are-assessed](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/understand-how-council-tax-bands-are-assessed)).
- <sup>3</sup> Early analysis indicated that such motions were more common among councils led by opposition parties, such as Labour, rather than those aligned with the Conservative central government.

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# Exploring the problems of a 'left behind' place in the context of 'levelling up'

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## Introduction

The transition from post-war social-democratic capitalism to neoliberalism in the late 1970s marked a 'phase shift'<sup>1</sup> in the UK's political economy, as the deregulation of finance and labour markets, the privatisation and contracting out of public services and utilities, and increasing social, economic and spatial inequalities all contributed to a new form of social contract (Wistow, 2022). These structural changes had long-lasting spatial characteristics that have been particularly acute across many locales in Northern England, including within Teesside, which were once characterised by relatively remunerative, stable and secure industrial work in mining, shipbuilding, heavy engineering, steelworks and chemical processing (Shildrick et al, 2012; Byrne and Ruane, 2017). During this period, London and the South East were much better placed to reinvent themselves given the capital's historic position as a global financial centre and in light of the 'Big Bang' deregulation of the economy (Leyshon, 2021; Martin and Sunley, 2023). Regional imbalances widened further during the period of austerity between 2010 and 2019/20, as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic (Martin et al, 2021; Bamba et al, 2023). Therefore, the neoliberal period resulted in the UK possessing 'large and persistent regional disparities' (Green et al, 2022: 24), as parts of the country pulled ahead and some parts, such as Redcar and Cleveland (R&C) in Teesside, were 'left behind'. The UK's position as one of the most regionally unbalanced countries in the industrialised world contributes to both its 'geography of discontent' and calls for devolution and decentralisation to help counteract this (McCann, 2020; Raikes, 2020).

While there are different types of 'left behind' places cutting across urban, rural and coastal areas, they are often defined by: relative social, economic and cultural decline; political discontent, particularly support for nationalistic causes in recent years; low-income employment opportunities; deindustrialisation; depopulation; poor mental and physical well-being; low

levels of highly skilled and professionalised jobs; and higher than national average rates of deprivation, crime and antisocial behaviour (ASB) (Martin et al, 2021; Etherington et al, 2022; MacKinnon et al, 2022; Wenham, 2022). Such ‘left behind’ spaces are a global phenomenon, including, for instance, in parts of France, Germany, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, as well as in cities across the US ‘Rust Belt’ like Minneapolis, Detroit and St Louis (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Hence, understanding the lived experiences of residents in these ‘left behind’ places is of global relevance for regional social policy interventions.

The Levelling Up agenda emerged in 2019 as the major national policy programme responding to the UK’s problem of ‘left behind’ places. In focusing on addressing spatial inequalities, it can be compared to other spatial development policy programmes across the world, including Germany’s Aufbau Ost programme that was constructed in light of German reunification to address spatial inequalities between the ‘East’ and ‘West’ (Enekel and Rosel, 2022). The UK’s Levelling Up programme has been characterised as identifying the symptoms of socio-spatial inequalities rather than addressing the causes (Leyshon, 2021), with the deeply embedded and long-standing problems in many ‘left behind’ places requiring years to ameliorate (Martin et al, 2022; Peck et al, 2023).

Such ‘social dislocations and political controversies require academic communities to urgently reflect and engage in a dialogue’ (Peck et al, 2023: 1392). There is, however, a lack of qualitative research in ‘left behind’ localities (Martin et al, 2021), meaning that empirical investigations into these locales are needed (MacKinnon et al, 2022). As Telford and Wistow (2022) outline, it is also important to recognise that the political rhetoric and policy focus on spatial disparities stemming from the agenda has raised expectations (albeit with varying degrees of cynicism across the public, policy makers, practitioners and academia) about the potential to level places up. If the agenda falls short of its stated ambitions, then it will not only represent a missed opportunity to respond to spatially concentrated economic and social inequalities but also potentially amplify political discontent in these areas.

Utilising 25 interviews with R&C’s residents, this chapter explores their experiences of living in a ‘left behind’ locality and how these relate to the deep-rooted and interlinked challenges that the Levelling Up agenda is seeking to address. The chapter is structured as follows. It begins by introducing the Levelling Up agenda and outlines some of the key critiques of the strategy. This is followed by a brief history of R&C and the Teesside sub-region, documenting deindustrialisation and the emergence of high levels of social problems, including unemployment and crime. It then discusses the qualitative methodology that underpins the chapter. The findings section presents original qualitative data on the enduring significance of well-paid

industrial employment, the area's decline and the social problems in 'left behind' neighbourhoods. This contributes to a wider policy debate on the lived experiences of 'left behind' places (see, for example, [Wenham, 2022](#); [Etherington et al, 2023](#); [Tomaney et al, 2024](#)), followed by a discussion of the findings in the context of the Levelling Up agenda specifically and regional policy in the UK and elsewhere in general.

## **The Levelling Up agenda**

The UK is the most regionally unequal country in the developed world ([Raikes, 2020](#)) and the most centralised major developed economy ([UK2070 Commission, 2020](#)), which has significance for both the nature of the so-called 'left behind' problem and the policy solutions responding to this such as the Levelling Up agenda. As [Etherington et al \(2022\)](#) outline though, the Levelling Up agenda forms part of the UK's lengthy policy history of governments attempting to tackle geographical inequalities in social and economic opportunity. Under the 1997–2010 New Labour government, nine regional development agencies (RDAs) were created by the turn of the millennium partially to enhance regional economic development and regeneration programmes. However, the 2010–15 Coalition government abolished RDAs in 2012, replacing them with 39 local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) involving businesses and local authorities to identify priorities for local economic development. The Conservative government then announced the 'Northern Powerhouse' in 2014, indicating the need to address regional disparities between the North and London. Theresa's May 2017–19 Conservative government also emphasised the importance of place, constructing a new industrial strategy.

The Levelling Up agenda is, therefore, the latest core example of spatial policy in the UK and was a key pillar of the Conservative Party's 2019 general election manifesto. Alongside the promise to 'get Brexit done' the agenda had electoral appeal in 'left behind' places, most notably evidenced through the collapse of the former 'Red Wall' of traditional Labour-voting constituencies from Wales to the north-east of England. In this respect, [Jennings et al \(2021\)](#) highlight the significance of the 'politics of levelling up' emerging from unequal economic and social development. [Tomaney and Pike \(2020\)](#) also argue that the Levelling Up agenda raised expectations to spread social and economic opportunity more evenly throughout the nation, while [Leyshon \(2021\)](#) highlights some cause for optimism arising from an enhanced focus on long-term uneven spatial development in UK policy. However, [Martin et al \(2021: 7\)](#) describe the 'left behind' problem as being 'spatially and systematically entrenched' due to the inability of some places to adapt to the post-industrial service and knowledge-based economy. These long-standing and deeply embedded trajectories of places require similarly



sustained and ambitious solutions for ‘left behind’ places to level up to the social and economic outcomes of more affluent parts of the UK.

Shearer et al (2021) summarise the main funding schemes and policies emerging from the Levelling Up agenda prior to the launch of the Levelling Up White Paper (LUWP) in February 2022 as the Levelling Up Fund (£4.8 billion), the Towns Fund (£3.6 billion), the Community Renewal Fund (£220 million), eight freeports, the Skills Fund (£2.5 billion), the UK Infrastructure Bank (£12 billion for lending and investment) and civil service relocation (with a target to move 22,000 jobs away from London and the South East by 2030). Despite these initiatives, the agenda has received criticism for: having a lack of clear goals and measures for success (Carr-West and Sillett, 2021); with ‘possessing an inadequate understanding of the barriers to devolving power under a highly complex political system (Hoole et al, 2023); awarding insufficient attention to the economic dominance of London in creating the UK’s spatial disparities (Martin and Sunley, 2023); a competitive funding model with unrealistic deadlines and inequalities in capacity among areas bidding for funds (Newman, 2021); a lack of resourcing and powers for local leaders (Connolly et al, 2021); insufficient attention to the impact of austerity on ‘left behind’ places (Marmot, 2022); and a lack of clarity about devolution (Jennings et al, 2021).

Although space precludes a detailed exploration of the LUWP (see Telford and Wistow, 2022), it includes five pillars that underpin the policy regime: medium-term missions to tackle societal challenges; reshaping central government decision making to enhance spatial considerations; empowering local decision making through devolution; improving data, monitoring and evaluation; and improving transparency and accountability, including a statutory requirement to report on progress in achieving the missions (HM Government, 2022). The LUWP also acknowledges that the UK’s spatial imbalances have been long in the making and the missions represent key outcome areas for policies targeted to reduce these imbalances. The missions include various targets and measures designed to narrow the gap between affluent and deprived localities, including in relation to education, skills, pride in place, housing and crime.

Telford and Wistow (2022) conclude that these missions partially address criticism of the Levelling Up agenda about a lack of clarity regarding its measures and goals. However, the detail about how these ambitious missions will be achieved is lacking (Copeland and Diamond, 2022). Telford and Wistow (2022) also argue that key factors (for example, the structure of the political economy) contributing to the gaps the missions are seeking to close are marginal to the agenda and the targets are, therefore, ambitious at best. As such, the policy agenda continues to place primacy upon the importance of market forces to reduce regional inequalities while neglecting

the influence of these under a deregulatory market environment for the place-based imbalances it seeks to address (Jones, 2019; Martin et al, 2022). The Levelling Up agenda has also been criticised for its heavily centralised funding mechanisms, which contradict the premise of empowering local actors (Copeland and Diamond, 2022). In addition, London's pre-eminent position in the global and national economy is recognised in the LUWP but is not given sufficient attention in terms of the implications for spatial disparities in the UK (see Martin and Sunley, 2023). Ultimately, Marmot (2022: 1) concludes that the LUWP 'reads as though it was not the product of a political party that has been in power in Britain for 30 of the last 43 years and is responsible for much of the damage' that it seeks to undo.

### **'Left behind' R&C**

Given these regional disparities across the UK, our empirical focus is on R&C, one of the local areas targeted by the Levelling Up agenda. R&C is a local authority area (LAA) in Teesside in the north-east of England and has a population of 136,600 (Office for National Statistics, 2023a). It is part of the commuter belt to the urban centre of Middlesbrough and is constituted by various towns and villages. Similar to other 'left behind' places in the UK and particularly Europe and the US, R&C has a long industrial legacy. As the main seam of ironstone was discovered in the Cleveland Hills in 1850 (Owen, 1979), many of R&C's localities became home to steel, mining and petrochemicals industries from the 19th and early 20th centuries. The area contains natural advantages, as it is near the River Tees and North Sea, enabling the transportation of industrial products across the globe (Owen, 1979). As such, R&C's history is closely associated with the development of the Teesside sub-region around Middlesbrough as an industrial powerhouse during the 19th and 20th centuries (Shildrick et al, 2012; Warren, 2018; Telford and Wistow, 2020). The area's economic prosperity stemming from its manufacturing base led to it being described by former British Prime Minister William Gladstone as a 'remarkable place' and an 'infant Hercules' (Lloyd, 2013).

The petrochemicals company Imperial Chemicals Industry (ICI) was particularly significant to R&C and was established in Teesside in the early 20th century. Possessing two core sites in Teesside, one of which was in Cleveland, in its heyday in the 1970s, ICI employed around 35,000 people across the sub-region, with many more indirectly employed in the local supply chain (Shildrick et al, 2012). The sub-region also became home to one of the UK's most productive shipbuilding industries. Accordingly, the local economy during the three decades after the Second World War was relatively remunerative and stable, with employment in shipbuilding, mining, steelworks, petrochemicals and heavy engineering (Telford and Lloyd, 2020).

Industrial employment was central to various forms of security that formed the basis of social life, with another steelworks opening in the LAA in 1979.

Martin et al (2021) highlighted how the consolidation of neoliberalism in the 1980s should be the key starting point for understanding the evolution of 'left behind' places. While ironstone mining ceased in Cleveland in 1964, deindustrialisation intensified with the neoliberal shift, as Teesside lost tens of thousands of industrial jobs and restructured into a service economy. Although pockets of remunerative employment remain, the new and diverse service sector economy that emerged particularly benefited London's financial sector. In contrast, service jobs generated in R&C tend to offer poorer pay and working conditions than the former industrialised economy (Shildrick et al, 2012). ICI was downsized and privatised in the 1990s, and the core steelworks eventually closed in 2015 with the loss of 3,000 well-remunerated jobs (Warren, 2018).

Like all LAAs, R&C contains internal spatial disparities and possesses some affluent neighbourhoods. Residents of these neighbourhoods are not 'left behind'; but relatively content with both their place in the social world and the preservation of the neoliberal status quo (see Telford and Wistow, 2025). However, given the trends described earlier, R&C as a whole performs below the national average for a range of social and economic indicators, including, for example, high levels of unemployment (2–5 percentage points above the national average over 2005–22), a shortage of skills and qualifications (33.4 per cent of residents possess a vocational qualification at level NVQ4 and above [out of 5], in comparison to 43.6 per cent nationally, which is a key indicator for skills in non-academic professions), and lower than average gross weekly pay for full-time employees (£564 compared to £683 nationally in 2023) (Office for National Statistics, 2023a). Moreover, Cleveland has the highest recorded crime rate per 1,000 people of all police force areas in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2023b). Three out of five of Teesside's LAAs – Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and R&C – are in the UK's top 20 out of 74 'left behind' LAAs in terms of the cumulative differential growth of both employment and output, with R&C ranking second (Martin et al, 2021). This context of social and economic decline under neoliberalism contributed to rising political discontent in the area, with R&C returning a 66 per cent vote for Brexit in 2016 (Telford and Wistow, 2020). Promises to both 'get Brexit done' and 'level up' appear to have contributed to the LAA recently electing its two members of Parliament (MPs) from the Conservative Party for the first time in modern electoral history.

R&C and the wider Teesside area have also been a central focus of the Levelling Up agenda; the area was cast by then Chancellor of the Exchequer and current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak as the Levelling Up agenda's 'poster child' (Sheldrick, 2021). R&C Council was successful in Round 2 of the Levelling Up Fund, as it was awarded £20 million, including £15 million

to develop a town centre (BBC, 2023). Since November 2021, R&C has also been home to one of England's eight freeports. The LUWP suggests that the freeport – known as TeesWorks – will regenerate the old steelworks site and engender high-skilled and remunerative jobs (HM Government, 2022). While freeports have been subjected to critique (Hall et al, 2023), there are plans for TeesWorks to be home to sizeable private investment, including the construction of a wind turbine manufacturing plant and the UK's biggest blue hydrogen plant (Telford, 2023). As our findings will show, the structural problems of R&C highlighted here are long-standing and deep-rooted, encompassing deindustrialisation, and contribute to lived experiences of insecure employment, the decline of community life and the prevalence of crime. The chapter now turns to the methodology before outlining the empirical findings and discussing the implications in the context of the Levelling Up agenda.

## **Qualitative methodology**

The qualitative data deployed in this chapter are derived from an ongoing research collaboration on 'left behind' places (Telford and Wistow, 2022). A total of 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with R&C residents across May–August 2022. Of these interviews, 22 were conducted face to face, while the remaining three were telephone interviews. Echoing other qualitative research (Williams and Treadwell, 2008; Bloch et al, 2014; Telford and Wistow, 2020), respondents were accessed by utilising various gatekeepers, as the lead author lives in R&C. This made obtaining access more straightforward and less time-consuming, as their biography aided the recruitment process. As such, purposive sampling was utilised because participants had to reside in R&C, with snowball sampling subsequently deployed to increase the sample size. The interview questions primarily concentrated on lived experience in the local area, including 'What are your thoughts on Redcar & Cleveland?', 'How has Redcar & Cleveland changed?' and 'What are the core problems in the area?', and then moved on to ask: 'What does levelling up Redcar & Cleveland mean to you?' In other words, the Levelling Up agenda was the policy backdrop to recruit respondents and probe in detail their experiences of living in a 'left behind' place.

We particularly spoke to older-aged residents because they were able to reflect on what had changed in the area in recent decades. One participant is aged in their 80s, six in their 70s, seven in their 60s, four in their 50s, three in their 40s and four in their 20s. Nine are retired. Overall, the sample has a good gender balance (12 female; 13 male). Most respondents were from a working-class background and worked in such jobs as a lunchtime supervisor, cleaner, warehouse operative, postal worker, hairdresser and

council employee. Five participants lived in more affluent neighbourhoods and had professional backgrounds, including a manager of a company, a director of an education trust, a nurse and two petrochemical workers. Many had some experience of previously working in industrial-related employment. R&C contains the highest proportion (97.6 per cent) of White British residents in the UK, and all this study's respondents are white. As such, the sample reflects the social profile of the LAA.

The research contains limitations, including a relatively small sample size, meaning that it is unable to offer universal applicability. However, there is a lack of qualitative data from 'left behind' places, especially in the context of the Levelling Up agenda, making this qualitative study both timely and important. While the localised specifics of 'left behind' places are important, data presented here also parallel problems in other 'left behind' places across the globe where deindustrialisation, rates of unemployment higher than the national average, social and economic marginalisation, long-term economic decline, and political dissatisfaction are prevalent (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Martin et al, 2021).

The data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Ethical approval was obtained institutionally from Durham University (Reference Number: SOC-2021-12-14T13\_57\_25-dss1jw), with participants given full information about the study's purpose, their rights, data usage and the risk of harm, which was considered minimal prior to the interviews. All respondents and places within R&C have been allocated a pseudonym.

## **Findings**

The findings are structured around the three key themes of employment, location and crime, which emerged as the dominant issues in the interviews.

### *Secure and well-paid employment*

When the lead author asked the participants about local problems, most respondents were relatively depoliticised and primarily spoke about their lived experiences of the area. Such experiences were generally uniform regardless of the sample's socio-demographic circumstances. Many of the older respondents had some experience of working in the area's former industry, and all participants knew somebody who did. Respondents glossed over negative aspects of this type of employment, such as the shift work, dirtiness and dangerousness of the steelworks and mines, which was partially due to the positive aspects of industrial work being perceived as far superior to employment conditions within R&C's current service economy. ICI was singled out as an excellent employer that previously offered well-paid jobs

to many local people. Charlotte, in her 60s, who laboured part-time as a cleaner throughout her working life, said:

‘Nearly everybody worked at ICI. Most people knew of somebody who worked there. My brother did, my dad did. On that estate up there, houses were allocated to ICI people. A friend of ours moved from Scotland because he got a job at ICI. Houses were put aside for them. This town developed as almost a commuter town for ICI.’

Many of our respondents claimed that ICI was more than an employer, offering workers a sense of pride, identity and social purpose. While ICI offered remunerative work, the company also provided generous pension packages. Such investment in its workforce meant that employees did not have to worry about economic insecurity in retirement; they looked to the future safe in the knowledge that they would retire relatively comfortably. Alan, retired, who previously worked as a nurse, claimed:

‘When I was growing up, it was British Steel, ICI. They were the main employers, other factories as well. There were always job opportunities for people. A lot of people went from ICI onto the oil rigs, they would get quite a lot of money there. My Dad worked at ICI. He had shares in them and got a big lump sum when he left.’

As Alan indicates, work was relatively easy to access and well paid, leading to a general sense of employment opportunities and security in the local population. Danny, aged 21, undertaking an engineering apprenticeship, also highlighted the history of relatively well-paid jobs in the area: “Our Grandad worked at British Steel, then ICI for over 20 years. Back then, most people had good, secure jobs.” As mentioned, the area’s evolution as a key locality for the Levelling Up agenda has been long in the making, particularly with the intensification of deindustrialisation during the 1980s. Anne, retired, who previously worked in Teesside’s textiles industry, said: “The area has lost loads of jobs. You used to leave school, and you knew you could get a job, especially in the 60s. But you can’t now; there are no decent jobs. It is difficult for young people; there is little for them to be proud about.” Mary is also retired and offered similar sentiments: “Work? Well, it has all gone. No industry, no factories. Nothing. It was easier to get work years ago. My younger ones [children] are working, but I wouldn’t like to be them now. Oh no.” Respondents suggested that it is particularly difficult for young people growing up in the LAA today, as the stability associated with industrial employment has largely been lost. When asked about the

availability of well-paid work in R&C, Gareth, in his 50s, a mental health support worker, argued:

'I am not sure if there are a lack of jobs, but a lack of good jobs. I think people can find work, but the question is, can they get paid well? The principle of going to work is to better yourself; get a salary where you go do well and provide for your family. That principle has been left behind somewhat.'

Stuart, in his late 40s, a warehouse worker, also highlighted some of these labour market problems:

'I've never had a problem getting a job. But the issue is what type of job and how much does it pay? There are far too many zero-hours contracts, shift work – can't rely on transport doing shifts. Just because somebody is employed doesn't mean it is any good or pays them enough to live. It was easier years ago. More firms were localised, engineering works; there isn't as much of it now.'

This dearth of remunerative work and prevalence of economically insecure employment contributed to the emergence of various social problems in R&C.

### *'Left behind' locations and extreme decline*

All respondents spoke about the emergence of cultural problems, occasionally suggesting that they could be the long-term consequences of the area losing 'lots of jobs'. Often speaking with a sense of resignation and sadness, many participants claimed that the area's decline had been several decades in the making, presenting entrenched policy problems for 'left behind' places. Mary, retired, spoke of how:

'I think this town is the same as other places around here now. They are all dumps. There is nothing here. All the shops are closing down. Look at the banks; more of them are closing. ... I wish I knew it would have ended up like this; I would have looked for a different place years ago.'

Although Jonny does not live in one of R&C's rural places, he pointed out:

'Some of the areas around here, particularly to the east, are so run down. They are shitholes and desperately need some money spent on them. It goes back decades really. There are some lovely

places and estates around here. But particularly the rural villages need some money spent on them.'

R&C's spatial inequalities were highlighted by most participants; they believed that some neighbourhoods were as prosperous as anywhere in the country, while others, especially rurally, were among the most 'left behind'. For example, Sophie, aged in her 20s, a healthcare assistant, stated:

'There's nice bits and not very nice bits, isn't there? There are loads of parts that are struggling. ... Some of these areas have been forgotten about. They get no money spent on them. Even the council don't go down to cut the grass or the hedges. They are just left, aren't they?'

The deep-rooted problems in 'left behind' places and the Levelling Up agenda policy challenge this represents was also highlighted by Jonny: "There are void areas around here; living in them isn't nice. It is far easier to get good jobs down South." Respondents frequently highlighted the decline of local high streets as indicative of the area's degeneration, pinpointing the urgent need for increased investment in the locality. Jamie, aged in his 40s, a petrochemical worker, underscores how:

'Certain parts of the country are just in dire straits. Look at this town: when I was young, it was a huge market; now, it is all charity and pizza shops. New businesses starting up just can't cope. The rates are too high. There's no investment in the North.'

Although there is a degree of variation in the decline across the high streets in R&C, participants emphasised their deteriorating nature, particularly the increasing amount of closed and empty stores. Respondents mentioned how this is partially because the costs involved in leasing the properties are too high, leaving them derelict. Given the problems outlined earlier, it is unsurprising that criminal activity was also highlighted as a key issue.

### *Crime*

Criminal activity was prevalent in R&C, particularly in the more deprived localities, with respondents suggesting that it was a corrosive blight upon the LAA. Mary argued:

'There's a lot more violence around here now; there didn't used to be as much. ASB is another big issue. There's nothing for the young ones to do – what is there to do but mischief? There's



nothing at all for them. I don't dare go out in the dark these days. There's more crime. Look at High Hill: my son has had his garage broken into three times in a couple of months. They took some bikes, about 3 am one morning. It [crime/ASB] is rife down there.'

Participants who were older and lived in the deprived neighbourhoods often claimed that they tried to not go outside after dark, shaped by a localised perception that crime had been increasing in recent years and was normalised and embedded in certain neighbourhoods. Both crime and ASB were cast as damaging to the local area, as Sophie outlined:

'Even taking my daughter to the local park is a struggle. They have pulled the tarmac up; glass and bottles smashed everywhere. Even going to play in the other park, there are needles, loads of them. There's a lot more drugs and that on the streets now – there is a lot of crack cocaine.'

Indeed, these social problems form embedded issues for the Levelling Up agenda.

### **Discussion: 'left behind' places and the Levelling Up agenda**

The qualitative findings highlight the lived experiences of living in a 'left behind' place. Industrial working conditions continued to be recalled fondly, as they involved numerous forms of security (Viebrock and Clasen, 2009). Such employment involved job security because industrial workers possessed the certainty of maintaining a job with the same employer over a lengthy period, as well a degree of employment security because they knew industrial work was once readily available in the local economy. As such industrial employment was overwhelmingly recalled with a sense of positivity because it involved forms of security that were absent from most of the participants' employment roles today.

The data demonstrate how the policy problem of levelling up 'left behind' places like R&C is long-running and entrenched. As industrial work often provided the economic DNA for localities like R&C, deindustrialisation has had 'profound implications socially and spatially. Its creative and destructive effects have not been economically, socially or spatially neutral' (Martin et al, 2021: 30), with many places becoming 'left behind'. R&C's service economy has not been a sufficient replacement for a productive economy, with many residents enduring job insecurity and uncertainty. Intense competition for insecure and low-paid employment prevails, which reflects a systemic and ingrained policy problem for the Levelling Up agenda, with a key issue

in 'left behind' locales like R&C being the prevalence of low-paid work (Etherington et al, 2022, 2023).

As such, the findings highlight the need for the Levelling Up agenda to address insecure and low-paid jobs. Our review of the Levelling Up strategy highlights concerns about the potential for its largely market-based approach to address job insecurity systematically. Meadway and Reed (2022) suggest an alternative policy approach through the introduction of a £15 minimum wage, which they argue would have a greater impact in northern England given current wage disparities between the North and more prosperous places in the South East. Furthermore, a Levelling Up Employment Bill, focusing upon high-quality and secure jobs, could help to address the types of insecure employment that tends to become concentrated in 'left behind' places like R&C (see Florisson, 2023). It also questions a national approach of labour market flexibility (Viebrock and Clasen, 2009). A national agenda of increased employment security and more robust social protection schemes would disproportionately benefit 'left behind' places. In other words, a universal and integrative social policy agenda that addresses labour market inequalities while increasing employment opportunities would have more positive effects in 'left behind' areas.

Our findings also highlight the deterioration of many high streets in R&C, which appear to have a symbolic meaning relative to the area's wider decline. Although closed and empty stores are a general feature of high streets in the UK and Europe, particularly with the accelerated shift towards online shopping in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth noting that the north-east of England contains the UK's highest store vacancy rate (14.4 per cent), which is far higher than the lowest in the South East (at 9.2 per cent) (Craig et al, 2023). Nearby Middlesbrough, 13 km from R&C, also possesses the ninth greatest increase in the UK's persistent store vacancy rate during 2015–23 (at 5.2 per cent) (Craig et al, 2023). Moreover, the closure of pubs is concentrated in 'left behind' places (Qureshi and Fyans, 2021). As high streets are an important part of community life, identity and belonging, their decline, combined with the loss of industrial work and the prevalence of insecure employment in R&C, shaped the respondents' sentiments about the decline of the LAA and broader locality. The Levelling Up agenda's funding mechanisms are reasonably well aligned with this approach to regeneration but have been criticised for pork barrel politics around the allocation of particular funds and doing little to address the inequalities of 'left behind' places (Jennings et al, 2021). More generally, the funding mechanisms do not come close to reversing the cuts to local government budgets during the austerity era during 2010–20 (Marmot, 2022).

While Cleveland contains the highest recorded crime rate in England and Wales, it is worth noting that the 'dark figure of criminality' is unknown, as much crime is unreported (Hall, 2012). 'Left behind' places also experience

higher levels of crime compared to the national average (OCSI, 2020), with respondents suggesting that crime was abundant in R&C and spatially concentrated in neighbourhoods with extreme deprivation. This involved violence, ASB, acquisitive crime and illicit drug dealing and consumption, including of crack cocaine. Although one of the LUWP's 12 missions is to reduce neighbourhood crime in localities where it is most prevalent by 2030 (HM Government, 2022), the participants highlighted how crime is entrenched and shows no signs of abating. This detrimentally impacted many people's quality of life in R&C, presenting a complex policy problem for the Levelling Up agenda.

Deindustrialisation, insecure employment, the decline of the high street and persistent crime illuminate how the policy problem of 'left behind' places is long-running and embedded (Telford and Wistow, 2022). Accordingly, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR, 2022) suggests that the scale of the sustained investment required should not be underestimated. As mentioned, Enekel and Rosel (2022) argue that the funding required to significantly level up 'left behind' places can be compared to Germany's Aufbau Ost programme in light of German reunification after the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall. Successive German governments spent around €70 billion per annum to attempt to level up 'East Germany' to 'West Germany's' standard of living and spread opportunity more evenly (IPPR, 2022). Even at these levels of investment, discrepancies in living standards between the 'East' and 'West' persist (Enekel and Rosel, 2022). Such relative success, though, has required a cross-party and long-term political agreement regarding the need for seismic investment, involving unprecedented infrastructure expenditure, subsidies for manufacturing businesses to revitalise capital equipment, increased industrial production, educational development schemes and strong local government (Enekel and Rosel, 2022; IPPR, 2022).

Insufficient levels of investment and concerns regarding the political will to level up have questioned the Conservative government's agenda. Current UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has been far less vocal about the Levelling Up agenda since taking office in October 2022, eight months after the publication of the LUWP and in comparison to the Boris Johnson election campaign of 2019 (Atherton and Le-Chevallier, 2023). Instead, attention has shifted to the policy challenges of the cost-of-living crisis, reducing inflation, returning to financial stability, and geopolitical tensions in Europe and further afield. Accordingly, there is a serious risk that the renewed political mission of addressing the UK's persistent and long-running spatial inequalities will become lost in a political climate of national crisis and apparent budgetary constraints.

Although the Conservative Party attained a historic 2019 electoral mandate to level up, evidence indicates that regional discrepancies on several indicators are worsening in light of the cost-of-living crisis, which is having an impact

across Europe. For example, the IPPR (2022) suggests that rising living costs are increasing poverty and deprivation, which damages well-being, especially in already-struggling places, while pay rises have recently outstripped inflation only because of sizeable wage growth in London's global financial district (Partington, 2023). Furthermore, residents in most 'priority areas' of the Levelling Up agenda believe that their locale has not improved since it was announced (YouGov, 2023). In R&C, survey data indicate that only 12 per cent of residents agree that the area has 'generally improved', 35 per cent agree that it has 'generally stayed much the same' and 46 per cent agree that it has 'generally declined' (YouGov, 2023).

While Keir Starmer's Labour Party is readying itself for success at the 2024 general election, it is questionable how their focus on levelling up will develop, including whether they will be sufficiently ambitious or radical to bring about the transformative policy changes that are required to significantly level up the UK (see Telford and Wistow, 2022). The Brown Commission (2022: 4) has suggested that the political primacy of the South East's economic interests represents an economy 'flying on only one wing' and outlined the need to tackle regional inequality. However, so far, Starmer's Labour Party has adopted a cautious policy approach, with their annual conference in October 2023 containing very few policy pledges and emphasising the importance of a decade of national renewal instead. The party also emphasised how they would be financially constrained and would not be able to implement all the policies that they would like to.

The problem of levelling up 'left behind' places, though, requires a bold and transformative policy approach, with 'policy action to be sustained over long periods of time' (Bambra et al, 2023: 105). Of course, there is still hope that the Levelling Up agenda and spreading wealth, social and economic opportunity, and economic prosperity more evenly across the UK can be achieved. However, if the transformative policy moment is missed, spatial inequalities will continue to widen and the political failure to level up will form another example of politicians letting people down in 'left behind' places, potentially intensifying their political discontent. This also poses the question as to which political party or movement residents in 'left behind' places turn to in a largely two-party system. Such a political void inevitably opens space for right-wing populists to exploit the expressed discontent evidenced in our findings.

## **Conclusion**

The policy problem of levelling up the UK's 'left behind' places has been congealing for decades (Telford and Wistow, 2022). The historical significance of industrial employment in R&C, however, continued to

resonate with people in the area, particularly the older-aged residents. This served to cast a long shadow over this ‘left behind’ place. As the study’s participants demonstrated, structural decline persists in the area, with concerns regarding job insecurity and uncertainty, the deterioration of the LAA’s high streets, a lack of investment, and crime, which mirror some of the problems in ‘left behind’ places across the UK and internationally (Martin et al, 2021; Wenham, 2022; Tomaney et al, 2024).

While many other countries and cities around the world have adopted various policy approaches to address spatial and social inequalities and ‘level up’ (Taylor et al, 2022), the UK government’s Levelling Up policy agenda emerged in 2019 largely as a political response to the problem of ‘left behind’ places. However, there are serious doubts about whether it is of a sufficient economic scale to reduce the deeply embedded spatial imbalances emerging from the transition to a post-industrial economy (Martin et al, 2021; Telford and Wistow, 2022). The long-standing and embedded trajectories of places require sustained and ambitious policy measures for ‘left behind’ places to level up to the social and economic outcomes in the UK’s more affluent areas. However, with political uncertainty over the Levelling Up agenda in the UK involving a potential change of the governing political party in 2024, it is unclear what the future of the Levelling Up agenda is. Accordingly, the strategy could form a missed policy opportunity to address place-based inequalities, embodying a long-running continuation of politicians letting people down in ‘left behind’ localities and potentially amplifying their political discontent.

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### Note

<sup>1</sup> A ‘phase shift’ is a term used in complexity sciences to describe a change in kind, as opposed to degree. Byrne (2019) applies this language to the social sciences to conceptualise changes in social and economic systems as they move to new ‘attractor states’ and ‘possibility spaces’. In this respect, Wistow (2022) argues that understanding the move to a broadly neoliberal political economy as a ‘phase shift’ helps to contextualise not only the nature and extent of social problems emerging from this but also the scope and types of social policy solutions available to tackle these.

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# Changing behaviour and/or heightening vulnerability? The impact of antisocial behaviour interventions on alleged perpetrators living within social housing

*Kirsty Cameron*

## Introduction

Antisocial behaviour (ASB) interventions were introduced to England and Wales in the 1990s to prevent and respond to behaviour deemed to be causing nuisance, annoyance, alarm or distress (Burney, 2005). ASB, which can range from minor incivilities like an untidy garden or minor neighbour dispute to more serious behaviours like physical violence, severe harassment or drug dealing, was seen to be a particular problem for generally more disadvantaged estates, including social housing estates, and it was argued that these behaviours were not being managed effectively by existing laws and practices (Burney, 2005; Nixon and Parr, 2006; Mackenzie et al, 2010; Johnstone, 2016; Flint, 2018).

The history of the rise of ASB policy has already been well chronicled (Burney, 2005; Carr and Cowan, 2006; Squires, 2006; Millie, 2007; Crawford and Flint, 2009; Tyler, 2013; Bannister and O'Sullivan, 2014; Johnstone, 2016), identifying how the New Labour Party began discussing ASB in earnest during elections in the 1990s following what was widely considered a period of consistently falling crime levels. Despite these relatively low crime levels, New Labour accused the then current and previous Conservative administrations of reigning over a period of increasing crime rates, specifically related to nuisance and incivilities, which they termed 'antisocial behaviour' (Bannister and O'Sullivan, 2014). Their conceptualisation of ASB, which covered behaviours ranging from the mundane to the criminal, suggested that ASB was symptomatic of a much larger problem: a threat to the current social and moral order (Squires, 2006). Areas of high-density social housing appeared to be prominently placed in this political narrative as needing particular interventions (Carr

and Cowan, 2006; Crawford and Flint, 2009; Bannister and O’Sullivan, 2014; McKenzie, 2015; Johnstone, 2016).

While there were some early attempts by New Labour to provide a list of behaviours that could define ASB (two Home Office reports and one Social Exclusion Unit report), the behaviours listed were inconsistent, with one list, from the Social Exclusion Unit, including violence and racist abuse and another, from the Home Office, focusing on vandalism and hoax calls, suggesting little internal agreement on how to define ASB (Carr and Cowan, 2006). Nevertheless, overwhelmingly, the approach to defining ASB has seen it as a broad, vague and ever-changing group of behaviours that span across criminal and non-criminal behaviour (Carr and Cowan, 2006; Millie, 2008; Mackenzie et al, 2010). This more flexible definition has the benefit for local authorities, housing providers and the police of being able to focus on the behaviours that are an issue in their area (Millie, 2007). However, a vague definition is arguably problematic when the response to behaviour seen as antisocial is largely punitive and impactful: a clear definition matters for those accused of ASB. If you are unsure what behaviours are prohibited, it can be hard to avoid them (Millie, 2007).

In policy, the most recent definition of ASB was provided in Section 2 of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014:

- (a) conduct that has caused, or is likely to cause, harassment, alarm or distress to any person;
- (b) conduct capable of causing nuisance or annoyance to a person in relation to that person’s occupation of residential premises; or
- (c) conduct capable of causing housing-related nuisance or annoyance to any person.

While certainly longer than the original policy definition provided in Section 2 of the Housing Act 1993 of ‘conduct causing or likely to cause a nuisance or annoyance’, the most recent legislative definition arguably does not tackle the specificity issues of former broad definitions of ASB. However, some commentators have argued that the broad definition of ASB gives the term and the related ASB interventions more power: by allowing the definition of ASB to be interpreted by local stakeholders, interventions become flexible tools to intervene in the maximum coverage of behaviours (Carr and Cowan, 2006; Millie, 2007; Edwards, 2015).

## **Managing ASB**

While anyone can technically be alleged to be engaged in ASB and ASB interventions can be used against any members of the public, those who live

within social housing properties are the most likely group to receive ASB interventions (Atkinson, 2006; Hunter, 2006; Bannister and O’Sullivan, 2014). Social housing providers have been used by consecutive governments to roll out ASB interventions and have become heavily involved in the management of nuisance behaviour in their properties (Burney, 2005; Atkinson, 2006; Crawford, 2009; Bannister and O’Sullivan, 2014). With social housing provision experiencing significant funding cuts and reduced numbers of properties over time, leading to the residualisation of the sector, it has been suggested that social housing has become the home of the most vulnerable in society (Fitzpatrick and Watts, 2017; McNeill, 2014). This concentration of disadvantage could lead to more challenging behaviours and, some would argue, justifies the focus of ASB interventions within the social housing sector (Millie, 2007; McNeill, 2014). Of course, others may suggest that ‘managed’ populations living within social housing experience higher levels of scrutiny, resulting in them being more likely to be accused of ASB, rather than that people living in social housing actually behave in a more antisocial way (Carr and Cowan, 2006; Crawford and Flint, 2009).

Interventions into ASB can range from non-legal interventions, such as a warning letter or home visit, support referrals to other services, and/or direct support provision, to legal interventions, such as injunctions that prohibit specified behaviours and eviction from social housing, leading to a subsequent exclusion from social housing waiting lists to meet future housing needs (Jones et al, 2006; Dwyer, 2016; Lewis et al, 2017; Flint, 2018). When interviewing ASB practitioners about the purpose and use of ASB interventions, Brown (2013) found three broad intentions: protecting and supporting victims; transforming behaviour; and enforcing good behaviour where necessary. Surprisingly, there is little mention of support to perpetrators. Although there was some recognition that due to social constraints or physical or mental ill health, some alleged perpetrators may not be able to fully control, or understand the impact of, their behaviour, they were still viewed as having some level of rational choice and responsibility for ASB. When deciding on how to intervene, ASB practitioners stated a reliance on common-sense judgement and what they believed worked to stop ASB, though this was largely based on individual perception rather than any evidenced analysis of how ASB interventions impact behaviour (Brown, 2013). This finding was supported by Bannister and O’Sullivan (2013), who stated that despite an apparent reliance on ‘what works’, ASB monitoring is generally not done consistently enough to be comparable, explore trends or evaluate the effectiveness of any specific intervention.

‘What works’ is generally understood as behaviour change and/or no further complaints of ASB (Brown, 2013; Batty et al, 2018; Flint, 2018). The Welfare Conditionality Project (2018), which interviewed perpetrators of ASB, found that behaviour change often does not follow a linear path

but instead includes periods of both progression and regression, which ASB policy and practice generally does not allow for (Batty et al, 2018). Brown (2011) similarly found that young people subject to legal orders to change their behaviour (at the time termed ‘Anti Social Behaviour Orders’) rarely changed their behaviour along a linear path or as a direct result of ASB interventions. Moves away from ASB often appeared to be linked to increased responsibility elsewhere, such as with one young person who had recently become a father (Brown, 2011). Similarly, more sustained behaviour change in Batty et al’s (2018) study was often linked to access to secure accommodation and support provision for underlying vulnerabilities. ASB interventions, which tend to follow a path of increasing seriousness from a verbal or written warning towards legal injunction or eviction, do not seem to allow for this non-linear path towards compliance. If a change of behaviour is not evident quickly enough, the perceived wishes or needs of the community or complainants regarding ASB seem to outweigh the need to support perpetrators, and further sanction is often introduced (Brown, 2013).

## **Vulnerability and ASB**

The term ‘vulnerability’ has become more prominent in broader welfare and criminal justice provisions, as well as in ASB policy and practice specifically (Brown, 2015; Dobson, 2019; Menichelli, 2021). In 2007, a disabled mother, Fiona Pilkington, killed both herself and her daughter after having experienced sustained ASB from local young people. Understandably, this led to a concern that vulnerable victims of ASB require additional support, and the provision of support (either directly or by referral) to victims who could be classed as vulnerable has become central to managing reports of ASB (Brown, 2015; Brown, 2013). While there is significant evidence that victims of ASB could often be classed as vulnerable, whether related to income, (dis)ability or other factors, there is also a growing evidence base that ASB perpetrators may also be classed as vulnerable (Jones et al, 2006; Atkinson, 2015; Batty et al, 2018; Crossley, 2018a, 2018b). While only sometimes referred to in government, policy and practice rhetoric, the vulnerability of alleged perpetrators of ASB is often viewed in a negative light, for example, when discussing the Troubled Families programme (which was a programme of intensive intervention into the lives of those seen as ‘troubled’, including, for example, households where children truanted from school, where there were allegations of ASB and/or where adults were unemployed and claiming welfare), politicians referred to ‘vulnerable’, ‘troubled’ and ‘nightmare’ neighbours apparently interchangeably (Crossley, 2018a, 2018b).

Despite the increased prevalence of the term ‘vulnerability’ in policy and practice, there is still disagreement on how vulnerability is defined. The definition largely used in practice appears to be a fairly normative

understanding of vulnerability as an issue to be resolved. Vulnerability may be deemed innate or natural, such as for children or pregnant women, or could be situational, such as for those who are homeless or victims of domestic violence (Brown, 2014). In policy, this is often linked with the phrase 'vulnerable groups' and to ideas of victimhood. While the idea that people are victims of circumstance can help alleviate perceived personal blame for their situation, behaviour or transgressions, this is weighed up against the perceived dangerousness posed by these behaviours. This understanding leads to the acceptance that some people may need not only extra care or support but also extra controls placed on them to control or change their behaviour (Brown, 2015).

However, rather than an issue to be resolved, or something that affects certain groups, it is instead possible to understand vulnerability as something that is universal: anyone can be potentially vulnerable to, for example, ill health, low income or an accident that changes their circumstances (Fineman, 2013). Rather than focusing societal resources specifically on those who are seen as especially vulnerable due to specific circumstances, societal institutions should support all citizens to build resilience, resources and capabilities, reducing the likelihood of increased vulnerability and supporting those who are already additionally disadvantaged (Fineman, 2013). Building on universal vulnerability as a starting point, we can propose that while vulnerability may be universal, inequalities in society make it more likely that certain groups will experience increased hardship, disadvantage and vulnerability, and that there will be differences within these groups (Cole, 2016).

Crenshaw (1991) argued that how people experience the social world can be impacted by multiple, intersecting identities. While initially focused on the intersection of gender and ethnicity, understandings of intersectionality have developed to further include other social divisions, circumstances and life experiences that may impact how people experience the social world (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). Applying intersectionality to the concept of vulnerability allows us to view vulnerability as being made up of intersecting, overlapping factors that impact an individual's experiences of the social world, which can offer insight into different and overlapping social identities, divisions and circumstances. This conceptualisation of vulnerability is arguably needed to better understand individual differences in experiences of vulnerability more generally (Kuran et al, 2020) and, as proposed here, ASB interventions more specifically.

## **Methods**

The research on which this article is based used a combination of qualitative longitudinal interviews with alleged perpetrators of ASB living within social housing and single, contextual interviews with five key informants, including

ASB managers, housing managers and neighbourhood services managers who were responsible for writing ASB policy and managing ASB within their social housing organisations. While the views of alleged perpetrators were placed at the fore, these contextual interviews were useful to gain insight into the priorities of social housing providers, the current processes of managing ASB and the balance of sanctions and support in ASB management. These qualitative, semi-structured interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes with key informants from across four different social housing providers, including generalised housing associations, specialised housing associations and local authority providers.

These same social housing providers acted as gatekeepers to accessing alleged perpetrators of ASB. Housing providers sent a cover letter and information leaflet to those of their tenants on whom they held a current, open, case of ASB in which that tenant was named as the alleged perpetrator. The documents provided the tenant with details about the research and the researcher contact details, and tenants could then choose to contact the researcher for further information and/or to take part in the research if they wished. Throughout the cover letter, information leaflet and consent form, as well as with conversations with the researcher, participants were reassured that their engagement was voluntary and separate from their housing provider, and that choosing to, or not to, take part would not impact any services they received or their current ASB case. A total of 15 social tenants alleged to be engaged in ASB took part in qualitative, longitudinal interviews. Despite the recruitment of a black and minority ethnic (BME) housing association, all tenant participants were from White British backgrounds.

Tenant participants were asked to take part in two, semi-structured, qualitative interviews, which took place approximately six to nine months apart. The first interviews used the same interview guides to structure questions around ASB and their experiences of intervention, as well as any impacts interventions had had on them. The second interview guides were more varied, returning to themes from the first interview with each participant and picking up on their individual experiences and stories, as well as touching on cross-data themes related to behaviour change that were identified from analysis of the first interviews. There was very low attrition, with 13 out of 15 tenants taking part in both interviews.

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis in NVivo to identify, analyse and report ideas, concepts or themes in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For tenant participant interviews, longitudinal thematic analysis was used to explore change over time, which meant that the data were subject to multiple readings, interrogations and techniques of analysis, including case, thematic and integrative analysis (Lewis, 2007; Neale, 2019). Each participant case was analysed individually, followed by thematic analysis of the cross-case data, which included broader conceptual

and temporal readings of the data. When data collection was complete, a full-scale integrative analysis synthesised descriptive and interpretive analyses to explore differences and continuity across themes, cases and time (Neale, 2019; Saldaña, 2003).

## **Findings and discussion**

The remainder of this chapter will explore the findings of the research data related to the impact of ASB interventions on behaviour and vulnerability, as well as the balance of sanctions and support. All 15 tenant participants reported at least one form of vulnerability, and 12 participants reported two or more intersecting vulnerabilities. These reported vulnerabilities were separate from their status as social housing tenants with relatively limited social capital and economic resources and their currently receiving some form of ASB intervention from their landlord, which could arguably be classed as vulnerabilities in themselves (Jones et al, 2006; McNeill, 2014). The vulnerabilities reported by tenants included being over 65 years of age, having a physical and/or mental health condition, having had suicidal thoughts and/or attempts, experiencing domestic abuse, facing benefit issues/sanctions or other financial hardship or debt, exhibiting problematic alcohol use, being a single parent, and experiencing family illness, bereavement and/or adult care responsibilities. While tenants reported fluctuating levels of vulnerability over time, they could all reasonably be classed as vulnerable at the time of both interviews. There were slightly more vulnerabilities reported in the second interviews; however, without further interrogation, it could not be certain that further vulnerabilities were not divulged to the researcher as the tenant felt more comfortable with the researcher over multiple interviews (Neale, 2019) rather than that vulnerability had necessarily increased over time. Additionally, around half of the tenants had recently been a victim of crime, including criminal damage, burglary, harassment, domestic abuse and/or physical assault with a weapon, and around 11 tenants felt that they were victims of ASB from their neighbours, including noise, harassment, drug use, assault of visitors and verbal abuse, calling into question their label as ‘perpetrator’ rather than ‘victim’. The apparent interchangeability of these labels has been referred to in previous studies, which suggested that it was unclear whether those alleged to be engaged in ASB were victims, perpetrators or a combination of both (Jones et al, 2006; Nixon and Parr, 2006; Flint, 2018).

In interviews with key informants, a successful ASB case was seen to be where behaviour was changed or complaints had stopped. As two key informants said, a success was where “Problems stop ... simply” (ASB manager, large housing association) or “Probably as simple as that you don’t hear about it again” (neighbourhood services manager, small housing



association). This was further clarified to generally mean either quick behaviour change (“Making people aware of their actions and trying to get them to change quite quickly” [ASB manager, local authority]) or eviction from social housing, as “At the end of the day, you’ve got to be mindful of the impact it’s having on the neighbourhood, you know; you can’t just consider too much on, you know, [the perpetrator]” (housing manager, city organisation). As this quote hints at, key informants appeared to focus on changing behaviour or removing the alleged perpetrator, with sanctions apparently prioritised over support. Even where vulnerability was recognised and key informants understood that they had a legal obligation to support their tenants, support for perpetrators was sidelined over sanctions as a method to change behaviour:

‘Part of the investigation process is that we have to ask you [the perpetrator] questions and ask you about your health, if there are any issues or any support needs that you need. There is a lot of that going on in terms of trying to meet our obligations to stay within the law, but if you challenge me and say, “Are you genuinely promoting perpetrator support?”, I couldn’t, hand on heart, say how effective our measures are. I still think our priority is to stop the problems.’ (ASB manager, large housing association)

Overall, there was very limited recognition among key informants that support could also be a method of changing behaviour. This appeared to play out on the ground, with all tenant participants reporting that they had not been offered any support from their housing officers, either directly or through referrals to other services, even when they had actively asked their housing officer for help or told their housing officer that they were struggling: “It’s a money-making scheme, it is, being a landlord for such a big company, it’s a money-making scheme. There’s no compassion. There’s no care. No nothing” (Amelia, Wave B). Like Amelia, tenants felt that housing providers were more focused on collecting rent than supporting tenants. Tenants reported properties in poor condition, such as leaking roofs, unusable bathroom facilities and mould and damp through the properties, about which nothing was being done. Tenants also reported making multiple phone calls to their housing providers to ask for support or to discuss their ASB case and not receiving phone calls back. For Harry (Wave B), this poor communication had worsened over time: “The landlords that were sort of looking after us, I’ll say, have gone elsewhere, so I don’t know who’s looking after us now. Maybe nobody.”

Due to significant reductions in funding for social housing providers and increased financial pressures placed on social housing tenants directly due to UK austerity policies, such as the Welfare Reform Acts 2012 and 2016,

it is possible that housing providers are spending an increased amount of time and resources on securing their rental incomes. Costarelli et al (2020) argue that since the 1980s, social housing providers internationally have become increasingly business-focused which, alongside residualisation, has led to social welfare goals being sidelined in favour of other, finance-related priorities. While the need to ensure an income may be understandable, there is a legal obligation for social housing organisations to provide care to vulnerable tenants (Power and Bergen, 2018), though Atkinson (2006) has suggested that housing officers may limit their contact with, and therefore their support for, tenants they perceive to be antisocial, which could suggest that perpetrators of ASB may find it harder than other social tenants to receive positive communications and support from their housing officers.

Behavioural changes as reported by tenants appeared to fall within four categories, including the required behaviour change, unintended behaviour change, a lack of or resistance to change, and sometimes fluctuations between changed behaviour and resistance to change, suggesting intermittent behaviour change. Across the data set, tenants reported a heavy focus on sanctions and a lack of support, though five tenants self-referred for support when their housing provider did not appear to offer any. Overall, there did not appear to be a link between the type of intervention used and consistent, required behaviour change. Instead, the only clear relationship appeared to be that there was no evidence of the required behaviour change without unintended changes to behaviour that, when explored further, appeared to increase tenant vulnerability. At his first interview, Barry had received an ASB warning letter about parking his work vehicle on the public road outside his neighbour's property (where there were no parking restrictions). By the time of the second interview, Barry no longer parked in this space because rather than risk further ASB interventions that could affect his security of tenure, he had retired from work, reducing his household's income significantly, an example of unintended behavioural outcomes triggered by the ASB intervention. This pushed Barry and his household, including his wife, who was not working, and his granddaughter, who they cared for, into financial insecurity and increased their difficulties in meeting their other tenancy obligations, including their rent. Barry's age exacerbated these increased vulnerabilities because he felt that his ability to seek work elsewhere was made harder by being over retirement age; he found himself taking ad hoc, temporary work, which he found fatiguing.

Pauline also changed how she used her home to prevent further ASB interventions. Pauline had severe social anxiety and mental health conditions that meant she required daily visits from her brother who acted as her carer, helping her get meals, keep the house tidy and occasionally go for walks. These visits from her carer were viewed as antisocial by her neighbours, who reported that Pauline must be dealing drugs from her

property because she kept having short visits from strange men, which included Pauline's brother and two adult sons. Despite explaining the situation to her housing officer and offering to arrange a meeting with her brother present to prove that he was her carer, Pauline received a warning letter that asked her to stop allowing these visits to her home. Pauline prevented her brother and her sons visiting her (her only familial support) because "I'm so worried to give them anything at all. They might get the wrong impression, so I just avoid anything that could be twisted to cast me in a bad light" (Pauline, Wave A). This led to a relationship breakdown with her brother that had not improved by the time of the second interview six months later and meant that Pauline no longer received any support, exacerbating her mental health. She described no longer being able to leave the house and struggling to go to the bin store to dispose of her rubbish because of the fear of encountering her neighbours and receiving further complaints. By focusing on nuisance caused to neighbours and behaviour change as the successful outcome, Pauline's vulnerability appears to have been overlooked or ignored by her housing officer, resulting in an inappropriate sanction that required her to heighten her vulnerabilities, preventing her from receiving necessary support and leading to ruptured familial relationships. An inability to take her rubbish to the bin could also lead to a build-up of rubbish in her home, which could lead to an alternate breach of her tenancy agreement by not keeping her property in a good condition. This suggests that while she may not receive further ASB complaints, her housing vulnerability could still be impacted by this unintended change to her behaviour.

Jason, who, similar to Pauline, required multiple daily visits from carers to meet his basic needs, resisted change to his behaviour. When he was informed that visits from his carers had been misconstrued as drug dealing, he was very upset and described shouting at his housing officer, resulting in him not hearing what the next steps could be. He said: "I just carry on as it always has been. Meals, carers, meals, carers, beds, carers. Just all done the same. I can't change me lifestyle. I'm in a wheelchair. I need help" (Jason, Wave A). As Jason did not take part in a second interview, it is unclear what the next steps were; however, it can be seen that, again, a disabled tenant's care needs were overlooked or ignored, and rather than understanding how tenants' vulnerabilities may impact how they use their property, vulnerable tenants were asked to change their behaviour to prevent increasing their housing vulnerability. This can place tenants in an impossible position of choosing to heighten their vulnerability to prevent further ASB sanctions or, alternatively, risking their housing security by not changing their behaviour. For disabled tenants, this apparent choice seems especially unreasonable. Jason reported that the allegations of ASB had led to a deterioration of his mental health, making him feel very "low".

Other tenants also did not appear to have much of a choice. Four female tenants reported experiencing domestic abuse either just before or during the research period. These tenants reported receiving warning letters for the behaviour of their violent ex- or current partners or adult sons, suggesting that the focus of their housing providers was on preventing nuisance to neighbours over supporting victims of domestic abuse. After being rehoused into her current property from a women's refuge, Jenny found that she had been housed around the corner from her violent ex-partner. This ex-partner attempted to gain entry to her property by breaking her window, and despite calling the police and explaining the situation to her housing officer, she received a warning letter for ASB and was asked to pay for the damage to the property: "It's not my fault I've been through domestic violence. I didn't say, like, 'Come here and do this to me'. Do you know what I mean?" (Jenny, Wave A). In this scenario, Jenny, as well as other victims of abuse, were not asked to change their own behaviour but to change the behaviour of others who were violent towards them. When this did not happen, it was seen by housing providers as a lack of behaviour change, which could lead to further ASB sanctions.

Rangers, an older woman with dementia, experienced physical, emotional and financial abuse from her two adult sons, who, with their friends, had taken over her flat to use as a base to financially abuse both Rangers and her neighbours. Rangers believes that she was asked to "control" her sons, though she was not present at the meeting held in her flat to discuss the ASB reports because she became confused and had to leave the room. She said: "How the hell can I control them? You know what I mean? I can't control, I can't control myself, let alone them" (Rangers, Wave B). Rangers was served a notice of seeking possession, which she provided to the researcher. This notice represents the first step towards eviction proceedings and showed that she was held responsible for the abuse of both her and her neighbours, which included Rangers being held out of her own upper floor window, someone entering her flat with a knife that resulted in her screaming (which caused a nuisance to her neighbours) and the financial abuse of her and her neighbours, about which she had limited understanding. Rangers fell into the category of 'intermittent change' because, between the first and second interviews, she managed to access a housing support worker who helped her to change the locks on her flat and remove her sons and their friends from her home, seemingly preventing further abuse to her neighbours. However, due to COVID-19 and the lockdown restrictions in England and Wales, the support for Rangers dropped off and her sons and their friends had started to return to the flat by the time of the second interview. By this second interview, Rangers was still awaiting a court date and, with her own health deteriorating, felt unable to leave her bedroom. She reported that she had attempted suicide

following the notice and that she had not been offered any support from her housing provider.

There was further complexity within this group, as the female tenants who experienced abuse also reported complex financial issues, perhaps unsurprisingly when financial abuse can be common among victims of intimate partner abuse (Botein and Hetling, 2016). One tenant, Rachel, received a warning letter for leaving a sofa in the communal external area, and although she made attempts to have the sofa removed by her local council, she did not have the funds to pay for this. Her local council told her that she needed to call them back when she was no longer in debt; however, as she was in over £15,000 worth of debt and was experiencing difficulties accessing her benefits due to an apparent administrative error that had resulted in her receiving no income for a period of time, it was unlikely that behaviour change was going to be evidenced for her housing provider quickly. Rachel, who was pregnant at the time of the first interview, described very visible injuries that she displayed during a visit from her housing officer about rent arrears; however, there was no offer of support at or after the meeting, either directly or by referral to domestic abuse services. By the time of the second interview, her newborn child had been hospitalised following violence from her (then ex-)partner, her children had been removed into care and she continued to receive no support from her housing provider. Instead, she felt that she was judged by her housing officer, and when she complained about her to a manager, she was told that there was simply a training need: “They [the manager] was like, ‘Oh yeah, we’re going to give her more training on it.’ I’m like, ‘Alright, thanks. So, she [housing officer] gets to ruin my life, while I’ve got to fight to keep my kids in my care, and she has more training’” (Rachel, Wave B). Rachel’s experience clearly demonstrates the intersecting vulnerabilities that were present in many alleged perpetrators’ lives that appeared to routinely be missed in favour of quick, punitive responses like warning letters or verbal warnings, with little thought given to the ability or reasonableness of asking alleged perpetrators to change their behaviour at all, especially without support.

## **Conclusion**

Analysed through the lens of intersectional vulnerability, the stories of alleged perpetrators highlighted how a focus on behaviour change, with sanctions viewed as the prominent method of behaviour change, can lead to the multiple, intersecting vulnerabilities that appeared to be a common factor among alleged perpetrators being missed or ignored. While this is problematic in itself, it appeared that the ASB process of intervention itself could impact tenant vulnerability. By sidelining perpetrator vulnerability, tenants can be asked to change behaviour that is outside of their control

due to mental ill-health, physical disability, domestic abuse, poverty or a combination of these and other vulnerabilities. Tenants may change their behaviour as requested, placing them in increasingly challenging circumstances in an attempt to keep their housing secure. Alternatively, tenants may resist change or be unable to change their behaviour, which can lead to less secure housing, increasing their vulnerability in other ways. It can also be argued that for people with disabilities or people experiencing abuse (and especially for those where these vulnerabilities intersected), requiring changed behaviour and punishing the tenant where behaviour is not changed could be seen as discriminatory, with the constraints of their current circumstances or support needs viewed as deserving of punishment.

While this project was limited to the experiences of alleged perpetrators of ASB living within social housing and within the context of ASB policy in England and Wales, the findings of this research, as well as the theoretical framework of intersectional vulnerability, could help to understand experiences of interventions into (largely) non-criminal 'nuisance' behaviour in other countries. Ireland, Iceland, Australia and the Netherlands, among others, have policies and practice related to nuisance, delinquent or antisocial behaviour that, as found in this research, can be largely argued to be focused on a relatively more vulnerable population in their respective countries (see, for example, [van der Leun and Koemans, 2013](#); [Cheshire and Buglar, 2015](#); [Valdimarsdottir and Bernburg, 2015](#); [Vazsonyi et al, 2018](#); [Vaughan et al, 2022](#)). While not necessarily exactly comparable, the findings of this research certainly appear to ring true with some of the findings of, for example, [Martin et al's \(2019\)](#) research into social housing responses to ASB in Australia, with legal action related to nuisance behaviour used against female tenants experiencing abuse resulting in potential homelessness for victims of abuse. That being said, there has been limited research into ASB both in the UK and internationally in recent years, especially from the point of view of those on the receiving end of interventions, and this is an area that requires further exploration in future research to more fully understand how ASB (or similar) interventions can contribute to heightened vulnerability and/or changed behaviour.

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# Promise or peril? 'Devolution as modality' for decentralisation in primary healthcare in Thailand

*Rangsan Sukhampha*

## Introduction

Primary healthcare is the foundation of universal healthcare (UHC) for building healthier communities, higher quality of care and a more responsive healthcare system for local patients (Miharti et al, 2016). Decentralisation has often been seen as the cornerstone of improving the primary healthcare system, guaranteeing citizens' health equity and improving good governance (Madon and Krishna, 2022) in both developed and developing countries. Decentralisation has been defined as the transfer of authority and responsibility from the central government's public functions to subordinate or quasi-independent government organisations, which include private entities (World Bank, 2022). The concept is typically distinguished into four types of decentralisation: political, administrative, fiscal and market decentralisation (Litvack and Seddon, 1999; Crook, 2003). Decentralisation has different characteristics, policy implications and conditions for success. In practice, decentralisation has been implemented at national and local levels in various ways. Therefore, in-depth and grounded investigation in particular contexts is needed to assess its implications and outcomes.

This chapter focuses on the administrative decentralisation of Thailand's primary healthcare. Administrative decentralisation can be distinguished into de-concentration, delegation, devolution and privatisation (World Bank Group, 2005; Frumence et al, 2013). Following Collins and Green (1993, 1994), I define decentralisation as the transfer of administrative power within the realm of the public sector, that is, the transfer of public affairs from the central administrative agency to subordinated agencies or lower-level agencies and governance. This does not include privatisation that involves the reallocation of power from state authority to the private sector without state operative intervention or the withdrawal of the state from provision.

Thailand is a unitary state with a traditionally highly centralised and hierarchically bureaucratic health system and governance (Unger and Mahakanjana, 2016). The decentralisation of the healthcare system is slowly occurring, with the authority and responsibility of areas, functions and institutions transferred from the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) to other agencies, both vertically and horizontally. Specifically, in primary healthcare, national policy makers endorsed a ‘devolution as modality’ for decentralisation. The Decentralization Act 1999 envisaged that the affiliation of so-called ‘sub-district health-promoting hospitals’ (SHPHs) is devolved from the MoPH to local administrative organisations (LAOs) (Office of the Council of State, 1999). After over 20 years, this is still a pending process given that only a few SHPHs have been devolved and the majority of them still remain under MoPH control. This statement highlights the presence of unidentified challenges related to human factors, as well as the power dynamics between the central authority and peripheral entities. These issues warrant further investigation in order to identify possible solutions. The Thai health system reform is embedded in a broader context of large-scale decentralisation; exploring the devolution of primary healthcare units would contribute to an insightful understanding of the complexity relevant to successful decentralisation and policy implementation in a particular context.

This chapter questions how ‘devolution as modality’ for decentralisation in primary healthcare in Thailand is being implemented by answering the following questions:

- What is the extent to which ‘devolution as modality’ for decentralisation in a primary healthcare system has created changes in the ‘decision space’ of local elected authorities regarding health functions?
- How have the shifting power dynamics within the healthcare sector engendered a sense of uncertainty among healthcare personnel? And what are the current emerging opportunities and/or challenges in the given context?
- What lessons can ‘devolution as modality’ for decentralisation as implemented in Thailand’s primary healthcare provide? And does it signal promise or peril for other developing countries?

The chapter is structured as follows. The next section presents the current literature on decentralisation in primary healthcare with a specific focus on developing countries, the rise of ‘devolution as modality’ in Thailand and a description of the research methodology. Then, findings from the Thailand case study are presented, highlighting the opportunities and challenges that emerged in the attempted implementation of the devolution of primary healthcare units to local elected authorities. Finally, the chapter draws on implications from the case study to sensitise policy makers.

## **Decentralisation of primary healthcare in developing countries**

Improving health system efficiency and the quality of care for citizens is a desirable goal for both developed and developing countries. Primary healthcare is a UHC foundation that promotes equal access to basic healthcare and reduces morbidity rates from preventable illnesses. Health problems and equity access to healthcare in developing countries reveal different degrees and gaps of development along several dimensions. Decentralising the healthcare system to local authorities is utilised to increase accountability and responsiveness, and is often operated through the lowest or primary healthcare units at the district and/or sub-district levels. At the global scale, the decentralisation of the health system is mentioned as a part of local governance and localisation in the Sustainable Development Goals (Carrasco et al, 2023). At a national level, in times of economic and political transition, policy makers tend to prioritise the resolution of domestic conflicts and uncertainties with populist policies to sustain their position of power rather than focus on long-term health system development. Consequently, most health system transformations occur because of domestic public pressures after economic and political transitions (Harris, 2017; Venkateswaran et al, 2022). Furthermore, within-country territorial disparities in development have been seen in various sectors, including public health (Rojjananukulpong et al, 2021; Sritart et al, 2021). Often, the main urban areas see more developed systems, while remote areas face the issue of the scarcity of medical resources, that is, financial, healthcare personnel and healthcare infrastructure.

Channa and Faguet (2016) assert that decentralising health and education in developing countries could increase technical efficiency across various public services and improve preference matching in education and health under certain conditions. Therefore, decentralisation is utilised as a mechanism to increase the efficiency, accountability and responsiveness of services provided in primary healthcare units, as well as to distribute public health services to rural areas that are far from the centre of development and political power (Madon and Krishna, 2022). It has been seen in the case of Brazil, where the decentralisation of primary healthcare improved access to healthcare for diabetes mellitus (Nishijima et al, 2019).

Types and forms of decentralisation in primary healthcare are diverse. Organisationally, decentralisation means a choice between different types of public institutions, which vary in terms of the areas over which they have jurisdiction, the functions delegated to them and the way decision makers are recruited (Smith, 1997). Decentralisation in the public sector is typically divided into three policy domains – fiscal, political and administrative decentralisation (Collins and Green, 1994; Smith, 1997; Miharti et al, 2016; Terlizzi, 2019) – not including privatisation, which seemingly tends to abandon state provision of the public service. The literature emphasises

the significance of fiscal decentralisation as a key indicator for measuring decentralisation. It argues that fiscal decentralisation is contingent upon a conducive institutional and political environment, in line with the arm's-length principle (Moussé and Ivohasina, 2015). Most literature reveals the positive relationship between the degree of fiscal decentralisation and various health outcomes (Moussé and Ivohasina, 2015; Nishijima et al, 2019), but on decentralisation in general, the findings are mixed (Dwicaksono and Fox, 2018). Furthermore, implementing a decentralisation policy is relevant not only to financial matters but also to the political and administrative apparatus.

Literature on decentralisation in primary healthcare in developing countries reveals a variety of topics and focuses. A recent approach focuses on the analysis of the 'decision space' (Bossert, 2015; Faguet, 2016; Miharti et al, 2016; Madon and Krishna, 2022) for strengthening primary healthcare. Bossert's (1998, 2015) concept of 'decision space' is used for the assessment of decentralisation in the healthcare system to evaluate the real-world experience of decision-making authority and the degree of choice at local levels granted to different health system functions (Faguet and Pöschl, 2015; Faguet, 2016). A decision space analysis is useful for evaluating the implementation and ongoing management of the practices on the ground of any health system (Marchildon and Bossert, 2018). In the case of Indonesia, Miharti et al (2016) found that mayors' unwavering dedication, extensive professional experience and personal connections, including the ability to secure supplementary resources and sufficient funding, have played a pivotal role in facilitating health policy innovation among most local governments. Similarly, in decentralised primary healthcare in India, Madon and Krishna (2022) asserted that decentralisation could provide optimal 'decision space' structures for lower-level bureaucrats to address key aspects of community health governance. In the case of Sierra Leone, Conteh (2016) reflected on the promise and reality of decentralisation for building a resilient and decentralised primary healthcare system. That would largely depend on the willingness to devolve power and resources from the central to subnational governments, but the central and the local levels would seemingly have to create a meaningful and mutual mechanism by reaching a compromise acceptable to actors at all levels. In the case of Chile, Gideon's (2001) work reflected on the inefficiency of decentralising primary healthcare delivery when municipalities are responsible for service delivery while fiscal authority remains centralised. With the complexity of decentralisation processes and their systemwide effects, Dwicaksono and Fox (2018) noted mixed empirical findings on the relationship between decentralisation and health system performance and outcomes. In the cases of Kenya and Indonesia, McCollum et al (2018) noted that the main obstacle to the devolution process of the two countries' health centres was associated with limited technical capacity and community engagement with weak accountability structures. They

suggested that well-supported and empowered community health workers are potentially key actors in promoting genuine community engagement with decision-making processes following health reforms in the two countries.

Most literature on the Thai case regarding decentralisation in the healthcare system typically focuses on fiscal decentralisation in healthcare policy (Jongudomsuk et al, 2012; Laovakul, 2019). Scholars have focused on institutionalism and policy change (Sudhipongpracha and Wongpredee, 2016), as well as on the policy process (Jongudomsuk and Srisasalux, 2012). The focus on the 'decision space' and stakeholders' perspectives in the analysis is still limited.

## **The rise of 'devolution as modality' in Thailand**

Thailand has implemented decentralisation by devolution to transfer administrative power from central agencies into the hands of locally elected authorities, the LAOs, which can also be seen elsewhere, such as in Mali (Lodenstein and Dao, 2011), Sudan (Noory et al, 2020), the Philippines (Grundy et al, 2003; Cuenca, 2018), England (National Institute for Health Research, 2005), Italy and Denmark (Terlizzi, 2019). Decentralisation in the public health sector of Thailand has been slowly progressing for over 20 years. It clearly took shape after the Black May Event during the 1992 political crisis and later the 1997 Asian financial crisis stemming from Thailand, which led to the successful constitutional drafting process that formed the 1999 Constitution. The 1999 Constitution basically called for decentralising administrative power and increasing public participation (Klein, 1998). The later 2017 Constitution also indicated the importance of decentralisation (see Office of the Council of State, 2017: Section 250).

Political and public demands played an essential role in pushing the state to issue related laws and regulations regarding the decentralisation of power. The statutory decentralisation reforms (by devolution) for transferring power from the central authority to LAOs adhere to the principles of proximity and subsidiary. This requires decentralising administrative powers to local authorities. This resulted in the establishment of the National Committee of Decentralisation and the approval of an organic law relating to decentralisation, namely, the Determining Plans and Process of Decentralization to Local Government Organization Act 1999 (BE2542) (Office of the Council of State, 1999). The purpose of the National Committee of Decentralization is to decentralise central administrative power over management and responsibility for the quality of life to the local government, which became responsible for actions pursuing the well-being of the people, including health and public health.

At present, Thailand is in a transition period in decentralising the primary healthcare unit by transferring power from the central bureaucracy under

the MoPH, where the executives are appointed through the bureaucratic system, to local government organisations. The delayed devolution of authority and duties in public health was most obviously seen in the case of the devolution of 9,863 SHPHs to LAOs. The first (2002–07) and second (2008–12) regulations to implement the decentralisation envisaged the transfer of SHPHs to sub-district administrative organisations (SAOs). However, inadequate financial resources and other critical factors related to subsidising the SHPHs contributed to the failure to progress. By the time of the second regulation, only 39 SHPHs, or 0.4 per cent of the total number of SHPHs under the supervision of the Office of the Permanent Secretary of the MoPH, were transferred ([Sudhipongpracha, 2017](#)). However, it remains a pending process, and there is little progress in de facto implementation. Since earlier stages, participating in the devolution process was open to the discretion of SHPHs to decide when they preferred to join. In 2021, only 57 SHPHs were devolved, so the Committee of Decentralization launched a new devolution act (Office of the [Permanent Secretary, 2020](#)) to push implementation. All of these SHPHs are expected to be devolved to provincial administrative organisations (PAOs). As a result, in 2023, all SHPHs in 49 provinces participated in the devolution process and will be devolved to PAOs by the end of the fiscal year (Department of Local Administration, 2022). Nevertheless, a lack of substantial advancements over the past two decades regarding the devolution of SHPHs is noticeable. Given this background, the subsequent sections presenting the research findings will investigate healthcare professionals' prevailing uncertainty and perspectives about the devolution process.

## **Methodology**

### *Data collection*

The research employed a qualitative method of collecting data from both primary and secondary sources. A series of personal interviews were conducted between July and October 2022 in various SHPHs located in two predominantly rural provinces, namely, Sa Kaeo Province in the Eastern Region, where some SHPHs (which were parts of the interviews) have been devolved, and Yasothon Province in the Northeastern Region, where none of the SHPHs have been devolved. These interviews served as illustrative evidence cases, providing insights into the stakeholders' perspectives of the devolution process of primary healthcare units. In-depth and semi-structured interviews included:

- 11 high-ranked healthcare personnel (bureaucrats) at provincial public health offices (PPHOs), district public health offices (DPHOs) and SHPHs,



- including PAOs, both healthcare workers employed at the devolved SHPHs and those anticipating the conclusion of the devolution process;
- four high-ranked executive officers at LAOs<sup>1</sup> (that is, SAOs, municipalities and PAOs); and
  - four (academic) experts on decentralisation and/or public health devolution.

The key informants' perspectives are critical to the success of the devolution of SHPHs, as participation in the devolution process was voluntary in the first and second phases. Although the latest and third devolution plan is compulsory, there is no penalty for SHPHs with no progress whatsoever.

Furthermore, I retrieved information from various kinds of documents and online sources, that is, policy papers, grey literature and the government's open data, and I participated in online seminars. Last, I closely followed and participated in the series of seminars on the devolution of primary healthcare units (co-)organised by King Prajadhipok's Institute (KPI, 2021), the Senate of Thailand (2021, 2022) and HSRIThai (2022). These online discussions helped complement, update and corroborate data gathered through desk reviews and in-depth interviews with stakeholders in a few example provinces, thus providing at least some ways to triangulate the findings and contextualise them within broader governance processes in Thailand. However, this study was conducted during the ongoing and pending devolution process. Since key informants interviewed are direct stakeholders and are affected by the devolution policy, their recurring viewpoints pertaining to the quandary of devolution can be utilised as informative data to draw interpretations useful for decision-making purposes.

## *Analysis*

The article employs a grounded-based analysis of primary data from an in-depth interview and observations, including secondary data, presenting the findings with a thematic content analysis from transcribed and coded data based on an in-depth interview. Bossert's 'decision space' approach is also employed to analyse the extent to which central bureaucratic authority was transferred and has increased discretionary power for local elected authorities. Understanding it through the lens of a 'decision space' analysis could provide a preliminary assessment of the degree of change and discretionary power in terms of the decision space available to local elected authorities as real power to influence decision making. Later in the chapter, the responses of key informants to questions regarding the objectives of the devolution proposals outlined in the three action plans of 2002, 2008 and 2020–22 are used to reflect on the perspectives of healthcare personnel regarding opportunities and challenges in the devolution process of SHPHs.

## Findings

### *A 'decision space' approach for assessing devolution*

Reconsidering decentralisation by devolution, in other words, 'devolution as modality' for decentralisation, in primary healthcare in Thailand has to be assessed as de facto power that has been transferred from the central to local authorities. Bossert recommended a 'decision space' approach to assess the degree of discretion as a way to improve primary healthcare. Faguet (2016) argues that 'low decision space means no decentralisation', and the edited work of Faguet and Pöschl (2015) also notes that 'decision space' analysis is a more realistic way of assessing the real-world experience of the degree of choice at local levels granted for different health system functions.

Based on Bossert's (1998, 2015) concept of 'decision space', I constructed a map of the decision space, classifying the different degrees of formal choice for each function transferred to local elected authorities and demonstrating the considerable variation and functions in tandem with the Decentralization Act 1999 of Thailand and the 'Action plan for decentralization of power to local administrative organizations' of 2002, 2008 and 2020, respectively (Committee on Decentralization to Local Administrative Organizations, 2002, 2008; Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2020).

Overall, it can be seen that the laws and regulations approved by the central government provided very little opportunity to exercise local discretion in the five main functions (for example, finance, service organisation, human resources, access rules and governance rules) of the (primary) health system (see Table 4.1). The health regulations and protocols set the central standard for operating health-promotion hospitals at the sub-district level. In terms of health finance, the National Health Security Office (NHSO) is the central agency in health budget management and allocates resources according to the purchaser-provider split principle, acting as a purchaser of the health system for UHC. Health financing in Thailand employs a per capita payment system, and allocation to the service units is based on the number of registered populations in the service area of the contracted hospital and primary care units. Service organisations, in terms of the autonomy of the SHPHs, are still limited and dictated by legislation, and they must achieve key performance indicators (KPIs) given by the MoPH strategy. Service provision follows the reimbursement framework for the three existing health insurance plans. In terms of human resources, after the affiliation of staff was changed from the MoPH to the PAOs, the PAOs can recruit health personnel and are in charge of recruitment, salaries, employment contracts and the promotion system for civil servants. As indicated by regulations for the qualifications of health personnel, applicants must hold professional medical licences in order to fulfil the preliminary requirement (set by the MoPH) for the position. As for access rules, the target groups for health services are the people who live in

**Table 4.1:** Map of the formal decision space: administration of devolved primary care units within PAOs

Functions	Range of choice		
	Narrow	Moderate	Wide
<b>Finance</b>			
Sources of revenue		✓	
Allocation of expenditures		✓	
Fees	✓		
Contracts	✓		
<b>Service organisation</b>			
Hospital autonomy	✓		
Insurance plans	✓		
Payment mechanisms		✓	
Required programmes		✓	
<b>Human resources</b>			
Salaries		✓	
Contract		✓	
Civil service	✓		
<b>Access rules</b>			
Targeting	✓		
<b>Governance rules</b>			
Facility boards	✓		
(Sub-)District offices	✓		
Community participation	✓		

Source: Based on Bossert's (1998, 2015) framework for mapping the formal decision space.

the service area of the hospital network. Governance rules for the overview of management are still limited, especially as to the role of the executive director regarding the SHPHs' facilities, medical personnel management, community participation and so on. Local health promotion programmes and governance must adhere to the central KPIs and/or health autonomous authorities under the supervision of the MoPH. The only aspect that local health governance can do independently is SHPHs' building construction with a subsidy from LAOs' local taxes and local infrastructure development budget provided by the Department of Local Administration (DLA) of the Ministry of Interior.

In sum, it can be inferred that decentralisation by the devolution of primary healthcare units to local elected government organisations in the

case of Thailand (PAOs) has led to a very low decision space in many health functions. The NHSO manages and allocates health finance by relying on a per capita payment system to the contracting unit for primary healthcare mainly according to the size of the population in the service area. The implementation by local health authorities (and SHPHs) follows indicators set by the MoPH. The main changes lie in the transfer of affiliation of physical and human resources to local government.

### *Opportunities and challenges*

Assessing to which degree devolution policy tends to be successfully implemented, it is necessary to reach out to the relevant stakeholders in the devolution process. In the following subsection, I depict stakeholders' perspectives based on in-depth interviews with key informants from two remote provinces (Sa Kaeo and Yasothon).

#### *Opportunities*

##### **A more unified and agile system**

Prior to the enactment of the Devolution Act, LAOs played a significant role in the administration of health-related initiatives and the execution of health promotion programmes. These operations encompassed a variety of tasks that were specifically devised to enhance the holistic welfare of individuals and environmental health, such as promoting professional growth and extending financial support to individuals with disabilities, the elderly, children, women, those facing socio-economic challenges, victims of natural disasters and patients with HIV/AIDS. The provision of health-related programmes and services from the public health division of LAOs and SHPHs exhibited a significant degree of overlap and interconnection prior to the initiation of devolution. However, the health professionals involved were employed by the MoPH, who then worked within the SHPHs to address the healthcare needs of the community, functioning under the authority of the LAOs.

In cases of devolved SHPHs, local authorities have assumed the direct employment of healthcare professionals, thereby taking on the responsibility for managing health-related initiatives. Furthermore, the transfer of health infrastructures, including buildings and healthcare equipment, to LAOs has also taken place. The third Devolution Act mandated a shift in the affiliation of SHPHs from SAOs/municipalities to PAOs. This change was deemed necessary due to the limited capacity demonstrated by certain SAOs/municipalities in supporting the operational needs of SHPHs. In relation to economies of scale, the enhancement of human resource management, budget allocation and health infrastructure development can potentially foster improved coordination between SHPHs and LAOs. The realignment of

SHPHs' affiliation with larger local authorities has the potential to enhance their prospects and operational effectiveness while simultaneously enabling LAOs to provide increased support to SHPHs:

'I agree with the devolution policy because I believe that the people would benefit from it. The local authorities are the closest entities to the people in daily life from birth to death. The same is true for public health at the local level. There is much more progress than before, where the SHPHs are primary healthcare, which is included in the PAO's strategic plan for improving the quality of life, which is the duty and responsibility of the PAO, and we are ready to do so.' (PAO 1, 5 September 2022)

'The referral system is even easier because the SAO has a rescue team, which is enough to coordinate immediately. The rescue team is ready to serve the whole district seamlessly; in terms of disease control, there will be a Division of Public Health under the supervision of SAO, as they have been doing. It would reduce the burden on SHPHs. Speaking about the management dimension, I wouldn't really be worried. It does not matter how good or bad the executives are, but in terms of service, would the PAO/SAO not interfere with us?' (SHPH 6, 5 September 2022)

### **Increasing local financial subsidies**

Due to the related role in improving people's quality of life, health-related operations have been transferred to LAOs in many areas, such as cleanliness, waste management, community water supply and caring for the elderly, people with disabilities and vulnerable groups. LAOs have received large amounts of budget from the Bureau of the Budget and the DLA. In addition, there are sub-district health funds (SHFs) for health-related projects in the community. The MoPH provides a limited budget for building construction, mostly for repairs and building maintenance. However, LAOs can collect revenue by themselves through local taxes (that is, land and building taxes, property taxes, local maintenance taxes, and signboard taxes) and can develop and expand SHPHs' service users or even upgrade to community hospitals and comprehensive health centres according to the vision of leaders and available resources of local governments. Moreover, as the affiliation of staff is devolved to LAOs, they can also manage additional recruitment through various schemes (for example, scholarships), without having to adhere to centrally determined staffing plans:

'The chain of command and decision in PAOs is shorter than the chain of command in MoPH. The LAOs are responsible for

it through their Division of Public Health; while we are in a big system, we have to look at the bigger picture. Our budget is quite limited. And there are agencies involved. As for over there, it is better to devolve to LAOs; the LAOs themselves can make decisions for financial support for health promotion added to per capita financial support from NHSO. Regarding healthcare personnel, the devolved SHPHs can be recruited independently with an opportunity for a scholarship for personnel development. While we have a limitation of the workforce given by the central authority, the devolved SHPHs and LAOs are more flexible to recruit more healthcare personnel.’ (PPHO 1, 23 August 2022)

### **Career advancement or cross-functional growth**

Normally, the highest position in SHPHs is a director of the hospital. If the SHPHs were devolved to LAOs, then healthcare workers could take a qualifying examination to be promoted to the head of the public health division or the provincial secretary under the PAOs, or have more chances to get promoted. In the bureaucratic system under the MoPH, workforce planning is limited, while the personnel management of the LAOs can be promoted by relying on competency-based promotions. They do not have, for example, a position ceiling or a workforce limitation framework like civil servants in other ministries:

‘I was just appointed to Senior Professional Level Nurse (K3) when they had a devolution policy. I think it is one of the advantages of devolution. Before this policy was launched, the opportunity for advancement to Senior Professional Level Nurse (K3) was rather not possible. For example, the position of a nurse is appointed as Senior Professional Level Nurse (K3) only for the central head of the hospital. People who work in the health centre have no chance at all. It is considered one of the advantages of the transfer because when the working age reaches the criteria, they can do research and send it to be assessed at the department level.’ (SHPH 6, 2 September 2022)

### **Responsiveness to service recipients**

The operation of SHPHs under the MoPH needs to follow the national KPIs in public health, which must implement the same KPIs for all SHPHs. However, the health needs of different areas can vary depending on the different socio-demographic profiles of said territories. This may translate into stronger demand for particular KPIs. Therefore, the operation of SHPHs

in certain health policies should be customised to certain areas; for example, SHPHs located in urban areas tend to have health needs and problems that differ from those located in the countryside and border areas:

‘The devolved SHPHs may not have to follow over 100 indicators, which they could relocate to other KPIs contributed to the larger amount of budget for the mission that we will focus and want to do. They do not have to play with all indicators of the MoPH. LAOs focus on the overall quality of life, but the MoPH deals with healthcare in detail. However, we [Provincial Public Health Offices] must fulfil all KPIs, ranging from the Provincial Public Health Offices’ indicators to the District Public Health Offices’ indicators. The MoPH’s indicators depend on what the national strategy provides, and we would drive them all together with the problems in our area. ... We must fulfil all KPIs of all sectors.’ (PPHO 1, 23 August 2022)

### *Challenges*

#### **Devolution’s unclear guidelines**

The central administration of public health has laid down a broad principle of devolution. There is no detail on how the process is carried out, and there is a lack of knowledge about the reform among healthcare personnel. It is not obligatory; therefore, the lack of clear guidelines has not encouraged some authorities to join in as soon as possible. Thus, this has created concern and confusion among healthcare personnel and is not helping reform to be implemented faster:

‘If they want to devolve SHPHs to the LAOs, I think they need to discuss financial allocation seriously first at the ministry level. The Bureau of the Budget had to crystallise it from above to the LAOs. That is, we have to talk about getting devolved or not getting devolved. How to devolve or devolve only the budgeting and how much money will be given. And if that matter is clear, the LAOs would feel more comfortable to go further to the next step.’ (PAO 1, 5 September 2022)

#### **Local politicians’ lack of healthcare knowledge and different focuses**

Local politicians also have a bad reputation in the eyes of healthcare professionals because they are perceived as not knowledgeable of the healthcare profession. Moreover, some healthcare professionals do not trust politicians because of their previous corruption and scandals. Healthcare

personnel are afraid that public health budgets will be used for non-healthcare projects, as seen in the case of the devolved SHPHs. As a result, healthcare personnel do not trust politicians as much as ideally expected:

‘Many are afraid of political changes and new bosses. The devolution of SHPHs might be difficult if they [politicians] do not realise the importance of SHPHs ... right? Some politicians have a tendency to have a prejudice against the SHPHs. The SHPHs could not operate well, which would be a disadvantage of the devolution.’ (SHPH 6, 5 [September 2022](#))

The relocation of power to non-healthcare expert authorities can lead to conflicting viewpoints between healthcare professionals and decision makers who lack expertise in the field. Some respondents raised concerns regarding the perceived lack of expertise and experience in public health among local administrative officers. Politicians may prioritise other dimensions of local development in order to cater to the preferences of their voters, potentially diverting attention and resources away from healthcare programmes:

‘I think the devolution could create problems for the health system in the future, whether it is a matter of patient referral and budget allocation that may be cut off or being used in a way that politicians prefer. Politicians may have different perspectives on health work with healthcare personnel.’ (SHPH 4, 19 [August 2022](#))

### **Feelings of uncertainty**

Concerns about the implementation also regard the career advancement of healthcare staff:

‘As for the devolution of three main dimensions: healthcare personnel, money and its property. It is unclear for healthcare personnel who have devolved in terms of the progress in their career. And for the money matter, I am not sure if it would be cut off, like in the case of the school devolution to the PAOs. As for properties, there are still no regulations to support and lack of clarity and complexity to deal with it.’ (SHPH 1, 10 [August 2022](#))

The devolution of SHPHs also engenders a sense of uncertainty regarding the status of their healthcare professionals: “I just know that the devolution policy existed, which is the important issue for now. I just realised that when you asked to make an appointment for an interview. So, I searched it



on the Internet for more information, and I just understand what we have to do next” (SHPH 3, 19 August 2022). Due to the nature of their work, healthcare personnel are at risk of litigation from patients. Currently, the PPHOs and DPHOs are the first line of defence to deal with potential cases. With the devolution of SHPHs, there may be a risk that they may not get full support from the central authority because their affiliation has changed to LAOs, which do not have professional knowledge and licences to deal with the concerns of medical personnel and protect them:

‘The central agency has a Provincial Public Health Medical Doctor (PPHMD) [Head of the Department] who takes care of all aspects ... because they have a professional licence. On the other hand, if SHPHs get devolved to the PAOs, our boss cannot protect us in terms of medical professionals. ... In many cases, for example, if the patient has a seizure or has a sudden allergic reaction to the drug, the PPHMD can protect us from the risk of litigation. While the devolved SHPHs, we must take full responsibility for the case because our boss does not have a professional licence to protect us. Even though we have a professional licence, it still needs protection in this aspect, which is still worrisome.’ (SHPH 6, 5 September 2022)

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has investigated the implementation of decentralisation by devolution of primary healthcare in Thailand, with a focus on early warning signs and (potential) impacts and a reflection on relevant stakeholders’ perspectives on the adoption of ‘devolution as modality’ to improve primary healthcare efficiency and effectiveness. Decentralisation by devolution in Thai primary healthcare is an indication of the government promise for health system reform by transferring the central public health administration power to local elected authorities, initially to the sub-district level (SAOs and municipalities) and later to the provincial level (PAOs). The initiative has been going on for over 20 years since the Decentralization Act 1999 (Office of the Council of [State, 1999](#)). Therefore, the delayed process demands in-depth investigation using fieldwork and stakeholders’ perspectives on the devolution process regarding opportunities and challenges.

The application of the ‘decision space’ approach depicted the very low ‘decision space’ granted to local elected authorities, as rules on areas ranging from financial matters to KPIs are determined by the central health management system. The local authorities and SHPHs must follow regulations and be audited by central health agencies. This reveals the attempt of existing power holders to stall and dissent from devolution processes.

However, at the same time, a number of key informants have conveyed the potential positive consequences of monitoring conducted by central authorities. The act of monitoring serves to address potential risks linked to disparities in resource allocation among provinces and the differing capabilities of local authorities in delivering healthcare services.

As there are many actors and stakeholders involved in the devolution process, the success of devolution also depends on the power relations between the central and local authorities and their ability to allocate and reconcile the interests of health administration. This includes allocating budgets as agreed upon before devolution, as well as increasing the ‘decision space’ for local elected authorities to create a more unified and agile system, including a stronger responsiveness to service recipients. However, [Unger and Mahakanjana \(2016\)](#) suspect that the problems plaguing Thailand’s local governments go beyond inadequate resources and central government meddling. This creates complexity and delayed decision making, which is often associated with the unclear information with which SHPHs have been provided. As a result, healthcare personnel lack confidence and feel insecure about the upcoming changes.

### *Reflections and lessons learned*

Decentralisation has been used as if it is a ‘panacea’ ([Terlizzi, 2019](#)). However, its successful implementation depends on the degree of change in the ‘decision space’ at the local level ([Faguet, 2016](#)). Furthermore, the characteristics of primary healthcare as a foundation of UHC are not the same everywhere because of different types of state organisations and governance structures ([Harris and Libardi Maia, 2022](#)). In practice, the implementation of decentralisation takes place in specific contexts.

The decentralisation of primary healthcare in Thailand reflects the opportunities and challenges of adopting ‘devolution as modality’. Most scholars ([Munga et al, 2009](#); [Faguet and Pöschl, 2015](#); [Miharti et al, 2016](#)) have suggested that authority should be devolved to the district level. Indeed, this analysis has found some positive aspects and opportunities of devolution to PAOs. However, the views of healthcare professionals in SHPHs also revealed the lack of a trustworthy and accountable local government, lesser confidence in local executives and politicians, and political domination affecting how resources for public health administration, especially regarding budget and healthcare expertise, are allocated.

As the old saying goes: ‘If the first button is buttoned wrong, the rest shall be wrong.’ Reforms should first start with resolving the most important requirements for successful implementation. A key factor affecting the success of the devolution of SHPHs is the lack of clarity about the three main functions of Bossert’s ‘decision space’: human resources, finance

and governance. On the first point, once devolved, human resource management needs to be clear about career advancement and stability, including how staff get protection in case of potential professional risks. The second point concerns financing: the government must ensure that if SHPHs are devolved, the budgets of the LAOs are and will be allocated as promised before the devolution process starts. Whether it is a per capita budget supported by the NHSO or other supporting budgets allocated from the Bureau of the Budget, it must be guaranteed as promised. The final aspect pertains to the governance rules and commitment, wherein both the central and local authorities must reach an agreement due to the intricate nature of the healthcare system and the involvement of multiple stakeholders. If these three main issues are clarified, the devolution of SHPHs could be done more quickly and with fewer negative impacts from such changes.

As a result of a lack of clarity over those aspects, in the first attempts at the devolution of the healthcare mission and operations (Phases 1–2), only a few SHPHs agreed to be devolved to LAOs (SAOs and municipalities, not PAOs). In Phase 3, the act mandated changing devolved agencies from smaller (SAOs and municipalities) to larger agencies like PAOs. It may have been done quicker, but it does not guarantee that the quality of services and operations will be more efficient because fiscal decentralisation and financial matters have long been transferred from the MoPH into the hands of an autonomous quasi-governmental agency, the NHSO.

In sum, the effectiveness of health system reforms implemented in one country may not necessarily translate to success in other contexts due to contextual specificities. The case of Thailand highlights the unique characteristics and intricacies of health systems, which could contribute to a less successful implementation compared to other countries that have adopted the approach of ‘devolution as modality’. Thailand has implemented various decentralisation models across different territorial authorities in the healthcare system. In this system, distinct actors, such as the NHSO, MoPH, professional organisations, LAOs and SHPHs, have been assigned responsibility for different areas, functions and institutions, such as UHC finance, salary payment, quality control in the healthcare and medical industry, human resource management, and health infrastructure development. Hence, it is evident that Thailand’s healthcare system exhibits intricacies and encompasses numerous stakeholders; as the saying goes, ‘Too many cooks spoil the broth.’

### **Acknowledgements**

The author deeply appreciates Professor Dr Alexandra Kaasch for her general support, including constructive and invaluable comments on several drafts of this chapter.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> The term ‘local administrative organisations’ is a collective designation for local administration authorities and entities, as defined by their respective establishment laws. These LAOs can be categorised into three distinct types: SAOs, municipalities and PAOs.

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## Part II

# Policy responses to working-age risks

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# Integrating intersectionality into minimum income policy design: a systematic literature review

*Matilde Cittadini*

## Introduction

Following the global economic recession triggered by the 2008 banking crisis, the importance of robust social safety nets, including minimum income provisions, gained new-found prominence (Marchal et al, 2014). Minimum income schemes (MISs) have evolved significantly over the past two decades, undergoing substantial transformations in their purpose and function (Natili, 2018). In the European Union (EU), MISs have emerged as a pivotal tool in the fight against poverty and the pursuit of social inclusion (Rodríguez-Fernández and Themelis, 2021). Many European countries have implemented various MISs, guided by European Commission (EC) Recommendation 2008/867/EC (Frazer and Marlier, 2009). These systems have garnered attention in policy domains for their assistance to individuals who are not eligible for social insurance benefits (Marchal et al, 2014). Increasing poverty rates also increased the problem pressure, especially the rise of working poor households, which constitute a new socio-political challenge for policy makers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, which worsened the situation of many people, spending priorities were further shifted by prompting a more generous allocation of funds for social protection. However, increased demand challenged the capacity of MISs (Immervoll, 2009), leading governments to tighten eligibility criteria (Frazer and Marlier, 2009). Consequently, MISs have shown their inadequacy (Acemoglu, 2019) in effectively addressing the severe consequences of systemic crises and handling ‘new social risks’ (Bonoli, 2007), such as the mass unemployment of low-skilled employees and the destandardisation of employment (Bonoli, 2007; Yang, 2014). Various studies suggest that the contributions and results of these MISs have been limited and disappointing (Frazer and Marlier, 2009; Marchal and Van Mechelen, 2013; De La Rica and Gorjón, 2019). This is not solely due to budgetary constraints but also stems from inadequate designs and a

failure to grasp the structural complexity of society by public institutions (Favero, 2020).

MIS designs are influenced by various factors, including the presence of a shadow economy, political considerations, funding capacity and prevailing poverty and unemployment rates (Clegg, 2013; Jessoula et al, 2014). While past studies concerning MISs primarily concentrated on its technical and financial dimensions, an increasingly popular approach involves examining MISs through the perspective of conditionality. This approach examines how the regulations and conditionalities of these safety-net measures could constrain or restrict access to some, taking into account the particular needs and traits of individuals seeking assistance. It is in this context of overlapping and complex social risks that the relatively new concept of intersectionality can make a relevant contribution to understanding the effects of MISs, but it has been hardly addressed in this literature. Coined by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality illustrates how different forms of oppression intersect and amplify one another. Unlike other approaches, it considers the overlapping dimensions of inequality and vulnerability, such as gender, class, ability, race and so on, creating complex meanings and experiences (Hankivsky and Cormier, 2011) that influence economic deprivation and resource accumulation (Lavee et al, 2022). Therefore, as Bishwakarma et al (2007: 9) assert, integrating intersectionality into policy making and policy analysis is crucial, as it 'addresses the way specific acts and policies address the inequalities experienced by various social groups'. Implementing an intersectional analytical frame in the analysis of conditionality in MISs could be beneficial to highlight shortcomings in the design of MISs and how to improve the efficacy of MIS measures against poverty.

As an analytical approach, intersectionality reveals the potential exclusionary obstacles in the design and implementation of traditional public policies (Hankivsky and Cormier, 2011). Garcia and Zajicek (2022) emphasise that an intersectional framework highlights distinctions in identity, informing policy development. In this context, this study delves into the discourse surrounding minimum income, examining how different forms of oppression converge to influence access to and encounters with these policies. It challenges the 'reductionist' nature of traditional policy making, particularly in anti-poverty measures (Manuel, 2006). Therefore, it emphasises the added value that the intersectional approach could bring to MISs by recognising policy problems.

This systematic literature review aims to reveal how MISs address intersecting forms of oppression and disadvantage. The advantage of the systematic literature review is that it offers a structured and transparent method to identify key themes and gaps in the literature (Lame, 2019). In this case, it helps to assess how the design of MISs may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities or have unintended negative consequences for certain groups. It also helps identify trends and research practices (Lame,

2019) in their design that affect inclusivity and outcomes. This study aims to highlight the potential of intersectionality in addressing complex contexts of discrimination, oppression and privilege. It will analyse if and how the theory of intersectionality has been applied to MISs and the potential role of intersectionality in improving the effectiveness and efficiency of MISs. The analytical lens of intersectionality emerges as a highly promising concept for achieving comprehensive insights into policy effects and, in turn, devising effective solutions or strategies (Hancock, 2007) to improve policies, as well as increasing our understanding of overlapping layers of inequality (Hankivsky and Cormier, 2011). The goal of applying the intersectionality approach to social policies like MISs is to understand how these policies address the inequalities experienced by various social groups (Bishwakarma et al, 2007).

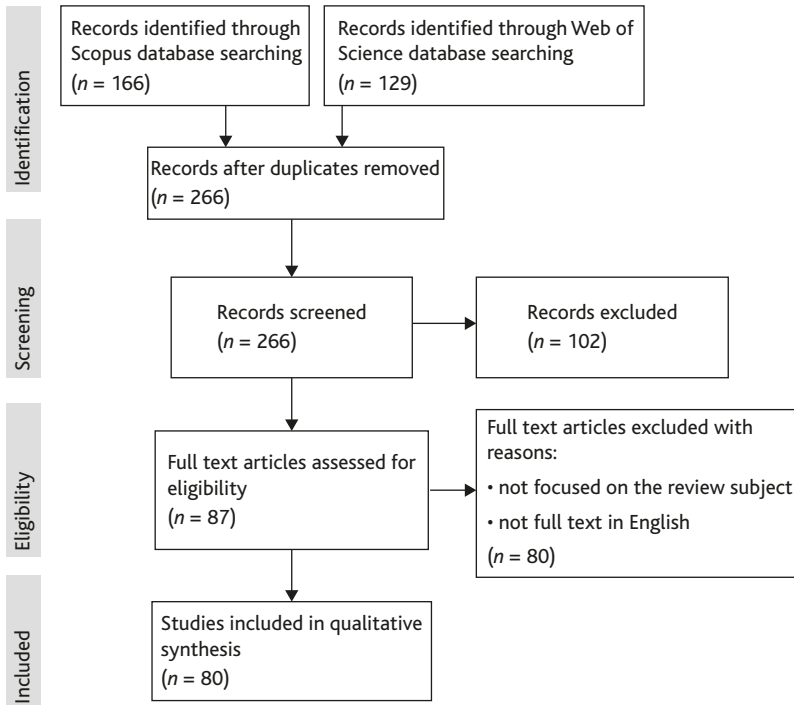
This study aims to systematically review the literature on MISs, focusing on the potential benefits of applying an intersectional approach. The review specifically looks at how these schemes address multiple forms of oppression simultaneously, considering the unique challenges faced by individuals with intersecting experiences. This includes individuals who may be low-income people of colour, disabled women or LGBTQ+ individuals, and it aims to provide tailored support for their specific needs. To achieve this, the study employs a narrow definition of MISs, excluding other types of social benefits like unemployment benefits, universal basic income and a minimum wage. The chosen definition aligns with Veit-Wilson's (1998: 1) description of MISs as means-tested income support instruments providing a minimum standard of living for a limited period to a specific population based on set requirements. The methodology section will provide detailed explanations of the research approach, including data collection and analysis procedures. The subsequent sections will review selected research studies according to inclusion criteria, focusing on how intersectionality is considered in the context of MISs. Finally, the conclusion will discuss its findings and their broader implications in the debate on MISs.

## **Methodology**

The systematic literature review applies the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Liberati et al, 2009; Moher et al, 2009). The PRISMA approach is especially useful for creating a protocol diagram with all relevant information to ensure the transparency and replicability of the review. Consequently, Figure 5.1 contains the Prisma protocol diagram regarding the number of studies that were identified and included in the review, as well as how many studies have been eliminated from the review following the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The review covers the time frame from January 2008 to October 2023. This period coincides with the publication of Recommendation 2008/

Figure 5.1: Prisma protocol diagram



867/EC on the active inclusion of people who are excluded from the labour market. Since then, the topic of MISs has been explicitly propelled in the political debate at the EU level (Frazer and Marlier, 2009). Following this recommendation, many European countries implemented numerous variations of MISs according to their national contexts.

I used two electronic academic databases as primary sources: Web of Science and Scopus. These databases share a variety of common features, but, at the same time, they have some significant differences that lead to the complementary use of these databases as tools to conduct the systematic literature review. On the one hand, Scopus provides a broader coverage of social science research, such as books. On the other hand, even though it indexes fewer journals than Scopus (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016), Web of Science has a higher concentration of influential academic journals. Using both databases can help to identify the most influential and highly cited articles on the topic. The articles were selected using the search term ‘minimum income’ to include studies that use this lemma in the title, abstract and keywords. The search was conducted on the Scopus and Web of Science databases within the subject area of ‘Social Science’ (Scopus) and ‘Social Issues’ and ‘Social Science Interdisciplinary’ (Web of Science), focusing on

EU countries. The restriction on EU countries ensures that the findings align with the EU directive on MISs.

This search aimed to identify articles specifically on minimum income, excluding studies on other social benefits like a minimum wage or universal basic income. The initial search generated 166 articles in Scopus and 129 in Web of Science. After an initial screening to exclude articles not meeting inclusion criteria or lacking abstracts, the list was narrowed down to 164 relevant articles on minimum income.

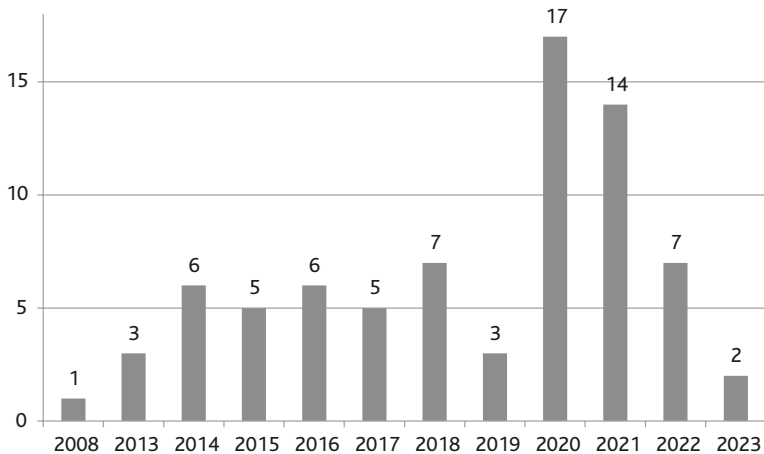
All these articles have been coded in a grid according to various features decided to categorise them: year of publication, number of quotes, geographical context, type of document (journal article or book chapter), type of study (theoretical or empirical), study design (comparative or case study), methodology and MIS focus (primary or secondary). Consequently, I proceeded with the application of exclusion and inclusion criteria for the second screening phase by reading the abstracts of the articles. The key inclusion criterion was a study focus on MISs, thereby excluding those that focused on other social policies, such as (universal) basic income, or other policy tools, such as the reference budget. Furthermore, to align the study with the EU recommendation of 2008, studies that focused on other geographical areas and countries outside the EU or covered an earlier period were excluded. Another inclusion criterion was the use of the English language, which meant that some articles were further excluded because they only had the title and abstract in English. The final selection process resulted in 80 articles (76 journal articles and four book chapters) on MISs produced in the period from 2008 to 2023.

## **Findings**

First, I briefly discuss the findings quantitatively, followed by a discussion of the findings based on an in-depth qualitative analysis of the published studies. The comprehensive review of the 80 articles reveals that the application of intersectionality theory in the design, implementation and investigation of MISs is notably absent from the discourse. Conversely, four articles delve into the concept of multidimensionality, which serves as the encompassing framework within which intersectionality could be situated. Over time, as depicted in [Figure 5.2](#), a notable surge in publications is observed from 2020 to 2023, coinciding with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, 40 out of the 80 articles were published during this period. This increased scholarly interest underscores the escalating significance that MISs have assumed as ultimate safety nets, particularly considering the severe challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis.

Regarding the journals that featured these studies, a diverse array of 36 journals and books contributed to this discourse. This diversity, coupled



**Figure 5.2:** Articles published per year

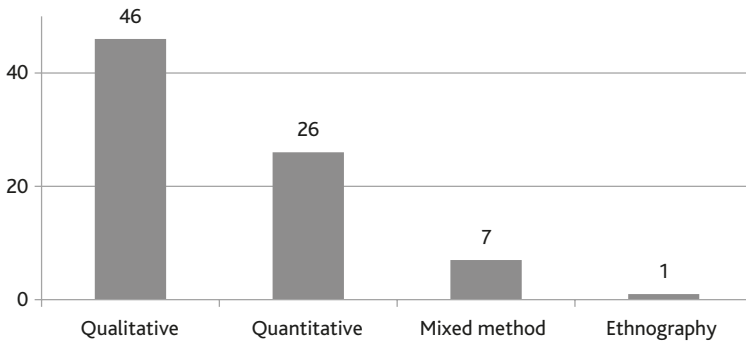
Source: Based on Scopus and Web of Science.

with the increased rate of publication in recent years, attests to the mounting relevance of this subject matter across the social sciences, not just in core social policy debates. Within the realm of research, most (60) of the articles placed MISs as their primary subject of investigation, while 20 studies investigated MISs as an object, meaning a specific point of scrutiny within a broader research debate.

Notably, 33 studies centred their geographical scope on Southern European countries, with a particular emphasis on Italy and Spain. This phenomenon may be attributed to both the recent implementation of national-level MISs in both these countries (Spain in June 2020 and Italy in March 2019) and the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects, which also partially account for the observed increase given that the bulk of studies on these countries emerged within the 2020–23 time frame. Nonetheless, the available data may not distinctly show which factor had a more relevant impact.

In terms of methodological approach, there is a slight majority of qualitative studies, with 46 out of 80 studies (see [Figure 5.3](#)). This preference for qualitative studies can be attributed, in part, to the inherent challenges in accessing official administrative data on MISs and their associated impacts. Furthermore, particularly when investigating vulnerable populations or delving into sensitive issues concerning income and well-being, qualitative research methods offer a more participatory and empathetic approach to data collection. They enable a deeper comprehension of policy implementation dynamics and their intricate interplay with the broader socio-economic and political context.

The second most frequent methodological approach is quantitative (26). However, the lack of diversity in methodological approaches is evident.

**Figure 5.3:** Articles per methodological approach

Source: Based on Scopus and Web of Science.

There is a notable scarcity of mixed-methods studies (only seven) and just one ethnographic study, limiting the comprehensive exploration of MISs from different methodological perspectives. A further six articles made a predominantly theoretical contribution. While comparative approaches are adopted in 41 out of 80 studies, there is a relatively lower representation of country case studies (33 articles), potentially limiting the depth of insights into specific national contexts and their implications for MISs.

The following sections provide further qualitative insights from the retrieved articles. Each subsection, namely, ‘Accessibility and eligibility criteria’, ‘Adequacy’, ‘Conditionalities’ and ‘Impact’, highlights the contributions in this area and is analysed through the analytical lens of intersectionality. Although the majority of the articles did not make any explicit reference to intersectionality in the text, in the analysis that follows, I will discuss the results by applying an intersectional analytical framework to highlight the potential issues that MISs are currently not able to tackle.

### *Accessibility and eligibility criteria*

The analysis of the selected articles reveals that MISs, including their eligibility criteria, are frequently structured in a manner that inadvertently excludes certain groups. These groups, despite facing additional economic challenges, along with situations of social exclusion and discrimination, should ideally be included (Hernanz et al, 2004; Figari et al, 2013). For example, they often fail to adequately address the specific needs of racialised communities and immigrants (including within the EU). Social rights, and specifically MISs, are often stratified according to economic status and country of origin (Bruzelius et al, 2017).

The most frequent types of discrimination addressed concern age requirements, nationality and citizenship, household composition (number of children and single mothers), disability, employment status, and receipt of other types of social benefits (Mundt, 2018; Pereirinha et al, 2020; Hernández et al, 2022; Tervola et al, 2023). A main intersectional critique that can be seen in the analysis of these articles on MISs is that while it is nonetheless recognised that migrants usually suffer the most severe conditions of social exclusion and poverty, the majority of MISs have exclusionary eligibility rules towards them (Jansová, 2008; Cantillon et al, 2020; Jessoula and Natili, 2020; Maino and De Tommaso, 2022). In examining the eligibility criteria of MISs, variations can be observed among different countries. For example, in Finland, stringent residency criteria exist, impacting groups like job seekers, non-national students and asylum seekers, rendering them ineligible despite meeting other requirements (Dalli, 2019). This exclusion thus affects some of the most vulnerable individuals. Conversely, France and Italy enforce strict residency criteria, necessitating a minimum period of residency, yet allow refugees to apply (Dalli, 2019).

Another group that appears to suffer from strict eligibility requirements are young people because they are usually considered dependent on their families (Jansová, 2008; Kevins, 2015) or, in some cases, are considered less vulnerable. For example, Pereirinha et al (2020) and Aguilar-Hendrickson and Arriba Gonzalez de Durana (2020a) show that for Southern European countries, older people, who also play an important role in electoral support due to higher turnout, face less strict eligibility criteria than younger people. There are also notable county differences. For instance, Finland is more lenient regarding age requirements, enabling even minors living separately from their parents to apply, in contrast to Spain and France, which have stricter age-related criteria for young adults.

A significant focus in various studies on eligibility criteria for MISs has been gendered experiences and the challenges associated with parenthood, especially lone motherhood (Natili, 2018; Aerts et al, 2022). European governments, in particular, are increasingly recognising the socio-economic challenges faced by women. It is important to note that MISs are typically provided at a household level, underscoring the pivotal role played by families, especially in Southern European countries (Aguilar-Hendrickson and Arriba Gonzalez de Durana, 2020b). Consequently, eligibility criteria often include such factors as the number of children and household members. This can result in women being disproportionately burdened with caregiving responsibilities or sometimes deemed ineligible for these crucial safety-net benefits due to their partner's higher earnings (Fagan et al, 2006). This highlights that social rights continue to be significantly influenced by a gendered perspective (O'Connor, 1993).

Therefore, the eligibility criteria disproportionately affect asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, recent movers and young individuals. Paradoxically,

these groups constitute some of the most vulnerable in society, demonstrating the most urgent need for MIS interventions (Dalli, 2019).

### *Adequacy*

The beneficiaries of MISs constitute a heterogeneous range of individuals, each with unique backgrounds, interests and beliefs (Immervoll, 2009). The composition of potential beneficiaries fluctuates over time, further hindering group formation and common interest recognition (Natili, 2018). Hence, it is crucial to acknowledge this diversity in life experiences, needs and the financial challenges they may encounter in achieving economic stability when designing MISs. For these reasons, in this section, another critical aspect of MISs is analysed through intersectionality, which is the adequacy of financial support levels (Moreira, 2008) and the duration of assistance needed to attain financial stability. Income adequacy and living expenses vary based on intersecting identities and social categories, influencing an individual's experience of poverty and ability to meet basic needs. The generosity of MISs has important implications for the efficacy of these measures to achieve their policy objectives. For instance, a single mother of a child with a chronic health condition suffers additional financial strain to pay for medical treatments and educational support.

From the analysis of the studies, it emerges that assessing adequacy often involves simulating net benefit packages related to commonly used poverty thresholds (Jansová, 2008; Marchal and van Mechelen, 2013). However, relying solely on these thresholds may limit effectiveness, as they are inadequate to capture real-world variations (Behrendt, 2000). This approach overlooks specific economic barriers faced by groups like women dealing with gender wage gaps, gig workers navigating insufficient working hours or individuals with limited access to education.

The prevailing model assesses the impact of national policies on typical family types receiving social assistance (Kuivalainen, 2004: 1), but it falls short of recognising the complexity highlighted by intersectionality theory. A more representative approach would consider families with diverse life situations. Many EU member states, as indicated by several studies (Jansová, 2008; Frazer and Marlier, 2009; Spyridakis, 2019; Rodriguez-Fernandez and Themelis, 2021), inadequately cover vulnerable populations. Without accounting for individual barriers, a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient. MISs should provide tailored means for decent living, such as adequate cash transfers. According to Frazer and Marlier (2009), five groups are frequently identified as inadequately covered – immigrants/asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, homeless people, young people and the working poor – mirroring some groups being excluded through eligibility criteria (for example, migrants and young people). An intersectional approach

would consider the unique challenges faced by these vulnerable populations, recognising factors like gender equality and protection for inadequately protected workers (that is, part-time, casual and self-employed workers) and marginalised groups.

Furthermore, income support levels often do not align with other essential state provisions, such as affordable services like childcare or housing policies. This particularly impacts vulnerable populations and is in contrast to the labour market-related aspects of active inclusion. It is crucial to consider additional living expenses, such as childcare or education fees for young people and migrants, which may not be covered by MISs. Benefits often complement income from other sources to ensure an adequate standard of living, especially for those with dependent family members (Immervoll, 2009). However, these top-ups may still fall short for individuals with intersecting risks, such as single-parent families headed by women. They face disadvantages in labour market opportunities and earnings, particularly if they have lower education levels (Aerts et al, 2022). The challenge is compounded for those reliant on jobs with irregular hours, which makes work–care balance even more difficult.

Providing a minimum income guarantee for as long as the need persists is crucial. Time limits on benefits can hinder adequate income support (Marchal and van Mechelen, 2013). For example, in Lithuania, benefits may be withdrawn after a certain period, while Bulgaria has abolished such time limits (Marchal and van Mechelen, 2013).

To conclude, the challenge lies in delivering the right type of support to individuals with different circumstances and needs, including as regards the generosity and duration of support. MIS design and adequacy often frame poverty and social inequalities as matters of individual control and responsibility, overlooking their underlying structural and socio-economic origins (Bauman, 2004; Spyridakis, 2019). An intersectional approach would address these adequacy barriers and enhance the effectiveness of MISs.

### *Conditionalities*

The implementation of MISs across European countries often hinges on behavioural conditions tied to beneficiaries' willingness to engage in active labour market measures (Natili, 2020). This approach is based on the European Commission's assertion that minimum income benefits should be coupled with incentives for those capable of (re)joining the labour force (Sanzo González, 2020). However, the application of these conditions has been a subject of controversy, with diverse interpretations and applications (Frazer and Marlier, 2009; Moreno Márquez, 2010).

This controversy stems from the fact that, especially without taking into account intersectionality, these conditions may disproportionately

disadvantage individuals from marginalised groups who face additional barriers in training and re-entering the job market due to their unique circumstances. Conditionality are the requirements individuals must meet to continue receiving economic support through MISs. In cases of non-compliance, benefits are typically reduced, and in more stringent cases, like in Germany (Natili, 2020), benefits can be completely terminated after repeated breaches (Petzold, 2013).

Activation policies, which include elements like active job searching and participation in training, are often linked to these conditionalities. However, as Clegg (2013) points out, tying access to employment support solely to benefit status rather than individual circumstances highlights a core issue and difficulty with MISs. This approach may lead to recipients being stuck in temporary and precarious work (Mato-Díaz and Miyar-Busto, 2021), a situation particularly prevalent among the younger labour force.

Requirements like mandatory job searching and training (Dalli, 2019) can be problematic because they may not account for the unique barriers faced by different profiles. For instance, a single mother may face different challenges compared to a young job seeker or a person with a disability. Overlooking these distinct barriers can result in policies that fail to resonate with the realities faced by these individuals. Additionally, these conditionalities often do not address racial and gender disparities in income, employment, access to resources and caregiving responsibilities adequately. For example, single parents may find it demanding to meet activation requirements while also fulfilling childcare obligations (Jansová, 2008). This not only fails to help them escape poverty but may also discourage participation in these activation policies, leading to an increase in non-take-up rates. Neglecting intersectionality in the formulation of conditionalities may perpetuate and reinforce existing inequalities.

Conditionalities can vary across countries and even within different beneficiary groups (Immervoll, 2009). For instance, in Greece, those over 45 must attend a 'second-chance school' if they have not completed compulsory education (Lalioti and Koutsampelas, 2021). This requirement may be unreachable or unrealistic for certain groups, highlighting the importance of considering unique circumstances. For instance, expecting individuals with disabilities to meet the same participation criteria as able-bodied individuals in employment programmes may be both unrealistic and discriminatory.

Moreover, as revealed by Marchal et al (2014), the exemption from labour force activation in Romania was granted only to recipients meeting a very narrow age range, namely, those responsible for looking after a disabled child between the ages of 16 and 18. This approach fails to acknowledge the diverse profiles and situations of beneficiaries. The active inclusion of marginalised individuals prompts the question of how benefits and various welfare services can be tailored to individual incentives and needs (Künzel,

2012). Under Universal Credit in the UK, as proposed in the White Paper (Clegg, 2014), claimants are categorised into different conditionality groups, ranging from full to no conditionality, but the implementation may continue to rely on a rather broad segmentation of claimant groups.

In conclusion, the limited connection between active labour market policies (ALMPs) and MISs in many countries is compounded by a general lack of assessment studies regarding the effectiveness of ALMPs for MIS beneficiaries (Frazer and Marlier, 2016). The absence of an intersectional approach in the design of MIS conditionalities, which only considers certain forms of vulnerability, further underscores the need for a more inclusive framework. Acknowledging intersectionality is fundamental to addressing the potential issues that the current design of conditionalities fails to tackle.

### *Impact*

The effectiveness of MISs in the EU varies across countries and over time, with limited impact on poverty alleviation (Avram, 2016). Gaps in coverage, inadequate benefits and weak targeting undermine their ability to provide essential support (Jansová, 2008; Immervoll, 2009; Hernández et al, 2022). Comparative studies indicate that MISs only had strong positive impacts in a few countries, such as the Netherlands, while being limited in others (Frazer and Marlier, 2016). Moreover, other reasons that limit their effectiveness are the lack of coordination and cooperation between services and a tendency to prioritise different groups in need of support who may be easier to reintegrate into the labour market (Frazer and Marlier, 2016). Long-term dependency on MISs is a significant challenge, particularly for individuals facing intersecting forms of disadvantage (Frazer and Marlier, 2016). Factors like poor health, low education and caregiving responsibilities compound the difficulties faced by marginalised individuals, making stable employment harder to secure, which appears to be one of the main policy aims of MISs. For instance, affordable childcare is crucial for parental labour market participation, yet accessibility remains an obstacle for many parents. In the absence of such childcare support, parents may become dependent on MISs. However, the presence of strict conditions and eligibility requirements can hinder their ability to fully utilise these programmes to improve their circumstances. When the right conditions are in place, individuals are more likely to secure employment and consequently reduce their dependence on public support (Immervoll, 2009).

Discrimination and bias in the labour market contribute to the cycle of dependency on MISs. In many cases, the alternatives to MISs are limited to low-paid, insecure work, which can lead to economic instability and exacerbate the cycle. In many countries, there is still insufficient emphasis on developing an integrated and tailored approach to supporting those receiving

benefits and fostering social inclusion and, as far as possible, integration into the labour market (Frazer and Marlier, 2016).

Across the EU, there is a trade-off in MIS design. Some countries prioritise narrow but more generous support, such as Austria, while others, such as in Scandinavia, take the opposite approach (Figari et al, 2013). This prompts critical questions about the effectiveness of means-tested benefits, especially when they are the primary form of support. These authors criticise the balance between social insurance and social assistance in welfare policies (Ferrera, 2005; Figari et al, 2013).

In Italy, employment does not always protect against poverty, with 10.8 per cent of workers experiencing poverty in 2020. Young workers, especially those overeducated or undereducated, face elevated risks of unemployment. The MIS design in Italy has limitations, particularly in covering non-national recipients, who constitute a significant portion of vulnerable individuals and younger people (Maino and De Tommaso, 2022).

Similar issues are observed in Spain, where the adequacy of MISs is relatively low. Benefits often fall short of lifting household incomes over the poverty line, and they have not registered significant improvements concerning the average level of income (Ayala et al, 2021). Fragmentation of non-contributory benefits contributes to inefficiencies, with young people and children receiving less protection. Single-parent households and large families face challenges in poverty reduction (Ayala et al, 2021; Mato-Díaz and Miyar-Busto, 2021). Other groups with inadequate protection are non-EU immigrants, as well as the working poor, in the absence of instruments that supplement salaries when remuneration is low and there are family dependencies (Ayala et al, 2021).

These intersectional dependencies limit the effectiveness of MISs in reducing poverty. The intersection of gender and age reveals that younger workers, both male and female, face a higher risk of poverty despite being employed. This suggests that young workers, especially those with tertiary education, are grappling with issues related to underemployment and educational mismatch. To enhance effectiveness, countries with low MIS coverage should review eligibility criteria to ensure that all in need receive support. Simplifying complex systems and allocating more resources to programmes can lead to more effective poverty reduction (Baldini et al, 2018). Additionally, rectifying the exclusion of vulnerable groups, such as homeless individuals and refugees, is crucial for creating inclusive social safety nets (Frazer and Marlier, 2016). In conclusion, addressing the limitations of MISs requires a targeted approach, considering intersecting factors like gender, age, nationality and family composition. By recognising and addressing the unique challenges faced by intersecting vulnerable groups, policy makers can work towards more effective and inclusive social safety-net programmes, ultimately contributing to a more equitable society for all.



### *Studies with an intersectional approach*

Only four articles addressed the concept of intersectionality, and none made explicit reference to it (see, for instance, [Immervoll, 2009](#); [Hirsch, 2013](#); [Hernández-Echegaray and Pacheco-Mangas, 2018](#); [Pérez Eransus and Martínez Virto, 2020](#)). Even though these articles do not explicitly mention intersectionality, they highlight the importance of it. All articles stress that the structure and design of MISs should include appropriate support that can address diverse needs, complex situations and multiple dimensions of exclusion while also highlighting significant challenges to achieving such encompassing MISs ([Immervoll, 2010](#)). These studies uniformly underscore the imperative of comprehending the complex experiences and multidimensional nature of exclusion ([Pérez Eransus and Martínez Virto, 2020](#)) that collectively shape the circumstances and livelihoods of individuals affected by poverty, social exclusion and limited access to policies. [Immervoll \(2010\)](#) critically asserts the challenge of formulating an inclusive MIS that mobilises diverse stakeholders and fosters collaborative awareness campaigns. Such concerted efforts are vital in assuming shared responsibility for addressing issues of exclusion. Indeed, [Hernández-Echegaray and Pacheco-Mangas \(2018\)](#), in their analysis of the implementation of the Spanish national MIS, highlight the importance of a deep understanding of the ‘multitudes of experiences’ of beneficiaries. Furthermore, poverty and exclusion are characterised by multidimensionality, which means that certain vulnerable groups accumulate difficulties in various and overlapping spheres of their life ([Pérez Eransus and Martínez Virto, 2020](#)). This underscores the importance of intersectionality, emphasising the need to understand how specific marginalised groups experience and are impacted by MISs. Therefore, an intersectional approach is indispensable, as it not only considers the broad spectrum of factors contributing to poverty and well-being but also acknowledges the unique experiences and challenges faced by specific marginalised groups.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, this analysis sheds light on a critical aspect of MISs: their accessibility and eligibility criteria. Nonetheless, increased attention towards the inclusion of different dimensions of inequalities, existing MIS designs and implementations has failed to address the specific needs and experiences of marginalised individuals and communities through an intersectional perspective. These policies, while intended to provide vital support, often fall short of adequately addressing the unique challenges faced by marginalised groups. The intersectional critique highlights that despite recognising the heightened vulnerability of certain populations, eligibility rules can

inadvertently exclude them from much-needed assistance. In light of these findings, it is imperative to recognise the importance of intersectionality in understanding and shaping MISs. Policies must be designed with a nuanced understanding of the diverse challenges faced by different groups, including migrants, young people and women, among others. Efforts should be directed towards crafting inclusive eligibility criteria that consider the complex interplay of such factors as age, nationality, household composition and gender. Only through this holistic approach can we ensure that MISs fulfil their intended purpose: to provide a meaningful safety net for those facing economic hardship and social exclusion. By doing so, we move towards a more equitable and just society that leaves no one behind.

This chapter has investigated how MISs address intersecting forms of oppression and disadvantage, focusing on their rise following an EU recommendation in 2008 and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lens of intersectionality allowed a nuanced understanding of how MISs navigate complex layers of oppression, enabling tailored interventions and facilitating the development of more inclusive policy solutions. The systematic literature review underscores a significant gap in both the design of MISs and research about these programmes when viewed through the lens of intersectionality theory.

The results show that intersectionality is rarely considered in the formulation of MISs or adequately explored in the scholarly discourse surrounding this subject. Nonetheless, it is clear that marginalised populations, characterised by diverse attributes like age, race and more, consistently confront elevated poverty rates and distinctive challenges when seeking access to these assistance programmes.

Despite the implementation of such policies, marginalised populations continue to exhibit elevated rates of poverty. While MISs have demonstrated some efficacy in mitigating poverty rates, they frequently fail to comprehensively account for the multifaceted needs of intersectionally marginalised individuals and households. Some authors and perspectives approach the concept of intersectionality with varying degrees of explicitness, with some primarily addressing specific forms of discrimination when discussing MISs. These authors consider the impact of factors like age, race, gender, sexuality and so on, as well as their influence on an individual's experience of poverty and inequality and their ability to access and benefit from MISs. It is noteworthy to highlight that publications on this topic have increased since 2008, though it remains to be seen if the COVID-19 hype and dominance of Spanish and Italian studies translate into a pan-European or global research agenda. Certainly, the analysis has demonstrated an increasing importance of intersectionality in the public policy discourse, while systematic research that links MISs and intersectionality remains rare and requires further research efforts. This structured literature review has

provided a synthesis of the use of intersectionality in MISs and identifies the research gaps in the recognition of complex forms of oppression and inequality. To conclude, the review has shed light on the importance of intersectionality and the added value that it can bring in the design of MISs, intending to overcome the ‘policy invisibility’ (Corus et al, 2016) of those who face different and complex forms of inequality by overcoming the one-size-fits-all approach.

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# The governance of youth labour market policies in Italy and Austria: opportunities and challenges across national and local levels

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## Introduction

In Europe, labour market conditions following the Great Recession have led to an increase in the rates of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Mascherini, 2019), though with marked territorial disparities between different countries (Cefalo and Scandurra, 2021). This phenomenon has a long-term impact, causing ‘scarring effects’ on young people (McQuaid, 2015; Mousteri et al, 2018). Strategic measures implemented at the European Union (EU) level in response to these challenges promote active labour market policies (ALMPs), in alignment with the requirements set by the Europe 2020 strategy, in which the European Commission, recognising the primacy of this issue in the context of framework programmes, defined the EU Youth Strategy.

As the crisis persists, the EU polity has strengthened its social policy making (Ferrera et al, 2023), intensifying ALMPs, not only as immediate countermeasures to unemployment but also as medium- to long-term investments in response to structural changes aimed at facilitating the labour market integration of the most disadvantaged groups, such as the unemployed, inactive and NEETs (Sergi and Barberis, 2017). In particular, young people are considered among the vulnerable groups by the literature on labour market participation (Lindbeck and Snower, 2001) because of their difficulties in getting permanent working positions, contributing to widening social inequalities (Rueda, 2005). Prime-age workers, as labour market insiders, benefit from more favourable opportunities and working conditions, also protected by the low cost of turnover, whereas young people, as outsiders, are exposed to higher unemployment and risks of precariousness (Scandurra et al, 2021).

Given this background, the European Commission has proposed a new EU Youth Strategy for the period 2019–27, including the Reinforced Youth



Guarantee (COM 2020/0132), representing an evolution and enhancement of the original Youth Guarantee (YG) initiative (COM 2012/3051), as a social buffer mechanism in the field of social and, particularly, employment policy (Miró et al, 2023). The reinforcement of the YG has provided even more specific and personalised support to those seeking employment or education and training programmes, facilitating their entry into the labour market. However, the shift from European to national and local policies, with targeted interventions in individual member states, engages multiple government levels in the adoption process due to the diverse institutional settings that shape how governance processes are implemented in different countries (Kazepov, 2010).

In this regard, this chapter aims to analyse the implementation of the EU YG in Italy and Austria and show the implications of translating it down to the local level, considering Milan and Vienna as case studies. Understanding the mechanisms behind the local implementation of such schemes designed at higher institutional levels is crucial to grasp their real effectiveness and whether and how distortions to planned objectives are generated that may adversely affect the achievement of goals. To analyse youth policies implemented in different territorial contexts, it is essential to consider, on the one hand, the welfare regimes in which they are embedded (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Bonoli, 1997) and, on the other, the governance strategies implemented within them (Levi-Faur, 2012; Parreira do Amaral, 2020). In particular, the analysis focuses on governance arrangements, outlining the actors involved, the roles of the stakeholders and the coordination modalities activated, to explore differences at the local level and the factors that hinder or promote their effectiveness.

## **Welfare systems and governance structures in Italy and Austria**

Italy represents an extreme case of the general transformations that are traversing Europe (Ferragina et al, 2022). The country exhibits notably high rates of youth unemployment and NEETs, which in 2022 reached 18 per cent (EU-27: 11.3 per cent) and 19 per cent (EU-27: 11.7 per cent), respectively, for the 15–29 age group (Eurostat, 2023). The crisis, exacerbated by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened by current political-economic tensions due to ongoing conflicts, has starkly highlighted the structural weaknesses resulting from years of flexibility not counterbalanced by adequate social protection mechanisms (Leonardi and Pica, 2015). Italy presents a sub-protective welfare state, typical of Mediterranean countries (Ferrera, 1996, 2005), characterised by limited redistributive policies and an unequal social structure (Cuzzocrea et al, 2020). The state plays a subsidiary role and mainly delegates to families the function of ‘social shock absorber’

(Schizzerotto, 2003; Sgritta, 2003), concerning assistance, economic support and work–life balance (Rhodes, 1996). In this sense, young people experience prolonged waiting times when job searching, as the first job in Italy, predictive of future employment status, strongly affects further career opportunities (Barone et al, 2011). The Italian labour market tends to protect insiders, leaving young people, who are mostly in outsider positions, with minimal social protection (Lindbeck and Snower, 2001). Additionally, social policies are affected by the marked differentiation between the various areas of the country, highlighting significant territorial inequalities (Kazepov and Barberis, 2013).

On the other hand, Austria, with its conservative employment-centred welfare regime (Stadler and Pernicka, 2008), typical of Central European countries, stands out for its low youth unemployment and NEET rates. In 2022, for the 15–29 age group, these rates were 7.5 per cent and 9.1 per cent, respectively, well below the EU average (source: Eurostat data, 2022). This is facilitated by a youth safety net (Tamesberger, 2015) and a close connection between the education system and the labour market, positively impacting school-to-work transitions (Cefalo and Kazepov, 2020). The Austrian welfare state presents a significant balance among various actors in the system (the state, markets, families and voluntary associations) and intervenes, from a perspective of the subsidiarity of public intervention, to the extent that needs are not satisfied at the individual, family or social levels (Österle and Heitzmann, 2019). The Austrian social state, drawing aspects from the ‘Bismarckian tradition’, is labelled ‘conservative’ because it tends to provide services and benefits thanks to an insurance scheme negotiated between the trade unions and employer associations according to occupational categories, while maintaining stratified income levels (Unger and Heitzmann, 2003). However, social policy reforms since the 1970s have introduced elements of the social-democratic and liberal welfare state, giving rise to an ‘extended’ social state model (Hefler and Steinheimer, 2020). The Austrian system therefore represents an interesting element of comparison, by contrast, with the Italian situation. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the levels of governance implemented in the two different welfare regimes to understand the transmission of European youth policies in these territorial contexts.

Different meanings have been attributed to the concept of governance in the literature, referring to the non-hierarchical and network-like structures (Ball and Junemann, 2012) assumed by institutional and non-institutional actors, the procedural mechanisms involved in the decision-making phase, the coordination process between the different actors, and the government strategies adopted (Levi-Faur, 2012). A further aspect related to governance concerns regulation modes, which are useful for understanding how different actors interact at different levels (Parreira do Amaral, 2020). This refers to a

multilevel perspective (Kazepov, 2010), which indicates the complexity of governance systems, characterised by different scalar levels. Regarding youth policies, according to Dibou (2012), the different levels of governance are represented by: the supranational level, formed by the European institutions; the national level, composed of the member states; and the regional level, which deals directly with the young people themselves and also interacts with municipalities and civil society. Therefore, actors interact at various levels by intervening in the negotiation of policy choices.

For the purposes of this chapter, two ways of coordinating multilevel governance will be considered: a scalar dimension, analysing the role of different actors across different institutional levels (vertical dimension); and a relational dimension, analysing the role of and interactions between different actors at the same level (horizontal dimension) (Øverbye et al, 2010). The aim is to outline the governance systems underlying the implementation of youth policies, both vertically (multilevel) and horizontally (regarding partnerships between the different territorial actors). Therefore, an analysis will be conducted on how, within the delineated welfare models, different governance dynamics contribute to shaping the implementation of youth policies through an in-depth analysis of two territorial-level case studies.

### **A comparative study on the governance of youth ALMPs: the cases of Milan and Vienna**

The chapter aims to investigate, through a comparative analysis (Cochrane, 1993; Ragin, 2014) of the Italian and Austrian governance systems, the youth ALMPs defined at the European level and their reception in national contexts, selecting a functional region for each of the two countries and, according to a multilevel perspective, consequently choosing the major metropolitan area of such region as its case study. The selection was based on theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 2009), considering Milan, the capital city of Lombardy, the leading Italian industrial city and main economic and financial centre of Northern Italy, and Vienna, the capital of Austria, which also holds the dual status of being both a municipality and a federal state. The urban case-study areas, although presenting differences in terms of welfare regimes, represent two advanced realities as regards the socio-economic context in the respective countries, with similar external conditions (Cordini et al, 2022). Specifically, Milan and Vienna are metropolises with over a million inhabitants, based on the advanced tertiary sector and finance (Boczy and Cordini, 2020), and integrated into the global cities network. The objective of this research is not to provide an extensive comparison between cities but rather to define the activities, projects and concrete management of multilevel governance among the different public–private actors involved in the implementation of youth ALMPs.

It is therefore a comparative analysis of different interventions related to youth employability in local labour market contexts. This thus allows not only for a comparison highlighting similarities and differences in the implementation of youth policies between Italy and Austria but also for a better understanding of the individual cases, investigating the multilevel governance arrangements of YG that occur at the local level and shedding light on the respective opportunities and critical elements. Through a desk analysis of legislation and a secondary data analysis related to both contexts, the system framework was defined, which starts from the design of the EU policies and descends to the national level by integrating into the different welfare regimes. Subsequently, qualitative research was carried out through semi-structured interviews with 30 key informants, as experts and policy makers of the main institutions<sup>1</sup> involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of youth policies within the two selected case studies.

The interview transcripts were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The collection of key informants' narratives allowed for a comparison between the different perceptions and meanings assigned to the policies considered from the actors' point of view, therefore contributing to defining them and analysing how they interact at the various levels and whether they intervene in negotiating policy choices, bringing out the different local networks and the complex multilevel governance solutions adopted.

## **Findings**

The following sections will present and discuss the findings of the analysis, focusing on two key aspects: (1) delving into which stakeholders are involved in regulating the system at different levels; and (2) investigating the coordination modalities on the horizontal and vertical axes of governance, highlighting the main strengths and weaknesses inherent in the partnership between different local actors.

### *The main actors of multilevel governance from the national to the local level*

Youth labour market policies designed by the EU are then transmitted and implemented at the national, regional and local levels. The European Commission provides the guidelines and recommendations for member states, which must then integrate them into territorial contexts. This requires adapting EU recommendations to national specificities, considering existing legislation, institutions and local labour market dynamics. At the national level, the central government plays a key role in coordinating policy implementation, while at the local level, policies are further

adapted to respond to specific territorial needs, requiring coordination and stakeholders' involvement to ensure the effective and relevant implementation of measures. Therefore, an analysis of multilevel governance was deemed necessary to address the different outcomes generated by youth labour market policies, highlighting the relationships among actors in policy making and negotiation.

In Italy, policies for the promotion of youth employment are regulated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, which is in charge of the development and protection of employment, operating through national operational programmes (PONs). The funding of programmes, which occurs for EU member states following negotiations of measures related to structural funds with the European Commission, is implemented in Italy by each region, which, following the change made by Constitutional Law (No. 3/2001), have responsibilities in the fields of youth, labour, and social policies. The amendment to Title V of the Constitution has in fact delegated programmatic and operational functions to the regions and, through the regions, to smaller administrations, such as the provinces or municipalities, maintaining control over the essential levels of performance (LEPs) under state competence. Furthermore, the ALMP system was reformed with Legislative Decree 150/2015, redefining the governance of labour policies through the establishment of the National Agency for Active Labour Policies (ANPAL), which coordinates the National Network of Labour Services, and the National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies (INAPP).

These actors play an active role in the implementation of the 2021–27 YG programme, reinforced through the PON *Iniziativa Occupazione Giovani* (IOG), targeting the group of NEETs (15 to 29 years old) and aiming to provide them with a qualitatively valid work offering, internship or reintegration into education or training within four months of unemployment or leaving the education/training system. Hence, the PON is centrally managed, but its implementation is delegated to regional authorities through regional operative programs (PORs). Each Italian region designs, executes and coordinates projects through regional offices or entities/agencies dedicated to employment.

In addition, at the regional/local level, the Network of Labour Services intervenes in policies aimed at youth employability, assuming different connotations depending on the actors involved and the networks activated territorially. It relies on several local employment centres and private service providers, which are often required to work in partnership:

‘Territorial networks include actors such as the regions, provinces, municipalities, public employment services, employment agencies, active labour policy providers, public agencies, such as ANPAL and INAPP, employers’ associations and trade unions,

chambers of commerce, universities, secondary schools, national interprofessional funds for lifelong learning, and bilateral funds. These are all actors who, if they worked together, could explore the issue and find answers.’ (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Italy)

In the Lombardy Region, where there is a dynamic entrepreneurial network, both companies and the private sector play a significant role, in addition to public administrations. In this context, the Regional Observatory on Youth Condition has been established, operating in collaboration with the Regional Research Institute Polis Lombardy, the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) and other public/private institutions to enhance and value the territorial network of services for young people, promoting an integrated understanding of their needs. In this regard, the first regional framework law on youth, titled ‘*La Lombardia è dei giovani*’ (No. 4/2022), was enacted. This legislative initiative emerged from a collaborative process involving thousands of individuals, institutions, associations, schools and stakeholders of various backgrounds and levels, all aiming to share cross-cutting objectives and useful tools:

‘The law’s intention is precisely to strengthen the network and youth policies at the local level, involving municipalities and regional authorities, fostering greater integration, cohesion and collaboration among the various policies implemented across different departments ... allowing the Lombardy Region to reinforce its interventions in the field of youth policies.’ (Lombardy Region, Italy)

In the implementation of measures at the local level, a primary role is played by public employment services (PESs), public structures coordinated by the regions or autonomous provinces to facilitate the matching of labour supply and demand and to promote ALMP interventions. However, these services face significant operational challenges, particularly regarding staff shortages and resource constraints: “PESs in Italy are the Cinderella of Europe, with limited possibilities for effective intervention in labour market mechanisms. ... The current PES essentially performs bureaucratic functions with negative impacts” (CGIL – Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro,<sup>2</sup> Milan, Italy). To counterbalance the shortcomings of PESs given Lombardy’s quasi-market system in labour market services, private employment agencies play an active role in YG local implementation to facilitate job matching.

Regarding Austria, in order to counteract youth unemployment in the late 1990s, the federal government had already introduced an approach aimed at providing occupational guarantees or reintegration into the educational/training

system for young people up to 18 years through the establishment of a ‘youth guarantee’. This action was further developed in 2008 with the activation of two specific ALMP measures: the Training Guarantee and Future for the Youth. In 2014, the YG was implemented, aligning with European recommendations and introducing additional interventions, such as apprenticeship coaching, NEET projects, youth coaching, a business start-up programme and subsidies.

Austria did not benefit from the European funds related to the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), as both the youth unemployment rate and the number of NEETs in the 15–29 age group did not reach the minimum threshold to access funding. Nevertheless, Austria managed to incorporate some YG implementation measures within European Social Fund (ESF) funding, co-financing national programmes supporting young people’s access to education, training or employment:

‘I think the importance of the European Social Fund and the ESF guidelines is crucial. These are transferred to the national agendas and then to the Austrian regions. At the local level, it is necessary to combine these guidelines with territorial issues and then use them to develop and enhance projects.’ (Vienna Chamber of Labour, Austria)

Referring to the 2019–27 EU Youth Strategy, the ‘Austrian Youth Strategy’, a governmental programme implemented by the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, has been activated to identify, promote and economically support interventions related to youth policies. Its goal is to achieve European objectives for youth, aiming for full employment in the 15–24 age group, primarily through the improvement and enhancement of dual apprenticeships, facilitating high levels of employment. Youth labour market policies are implemented at the national level, with local and regional PESs managing the scheme at a decentralised level. In fact, in the Austrian context, PESs play a fundamental role, representing the main service providers related to the labour market. The PESs, entrusted by the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Protection (BMASK), operate in close collaboration with workers’ and employers’ organisations and are structured comprehensively across the territory, comprising both a federal-level organisation and one corresponding to each federal state, branches and career information centres (BIZs). Representatives of employers’ and workers’ organisations from the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (WKO), the Federal Chamber of Labour (AK), the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) and the Federation of Austrian Industries (IV) are involved at all levels, contributing to defining guidelines in youth labour market policy: “In our organisation, we have involved the Chambers of Employees, the Chambers of Employers, and the federal government; these three groups lead the PES

and have regional authorities in each *Bundesgeschäftsstelle*, where they decide what the labour market policies should be” (PES, Austria). In addition, the PES in the Viennese context, in conjunction with the City of Vienna, has set up a special service for young adults up to the age of 25 (“Together for Young People in Vienna’ [U25]), which operates in a one-stop-shop perspective, offering all services required by measures to combat youth unemployment. In Vienna, there are also the City Council (Stadt Wien), the Social Fund (Fonds Soziales Wien), the Public Employment Service of Vienna (AMS Wien), the Federal Office of Social Affairs (BSB), the Municipal Department for Education and Out-of-school Activities for Children and Young People (MA 13), social partners, the Vienna Employment Promotional Fund (WAFF) and the Vienna School Board (SSR), all of which are involved in the direct management of projects in the metropolis aimed at promoting youth employment: “Among our partners, the main one is the City of Vienna, then the PES, particularly for Vienna, and the third major partner is the Vienna Department for Education, responsible for schools” (Federal Economic Chamber, Austria). The multiplicity of actors that intervene in the scalar definition of governance at the various levels, in both territorial contexts, requires an in-depth analysis of the relational dimension of the coordination mechanisms involved in the definition of youth labour market policies.

### *Coordination strategies across governance levels*

In Italy, services for ALMPs are regulated by Legislative Decree 150/2015, which establishes, among other things, provisions on labour market reform, defining the networks and actors responsible for implementation and coordination mechanisms in each territory. To enhance coordination at the central level, ANPAL was designated as the managing authority for YG. According to a public-private cooperation model, the Network of Labour Services was established to serve as the governance tool ensuring essential ALMPs at the national level:

‘The PON provided for ANPAL as the managing authority within the framework of the EU programmes and the regions as intermediate bodies, which, based on allocated resources, defined regional implementation plans and significantly determined the measures ... this was crucial to design interventions better connected to territorial specificities ... representing a joint effort between the Ministry of Labour and the regions, which act as implementers of the interventions.’ (ANPAL, Italy)

However, the Network of Labour Services, mandated at the regulatory level, is not uniformly activated at a regional-local level. The Italian institutional



and administrative architecture therefore poses a challenge: youth ALMPs are managed at the level of regional administration, based on national regulations, but the implementation of most of these policies takes place at a territorial level. Within the aforementioned system, networks vary depending on the specific context and possible internally developed coordination mechanisms, reflecting the significant territorial differentiation in Italy:

‘Territorial networks are not adequately widespread; they have highly “variable geometries”, which makes them weaker because a network conceived in this way should include all actors, not just a part of them. Otherwise, a piece is always missing. ... When we compare Italy to Europe, we are comparing 20 national systems,<sup>[3]</sup> and this creates inequality in opportunities.’ (INAPP, Italy)

These regional disparities risk becoming a negative precondition that leads to uneven outcomes from youth labour market policies. Indeed, although derived from national principles and values, the development of a policy then finds implementation with different intensity, infrastructure and territorial conditions in various contexts. This fragmentation also affects the possibility of establishing a governance network and structured coordination strategies that involve the participation of all stakeholders. Indeed, the lack of “some pieces” in the activated coordination networks weakens the effectiveness of the policies, not only in terms of their management but especially with regard to the achievement of the goals set by the measures for the target group.

According to data from the latest ANPAL evaluation report,<sup>4</sup> Lombardy appears to be the region with the highest number of young people registered in YG and with the highest percentage of job placements at the end of at least one ALMP intervention proposed by the programme. However, it recorded a low coverage rate, below the national average value, presenting a significant gap between the young people registered and those actually activated. Interviews in this regard highlighted a critical issue in the public coordination and governance networks of YG, which, even in the favourable socio-economic context of Lombardy, fails to intercept and activate NEETs.

In particular, with regard to coordination among different youth policy actors, weaknesses have been highlighted related to the role of the PES, which has the crucial task in labour policies of job matching, negatively affecting the profiling of policy beneficiaries and failing to facilitate the systematisation of the inclusion of vulnerable users. One of the main critical issues of YG lies precisely in the interception of NEETs, as they are not included in any administrative database, especially when considering their low educational-level categories and increased exposure to the risk

of social exclusion, making them a difficult target group to reach, engage and motivate:

‘The Youth Guarantee in Italy, as can be deduced from ANPAL’s monitoring and evaluation reports, was a policy designed for NEETs, but effectively, in the first years, those in more advantageous positions had access to the measure, so we had university graduates who effectively benefited from the Youth Guarantee programme!’ (Lombardy Confcooperative,<sup>5</sup> Italy)

The critical issues of YG were compensated for in some cases by the participation and coordination of local actors. In Milan, the NEETwork project was activated between 2016 and 2023, aiming to intercept and support the most vulnerable component of NEETs, which was not included in YG. The project, promoted by a Lombardy banking foundation (Fondazione Cariplo), operated in partnership with private employment agencies (Mestieri Lombardia and Fondazione Adecco) and a higher research institute (Istituto Toniolo), as well as in collaboration with the Lombardy Region, involving 378 third-sector entities. This project compensated for PES deficits thanks to the intervention of a private partnership, which also made it possible to offer a personalisation of the measures activated. In fact, after intercepting the target group, the challenge arises of customising the services offered according to the needs of young people:

‘There is an issue related to interception, an issue linked to attempting to personalise interventions as much as possible, because when talking to a broad group, such as NEETs, defined by some as individuals aged 15–34 and narrowed by the NEETwork project to 15–24, we cannot apply a single formula to support such a heterogeneous group of young people, as we need to focus on those who are the most vulnerable and those who are less protected by public policies.’ (Fondazione Cariplo, Italy)

In Austria, coordination among governance actors is structured on two levels: the federal level between the ministries and the regional level between the different *Länder*. The overall coordination and strategic development of the Austrian Youth Strategy is carried out through the Federal Chancellery’s Kompetenzzentrum Jugend (Competence Centre for Youth), which establishes central coordination in each federal ministry, ensuring inter-ministerial coordination and continuous participation in the whole process. Regional coordination, in particular, is strategic because it is able to tailor the implementation of the programmes at the territorial level, considering the

specificities of the different labour markets and benefiting from a certain level of autonomy regarding operational decisions in the implementation phase:

‘There are regional coordinating offices that have the knowledge, the network, and the connection on how a programme really has to be implemented in a certain region because there are considerable differences, not only between Vienna and other areas but also in the labour market structure ... you always have to implement the programme in a way that is best suited to the context considered.’ (Federal Ministry of Labour, Austria)

Vienna, as the *Land* and main metropolitan city, requires specific coordination actions between the different actors. The Koordinationsstelle Jugend – Bildung – Beschäftigung (Coordination Group for Youth, Training and Employment) has the task of supporting cooperation between the PES, the Vienna Social Fund, the Social Ministry Service (SMS) and the WAFF in the field of the transition from school to work for young people between the ages of 15 and 24:

‘The WAFF is a very peculiar Austrian institution, unique to Vienna, and it is complementary to the ALMP system. The WAFF offers retraining courses for all those who cannot access the existing systems at federal level, thus covering a variable group of people who would have been excluded by the federal system. This is interesting from the point of view of institutional architecture as well, highlighting the Länder’s ability to intervene and exercise varying degrees of autonomy based on political intention, a significant element worth noting.’ (University of Vienna, Austria)

The established models of cooperation and networking between different actors at the territorial level enable the implementation of integrated programmes between education, training and employment systems, such as the Youth Coaching measure, which offers personalised support to reduce the early school leaving of the most vulnerable target group, that is, pupils with disabilities, social disadvantages, special educational needs or NEETs. There are steering committees for Youth Coaching in each province of Austria, with a national support office (Bundes KOST) coordinating the transition from school to work. Strong coordination among different actors allows the activation and management of the operational phase, providing individualised support throughout the school-to-work transition. Youth Coaching has been the most relevant programme implemented since 2013 for the activation of 15- to 19-year-olds, reaching all schools in Vienna, by implementing the ‘*Ausbildung bis 18*’ (‘Education Until 18’) law, in which

young people are required to undergo further training, with the aim of leading all young people to qualifications beyond compulsory schooling:

‘We are coordinating to ensure that this law [Education Until 18] is not merely a document on paper. We’re convening because we represent different institutions – our institutions are part of the state government in Vienna; other institutions are institutions of the Austrian federal government – and there is cooperation and communication between these institutions. It’s crucial to identify where our active involvement is needed.’ (WAFB, Austria)

Coordination between the different service providers in the Austrian context is therefore well structured at the different political-administrative levels, involving all actors in youth labour market policies activated by different programmes, with positive repercussions on the functioning of governance.

### **Investigating territorial governance mechanisms: centralisation versus regionalisation**

Interviews with key informants revealed significant differences between Italy and Austria in the role played by the main actors in youth labour market policies, as well as in the dimensions of service integration and the coordination of multilevel governance from the national to the regional/local level. In Italy, the implementation of EU policies is strongly influenced by the decentralisation of functions and the integration of services at regional levels, as well as by specific dynamics of the labour market: where the territorial structure is economically ‘weak’, it is indeed more difficult for policies to succeed, leading to territorial disparities in the implementation of ALMPs (Cefalo and Scandurra, 2021). In such a scenario, positive examples can be found in areas where the socio-economic structure offers greater opportunities, such as in Lombardy and the metropolitan area of Milan, where local networks manage to structure themselves thanks to a constellation of public and private providers (Boczy et al, 2022) that create productive connections between various governance actors. However, these represent isolated cases, further highlighting a highly fragmented national dynamic (Palumbo and Pandolfini, 2019). This is particularly evident in the functioning of the PESs, responsible for implementing labour policies in their respective regional contexts, which are criticised for lacking personalised services to users, the limited involvement of social partners and experiencing difficulties in intercepting the most vulnerable individuals.

Indeed, according to the key informants interviewed, what is most lacking in the activation of services related to various youth policies in Italy is the concept of ‘taking care’ of unemployed youth facing greater difficulties,

who should receive personalised services not only to guide them but also to support them in subsequent steps towards employment stability. The NEET group in Italy is so vast and heterogeneous that EU-designed policies, implemented in the national and regional contexts from a top-down perspective that conceives implementation as a hierarchical execution of policy objectives established by central levels (Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1983), risk capturing the population segment not necessarily with the most needs, generating a displacement effect (Davidson and Woodbury, 1993). Referring to the analyses of Bourdieu and Passeron (1970), such policies tend to reproduce the existing social structure and family habitus of those who have ‘more capital, more culture’ in the map of social space, thus advantaging them over others and therefore not achieving the declared goal of social mobility but ending up generating a Matthew Effect (Merton, 1968). In the implementation of policies and, consequently, in the activation of multilevel governance mechanisms, the existing disparities between regions in Italy are therefore highly relevant and not comparable to the differences existing in Austria between eastern and western *Länder*, which are less marked and pertain to a dynamic labour market, especially regarding youth employment, differentiating Vienna in particular from the rest of the country.

Austria is indeed a federal republic with three distinct levels of government: the central one of the *Bund*; the regional or provincial level composed of nine *Länder*; and the municipal level articulated in the *Gemeinden*. Austrian federalism has a peculiar connotation: it is defined as ‘apparent’ because it presents, since the founding of its constitution, a clear centralising direction (Erk, 2004; Lehmbuch, 2019). The Austrian model is centralised in terms of labour policies; in this system, the federal government plays a more significant intervention role compared to individual regional territories, which nevertheless have a good level of autonomy. In the specific case of Vienna, which is at the same time Austria’s capital, *Land* and municipality, this element is particularly marked and the autonomy it has acquired as a consequence of the processes of decentralisation has allowed it to complement and compensate for federal government policies. In fact, the metropolis, which, following EU accession, developed a localised and inclusive welfare model that attempted to respond to the structural problems of the local labour market through the definition of ALMPs at the regional level (Ahn and Kazepov, 2021), has greater autonomy than any other city in the country and sees both the municipal council and the social partners, that is, representatives of employees and employers, involved in political-administrative management. In this context, the PESs play a central role in the organisation and management of services, the strength of which lies in the personalisation of measures to both combat and prevent unemployment. There is also fruitful cooperation between the horizontal and vertical levels of governance, especially exercised within the territorial committees, where

the federal (central) and local (regional) levels of institutional and social components are always available.

## **Conclusions**

The territorial dimension has scarcely been explored in comparative analyses of welfare and social policies (Kazepov and Cefalo, 2020), but a great deal of the effectiveness of policies depends on the implementation at a local level of the measures and the types of network coordination. In this regard, this in-depth analysis of the perspectives of key informants has aimed to highlight how governance models contribute to defining, at different levels, policies aimed at the employment of young people. In particular, the chapter has highlighted the crucial point of the local implementation of actions designed at 'higher' institutional levels that could generate different outcomes.

In the implementation of youth employment policies in Italy, significant differences emerge in the various local contexts, with competencies in the field of education falling under state directives and in the field of training and labour falling under regional authority. These two levels of governance are not effectively integrated, highlighting local discretion in the implementation of central programmes (Arlotti et al, 2021). The Italian regulatory framework tends to promote measures that are not uniformly implemented nationwide but are more effective in contexts with a dynamic economic structure, such as in the case of Milan, risking increasing inequalities rather than reducing them (Palumbo et al, 2019). On top of a lack of territorial sensitivity mechanisms (Cefalo and Scandurra, 2023), such as the ability to adapt national reforms to local levels while maintaining essential standards, there is also a significant difference in the implementation of policies, implying that some regions are able to maximise the opportunities provided by legislative reforms at the expense of others. The governance of the system is thus fragmented between the state and regional levels.

From this point of view, while allowing great autonomy to the specific territorial realities, Austria intervenes in a centralised way regarding labour market policies, which are dynamic, especially concerning the transition mechanisms strongly favoured by the dual apprenticeship training system, in which cooperation between ministries, public actors, companies and social partners develops its action. In the face of socio-economic issues, as in the case of Vienna, specific actors have been identified and special measures activated, leveraging the city's autonomy as a *Land* to reach the standard set by the federal government. Territorial differences are indeed linked to the socio-economic context. Vienna is a metropolis and tends to concentrate elements of the knowledge economy and the dynamism of the economic market, as well as migratory flows, and presents higher unemployment and NEET rates than the rest of the country, which are not determined by legislative elements or the

differentiated implementation of policies but rather by the socio-economic context with which the regulatory element then interacts.

From the comparison of the actors involved in youth labour market policies in the Italian and Austrian contexts, significant differences emerged. In Austria, there is the full and recognised involvement of social partners (trade unions and employers), both as actors and promoters of policies (which they implement and partly finance) and as active partners within different levels of coordination. Social partners in Italy do not operate at this level and are marginally involved in promoting effective coordination networks. Even public employment services exhibit significant differences between the two countries. In Austria, they represent one of the pillars of governance, both vertically (in national/federal policy-making committees) and horizontally (in service activation and territorial coordination), allowing for personalised services. In Italy, on the other hand, employment centres are highly bureaucratised structures that predominantly deal with administrative practices, are understaffed and have limited resources.

The profound differences between Italy and Austria observed among various actors, both on the vertical and horizontal axes of governance, thus impact the reception and implementation of youth policies. Analysing the vertical axis of multilevel governance coordination, it has emerged that objectives and programming choices descend from EU institutions to the national and regional/local levels, following a top-down perspective and adapting in different ways to various contexts, depending on the relational dimension involved in the interactions between actors. The research results have demonstrated that the planning of youth policy offerings is not homogeneous but differentiated based on labour market dynamics and territorial coordination among various actors. Different perspectives also emphasise significant variations in regional contexts and correlations that youth policies have with welfare regimes, either hindering or promoting the effectiveness of multilevel governance, highlighting its complexity.

## **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> In detail, interviews were conducted with selected representative key informants (15 for Milan and 15 for Vienna) from the following institutions: the Ministries of Labour and Social Policy, national agencies for active labour policies, national and regional research centres, regional/federal administrative bodies, municipal labour market organisations, universities, banking foundations, public employment services, training agencies, chambers of commerce, trade unions, and third sector organisations.
- <sup>2</sup> CGIL is the largest Italian trade union.
- <sup>3</sup> This claim stems from the fact that Italy is subdivided into 20 regions, and since ALMPs are developed mainly at the regional level, the national system is not uniform.
- <sup>4</sup> Lombardy Region achieved the highest number of young people registered in YG during 2014–2022 (about 220,000) and the highest rate of job placements six months after the conclusion of at least one ALMP intervention (78.3 per cent). However, Lombardy Region presented a significant gap between the number of young people initially registered in

YG and those who effectively participated in the programme (109,940), with a coverage rate well below the national average (around 70.0 per cent versus 85.0 per cent), ranking 17th among the 20 Italian regions (ANPAL Report, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Confcooperative is the second-largest association of cooperatives in Italy.

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# Election battleground: a critical analysis of childcare policy problems and proposals in England

*Tina Haux*

## Introduction

Childcare provision has become one of the key battlegrounds for the next general election in the UK, which is highly likely to take place in 2024. The Conservative government announced substantial reforms in the 2023 Spring Budget, while Labour has set up a commission on early years and childcare to develop its own policy recommendations. Childcare in the UK remains expensive compared to other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (HoC, 2023), and there are concerns over the sustainability of childcare provision generally and the recruitment and retention of the childcare workforce in particular (Haux et al, 2022). The financial pressures on the sector have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the high inflation and energy costs since. The pandemic has also led to a widening of educational inequalities, particularly in the early years. All of this has increased the pressure on parents, and at a time of labour shortages, the cost and availability of childcare, presenting a barrier for parents to continue or return to work, has meant that childcare and early years provision (CEYP) has (finally) gained political traction.

However, while formal CEYP is acknowledged to have a positive effect on the cognitive, social and emotional development of children, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (see Hobbs and Mutebi, 2021; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2021), the main driver is the labour market shortages and, therefore, the aim to enable mothers to return to paid employment or to increase their working hours. The quality of childcare provision is an important part of this debate (see Hobbs and Mutebi, 2021; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2021). The current government has introduced a series of measures, coming into effect in Autumn 2024, while the Labour Party has commissioned an early years review and a number of think tanks have developed proposals. Any improvement of the current situation is hindered not only by the fact that the problems are multifaceted and

interlocking but also because it is likely to be expensive given the wide coverage of childcare at a time of stretched public finances. The latter makes sticking-plaster interventions more likely, while the former means that this is unlikely to address any of the deeper problems.

This chapter will briefly set out the problems with the current CEYP by drawing on existing research. The empirical section will analyse and discuss the proposed reforms of the government and other political actors and conclude with a discussion of the likely success and sufficiency of the proposed solutions. The analytical focus will be on proposals by key partisans (the Conservative and Labour Parties), think tanks (Onward and the Institute for Public Policy Research [IPPR]) and advocacy groups, such as the Early Years Childcare Coalition (EYCC). While childcare policy is relatively centralised in the UK compared to more devolved social services, such as long-term care, the analytical focus is on England within the wider UK political context of a likely general election in 2024. Comparisons with CEYP in other countries and the devolved nations are woven into the narrative throughout the chapter.

## **What are the policy issues?**

This section will briefly set out the most important problems with CEYP in England to illustrate the scale of the challenge across the UK. This section draws on existing academic research (for example, [Lloyd, 2020](#)) and policy-focused research by political actors (for example, [HoC, 2023](#)) and advocacy groups (for example, the EYCC).

### *Cost of childcare*

The cost of childcare to parents and carers has become a political issue, as it is pricing parents (mainly mothers) out of the labour market at a time of labour shortages. Childcare in the UK is considered to be the most expensive among OECD countries ([OECD, 2020](#)). On average, a full-time place for one- to two-year-old children in England in 2023 (assuming 25 hours) costs between £7,000 and £8,000 per year. This reduces to around £3,000 for three- and four-year-olds ([Jarvie et al, 2023](#)). The reduction in cost is due to higher staff-child ratios for older children and the 15/30 free hours, which are only available for three- and four-year-old children. In comparison, an employee working full-time at the National Minimum Wage earns around £21,000 ([Jarvie et al, 2023](#)). In relative terms and in an international context, for a couple on the minimum wage, childcare costs amount to 25 per cent of their earnings ([OECD, 2020](#)).

The high relative cost of childcare for families in the UK compared to their net income is driven by a higher rate of taxes paid by UK families and

the lower rate of child benefits in comparison to other OECD countries, rather than reflecting higher raw costs of childcare. Childcare has also become relatively more expensive given the sharp increase in costs over the past ten years. The cost of part-time nursery places for children under age two grew by 60 per cent in cash terms between 2010 and 2021, twice as fast as average earnings and much higher than the 24 per cent growth in overall prices in the same period (Faqharson and Olorenshaw, 2022). It is therefore not surprising that almost half of families earning less than £10,000 per year are struggling with the cost of childcare (Foster et al, 2023).

Furthermore, the national averages do not fully reflect the spatial inequalities. There are substantial variations in the cost of childcare across England, with childcare being the most expensive in London. Similarly, there are differences in the cost of childcare between the regions, with childcare being less expensive in Scotland and Wales, respectively, than in England (Jarvie et al, 2023).

### *Mothers leaving work or not returning to work due to the cost of childcare*

Parental employment rates continue to differ substantially by gender in the UK. In 2021, 76 per cent of mothers in couples were in employment compared to 91 per cent of fathers (and 69 per cent of lone parents). The employment rate of mothers increases with the age of the child, as does the proportion of mothers working full-time. When their youngest child is aged one, 39 per cent of mothers work part-time compared to 30 per cent when their youngest child is aged 16 (ONS, 2022). A recent survey of mothers in work reported that one in ten had left work due to childcare issues, and twice as many mothers, particularly of young children, have considered leaving the workforce due to the difficulties of balancing childcare with their work (see Fawcett, 2022). The 2023 Women in Work Index shows that the UK is now placed 14th compared to ninth in 2020 (PWC, 2023).<sup>1</sup> The main reasons for the drop in the ranking are the cost of childcare and the low take-up of shared parental leave (PWC, 2023).

### *Complex system of claiming the cost of childcare*

Government support for parents to cover the cost of childcare has become complex and multilayered in England. The outgoing Conservative government under John Major introduced childcare vouchers for four-year-olds for 2.5 hours of daily preschool in 1996 (West and Noden, 2016). The New Labour government under Tony Blair turned these vouchers into 15 hours of free childcare, designed to align with preschool attendance and thus firmly focused on education rather than childcare and supporting working parents/carers. Take-up rose quickly to around 90 per cent (Lewis, 2003;

Lloyd, 2020). However, the original purpose of funding preschool attendance explains why the ‘free’ hours only apply during term time, that is, only for 38 weeks of the year. This means that the free entitlement is substantially lower when calculated over the whole calendar year.

Since then, the 15 free hours offer has been expanded and additional ways of funding childcare have been introduced to the point that there are now eight different programmes, which are spread over three different departments, and parents are eligible for one or more programmes depending on their circumstances. Starting with the free hours of childcare: all parents with three- and four-year-olds are eligible for 15 hours during term time, that is, 38 weeks per year. This is the only universal childcare scheme and is linked to the early years education schedule.

If parents with three- and four-year-olds are in work and are above an income threshold (£8,668 in 2023), then they are eligible for 30 hours of free childcare in term time. This means that each parent needs to earn at least the National Minimum Wage and work for 16 hours a week to be eligible. The access to 15 free hours is also available for parents with two-year-olds on a low income. The free hours are administered by the Department for Education.

Families receiving Universal Credit are eligible to get up to 85 per cent of childcare costs, with the maximum amount payable being £646 a month for one child or £1,108 a month for two or more children. This scheme is administered by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Parents in work can also reclaim tax for childcare fees where the cost of childcare is deducted from the pre-tax salary. This is mainly beneficial for parents on higher incomes, and the scheme is administered by His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC). In addition, students in higher and further education can receive help with childcare costs.

### *Government subsidies do not cover the cost of offering childcare*

As indicated earlier, government support for childcare is complicated and insufficient for parents/carers. However, the amount paid to childcare providers for the 15 (30) free hours does not cover the cost. A survey of CEYP managers reported three main problems with the funding (Haux et al, 2022: 11):

- funding rates are too low to cover the full costs of free schemes;
- funding rates are not indexed with the National Minimum Wage; and
- the term-based funding leads to under- and overpayment.

These issues were in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but have been exacerbated by it. The parliamentary report concluded that: ‘underfunding of

the early years entitlements has left providers unable to invest in development and straining to survive' (HoC, 2023: 3). This also affects childminders and explains some of the sharp reduction in the number of childminders in England over recent years.

### *Workforce recruitment and retention*

Adding complexity to this are the struggles of childcare providers to recruit and retain staff. When discussing recruitment and retention, it is important to distinguish between so-called 'school-based' and 'group-based' providers. The former are linked to schools and frequently only offer three hours a day during term time, that is, 15 hours per week. School-based providers tend to have a small team of stable staff, and, due to an ageing workforce, staff tend to leave because of retirement rather than moving to another job. Working in these settings is more attractive to staff because of the shorter hours and the link to a school, offering the chance of therefore training to be a teaching assistant with better pay and working conditions. Managers of group-based providers struggle with recruitment due to the long working hours and low pay. Employees tend to leave to move into care professions with more defined career trajectories, for example, in social care, or better pay in the retail sector. In addition, CEYP managers point out that working in the sector does not have a high profile, which means that applicants frequently do not have a clear understanding of what the work entails (Haux et al, 2022).

A report by the Social Mobility Commission in 2020 underscores these concerns expressed by providers (Social Mobility Commission, 2020). The average hourly wage of a childcare worker was £7.42 per hour, with 15 per cent earning less than £5 per hour. Only 17 per cent received in-work training, and 10 per cent worked 42 hours or more. The annual turnover of 15 per cent is not surprising given these working conditions.

There is a growing need for the (additional) training of existing (and new) staff to better support the increasing number of children with special educational needs and developments (SEND) (see Haux et al, 2022; HoC, 2023). The number of children with SEND or behavioural issues has increased as a result of and since the COVID-19 pandemic, and staff do not feel that they have the adequate resources or training necessary or the additional time required (Haux et al, 2022).

The House of Commons Education Committee inquiry received information regarding the state of the early years workforce that is concerning. According to the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), the number of childminders has gone down dramatically. Furthermore, the vast majority of providers were finding it difficult to recruit staff and around a third were actively considering leaving the sector (HoC, 2023: 9). The reduction in childminders limits the choice



and flexibility of parents, and together with the recruitment and retention issues in the sector more widely, this makes any significant expansion of the sector difficult to achieve without very substantial investment.

### *A distorted market amplifies structural problems*

As discussed in the section on financial support schemes for parents, successive UK governments have favoured a market approach to the provision of childcare. However, in addition to the aforementioned issues of inadequate funding leading to a reduction in the number of providers, particularly childminders, the dramatic rise in the proportion of settings being owned by large chains and private equity providers has raised concerns. Private firms invest less in their staff (Guillaume, 2022), charge higher prices and pay lower wages than not-for-profit providers (Simon et al, 2022). Their share of the overall CEYP nearly doubled between 2018 and 2022 and is forecast to continue to grow (Simon et al, 2022). In sum, the market-based approach amplifies the structural issues of affordability and poor working conditions.

### *The English system in context*

When comparing the English childcare system to other countries, a number of factors stand out: the high cost of childcare for parents (OECD, 2020); the complex set of policies for financial support (Farquharson and Olorenshaw 2022); the low qualification levels of the workforce; low child–staff ratios (Pascal et al, 2013); and the expansion of private provision without the concurrent expansion of regulation (Lloyd, 2020). Based on comparative research, childcare systems with better educational outcomes for children tend to have lower staff–child ratios, a better-qualified workforce and higher levels of regulation and government investment (Pascal et al, 2013). With the exception of higher staff–child ratios, this describes many Northern European childcare systems. In contrast, England tends to have higher staff–child ratios than its Northern European counterparts but lower staff qualifications, less regulation and lower government investment. The UK has also developed a mixed economy of childcare provision, with an increasing proportion of CEYP provided by private childcare companies (Pascal et al, 2013). The childcare systems of Ireland, Australia and Canada show similar characteristics as the English system.

In short, the current provision of CEYP is failing to support parents wanting to move into employment or increase their hours, is not able to provide an equal start in life for children, and struggles to recruit and retain a high-quality workforce. The existing system of free early years education is complex and falls short of reimbursing providers for the full

cost of service provision. The three key issues that any new policies need to address are, therefore:

- Cost and access for parents:
  - especially with younger children;
  - complexity of overlapping funding schemes for parents;
  - lack of alignment with other family policies, such as parental leave; and
  - access when not in work for younger children.
- Cost for providers:
  - insufficient financial support by the government to cover the costs of free schemes.
- Workforce recruitment and retention:
  - low pay (and low public esteem); and
  - lack of training and progression.

In other words, CEYP in England is not working for parents, providers or children in terms of its affordability, sustainability and quality. There is variation in the quality of childcare in England, but it is not generally raised as an important issue. However, any decrease in the quality of CEYP or further deregulation poses the risk of exacerbating educational inequalities. Maintaining and, ideally, improving the quality of childcare provision is an important consideration underlying all the arguments around affordability, availability and staffing. All of these issues sit within broader concerns about inequality in early learning and its long-term child outcomes, labour market supply shortages, and gender equality for mothers around labour force participation and work intensity. Therefore, the proposals outlined in the next section will be assessed in terms of the extent to which they are likely to meet some or all of the aforementioned concerns.

## **What are the proposed policy solutions?**

CEYP has become a key battleground for political parties. This section will introduce and critically evaluate the proposals of the two main parties, as well as three key think tanks, starting with the changes announced by the current government in the 2023 Spring Budget. The policies will be evaluated against their own stated aims, as well as the three key issues outlined earlier.

### *Conservatives: recent reforms and proposals*

The Conservative government announced a number of changes in the 2023 Spring budget, that is, after the publication of the parliamentary reports discussed earlier. The most significant change is focused on reducing the cost of childcare for working parents of very young children by extending

the 30 free hours to children aged nine months. Smaller changes increase the reimbursement for childcare providers and raise the ceiling for childcare costs under Universal Credit. The measures in detail are:

- making the 30-hours scheme available to all eligible working parents with children aged above nine months;
- increasing the rate of funding paid to providers for those hours;
- increasing the staff-child ratios for two-year-olds;
- providing start-up grants for childminders;
- introducing wraparound childcare for primary schoolchildren from 8 am to 6 pm; and
- increasing childcare amounts in the Universal Credit childcare scheme (HoC, 2023: 11–12).

These changes are planned to take effect in 2024/25 and will increase the financial support for parents by £3.2 billion in the remaining Spending Review period up to 2024–25 and a further £15.2 billion over the forecast period to 2027–28 (HoC, 2023). The reforms are being introduced in stages. The 15 free hours will be extended to working parents with a two-year-old from April 2024 and to all children aged nine months or older from September 2024. From September 2025, the entitlement to 30 hours of free childcare will be extended to all working parents.

The reception of these measures has been mixed. Many commentators have welcomed the additional investment into CEYP, in particular, the uplifting of the childcare components of Universal Credit and the expansion of the 30 hours down to the age of nine months (see, for example, Goddard, 2023; Sutton Trust, 2023; WBG, 2023). The latter would better align the childcare support for parents with parental leave policies in England. However, concerns have been raised about the increase in the staff-child ratios, the capacity of the sector to provide those extra places and that the expansion of the 30 free hours will not benefit the most disadvantaged children (HoC, 2023).

Together with the existing staff shortages and retention issues, this would mean that around 100,000 new staff members would need to be found by the end of 2025 in order to accommodate the additional 180,000 children who are estimated to take up the newly available free hours. As it stands, only two in ten nursery managers say that they will be able to offer additional places without restrictions, while three out of ten say that they will only be able to offer a restricted number of places (Hardy et al, 2023; for detailed analysis, see also Jones et al, 2023). Implementing this reform fully will, therefore, be a key challenge not only for this government but also for the next, following the likely general election in 2024.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS, 2023) argues that this expansion of childcare support has ‘effectively established a new arm of the welfare state’, as

the UK government is going to oversee 80 per cent of all preschool childcare in England once the planned reforms are implemented fully in 2025 (up from 50 per cent in 2023). Therefore, there would be ‘severe consequences from getting the funding rate wrong’, with providers either not engaging with the new policy or not being able to stay in business (HoC, 2023: 18). Moreover, disparities between affluent and deprived areas are likely to widen as a result of the Spring Budget announcements (HoC, 2023).

Measuring the reforms against the criteria outlined earlier, it is clear that they are focusing on the cost of childcare for working parents with young children but are unlikely to effectively address the workforce shortages. This may mean that the planned expansion will fall short of its aims and, thereby, not help working parents and their children. Nevertheless, it is likely to increase inequality in access for children from more deprived backgrounds.

### *Labour*

In the autumn of 2023, Labour floated the idea of a ‘childcare guarantee’ (see Stacey and Mason, 2023) from nine months to the start of school. However, this has since been amended given the high cost and constrained public finances. Instead, the proposals discussed focus on closing the gap between parental leave and free places for three-year-olds. One of the options discussed is to offer subsidised rather than free places (Stacey and Mason, 2023). One of Labour’s five pledges is to make education work for everyone, and this very much includes reform of current CEYP funding. Labour published the overarching rationale and specific policy proposals in the report ‘Breaking down the barriers to opportunity’ (Labour Party, 2023: 6):

For Labour, childcare must be more than just a facility that allows parents to work more hours. It is about providing every child with the best start in life; an early years education which sets them up for school and supports child development. Extensive evidence shows the positive impact of high-quality early education on long-term educational, behavioural and social outcomes, and on closing the gap for children in low-income households.

The proposals for reforming CEYP provision and funding focus on the expansion of available places and enhanced training and qualifications, as well as pay, for the workforce. In addition, Labour also wants to reform the inspection framework for the CEYP sector used by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted), the regulatory agency for educational institutions. Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson announced a major review of childcare at the Party Conference in the autumn of 2023. This review is to be led by David Bell, a former permanent

secretary in the Department of Education and former chief inspector of Ofsted (Simpson, 2023). The review is to cover the following topics:

- how to implement the planned childcare expansion;
- how to increase wraparound daycare for primary schoolchildren;
- how to enable local authorities to open nursery provision; and
- how to better support the childcare workforce.

In other words, Labour is focusing more on the educational aspects of childcare as part of a wider focus on social mobility rather than its role in supporting working parents. Neither are supply-side issues like staff shortages addressed. However, any more detailed proposals will only be forthcoming nearer the general election after the conclusion of the major review.

### *Policy proposals from think tanks*

A number of think tanks have published proposals on how to improve CEYP in England in 2022. The analysis focuses on proposals from three think tanks from opposing ends of the political spectrum.

#### *Onward*

The centre-right think tank Onward published the report *First Steps: Fixing Our Broken Childcare System* (Guillaume, 2022). The report opens with the following statement:

It is difficult to overstate the importance of early childhood. It is a crucial period for the physical and emotional growth of children. It is when families are formed, expanded, and strengthened. For all its stresses, it should be a period of joy for parents. And it is a moment when the community and government can serve as supporters and safety nets. (Guillaume, 2022: 6)

Childcare in some form is used by the majority of parents, and the sharp increase in cost is highlighted as having resulted in increased financial pressure for families and carers across the income spectrum. Similar to the problem analysis outlined earlier, four key issues with CEYP in England today are identified: the complexity of funding arrangements; their inflexibility; high staff turnover and the low qualification levels of the early years workforce; and, finally, a dysfunctional childcare market. In addition to an analysis of these issues, it contains five proposals: The first is for a universal childcare credit given to all children aged one to four to contribute towards the cost of childcare, with an additional credit for people on lower income.

The proposed value is set at £140 per month, intended as the equivalent of the current free 15 hours. Further proposals include: frontloading the payments; replacing the current system of parental leave with a single 12-month shared entitlement that could be taken flexibly; expanding family hubs; and introducing supply-side reforms, especially boosting the number of childminders.

The introduction of a universal childcare credit is very similar to the policy announced by the government in the 2023 Spring Budget. However, the difference in language, calling it a ‘universal childcare credit’, reflects the widespread take-up of formal childcare and the government taking a greater role in subsidising parents using formal childcare. It also proposes integrating parental leave and the universal child credit better, responding to a long-standing criticism of the English system. Finally, the focus on childminders addresses a key issue in reducing the shortage of places, but the proposals fall short of addressing the wider workforce problems in the early years sector.

### *IPPR*

The left-leaning IPPR think tank identifies slightly different challenges in its report, *Delivering a New Childcare Guarantee* (Statham et al, 2022), namely the failure of the childcare market to deliver quality childcare, the gap between the end of parental leave and free hours, the upfront cost when entering work and the lack of full daycare in school. The IPPR report focuses very much on reforming the number of free hours accessible to parents by suggesting that free hours should be accessible for younger children, cover the whole year and not just the school year, and be paid at a higher rate. In addition, the IPPR proposes the introduction of a means-tested top-up scheme for parents who need additional hours. These suggestions would close the gap between parental leave and the free-hours entitlement, as well as would support parents who are working full-time. The proposals are costed, and the sums involved are substantial and represent ongoing costs rather than one-off investments. Also, the proposed Affordable Hours Scheme would be the ninth funding stream for childcare, with different conditions again. Furthermore, the proposals only address the funding of childcare provision, not the wider workforce issues in terms of recruitment, retention and training.

### *Policy Exchange*

The Policy Exchange is a conservative think tank that has released a set of proposals called *Better Childcare: Putting Families First* (MacDonald and Kelly, 2022). The report was authored by Connor MacDonald and Ruth Kelly; the latter is a former Labour MP and government minister, which

indicates the broader partisan platform of the policy proposals. The focus of the proposals is on increasing and deregulating the provision of childcare by childminders, specifically:

- reducing the regulatory burden on childminders;
- creating childminder hubs to facilitate the community involvement of parents and children and to combat the isolation of childminders;
- allowing high-performing institutions and childminders (as judged by Ofsted) to vary staff–child ratios;
- allowing the Universal Credit childcare element to be used for providers registered in a new and less burdensome community system; and
- scrapping the childcare tax support and instead paying the money to parents with children under age four as a ‘Baby Boost’, acknowledging the high costs of very young children.

Reducing the regulatory burden and potential isolation of childminders may help to reduce the number of childminders leaving the profession and, at least, maintain the current workforce levels. What makes this proposal stand out is that the Baby Boost would be paid to all parents irrespective of their working or income status. The amount would be similar to doubling child benefits, with the aim of supporting families with the high cost of having young children. Assessing the evaluation criteria outlined earlier, these proposals could increase the number of childminders and the number of childcare places in high-performing institutions, and mean parents that with very young children would have more money to either spend on childcare or afford to stay at home/work fewer hours.

The notable absence from the proposals is higher hourly reimbursement by the government for CEYP providers, which is therefore unlikely to lead to a substantial expansion of provision or address the workforce issues. However, the Policy Exchange proposals are claimed to be cost-neutral.

## **Learning from other countries**

Now that the provision of childcare and early years education is high up the policy agenda, interest in provision in other countries has increased again. The Scandinavian countries are still regarded by some as a desirable model in terms of their strong regulation, high-quality provision and relatively equal access for children. However, as [Lloyd \(2023\)](#) argues, the current under-regulated mix within provision in England is too different for this to be a meaningful policy learning comparison at this point. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the focus has been on other Anglo-Saxon countries, such as Ireland, Canada, Australia and, to some degree, Eastern European countries like Estonia (see [Lloyd, 2023](#)).

In the public debate, particular attention has been paid to Ireland, the closest liberal welfare state, which carried out childcare reforms in 2019. For instance, Eva Lloyd (2023) set out the Irish reforms in a briefing paper for the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, which was also part of the expert commission advising the Irish government on childcare policy. The Irish reforms focused on the following four components:

1. reform of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) funding model,
2. a comprehensive ECEC workforce plan with corresponding funding commitments,
3. addressing governance of the sector, and
4. a commitment to doubling Ireland's levels of investment in ECEC. (Lloyd, 2023, p. 6)

In other words, the reforms, which were supported by one of the largest unions in Ireland, focused on the sustainability of early years provision, the workforce and the affordability for parents.

The cost of the new core funding scheme was €259 million in its full first year of operation. In addition to that, €300 million has gone on the early education programme per capita subsidy and the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), subsidising parental childcare costs (Lloyd, 2023). The effects of the new reforms after one year are clearly visible:

- the number of nurseries closing has dropped;
- out-of-school providers are re-registering;
- there is increased capacity in baby and toddler rooms;
- pay has increased for the majority of the sector's workers; and
- there has been an increase in parents accessing formal childcare (Lloyd, 2023).

Subsequent research will establish the longer-term effects of the reform.

It is not surprising that campaigners in England are focusing on the reforms in Ireland given the comprehensive nature of the reforms and success thus far. Furthermore, the combination of increased regulation, the transparency of costs and a focus on the quality of childcare provision, alongside reducing the costs for parents, would address many of the problems with childcare provision in England.

## **Conclusion**

As the analysis has shown, CEYP in England is facing many interlocking issues at this time. The key problems are: the affordability and availability



of childcare, particularly for parents with younger children; the multiple funding schemes; the lack of alignment with parental leave policies; and the mean testing of additional hours, thereby making it more difficult for parents on low income to access childcare. In addition, the financial support by the government to providers is insufficient, as is the regulation, which means that working conditions differ substantially between local authority and private providers. Finally, the recruitment and retention of staff are substantial challenges for providers.

The impetus for political reform at this point is driven by enabling more mothers to enter the labour market or to increase their working hours amid an ongoing cost-of-living crisis and labour market shortages. The role of formal childcare in reducing inequalities in educational outcomes for children is less prominent in the political debate.

Analysis of the recent childcare reforms introduced by the current UK government and the policy proposals put forward by Labour, think tanks and advocacy groups throws up a number of important similarities and differences. The proposals of the Labour Party are yet to be formalised following the early years review that has recently been commissioned.

There seems to be a consensus (with the Policy Exchange being the exception) on two ideas:

- childcare provision should be expanded significantly to include children at a younger age; and
- childcare funding should be aligned with parental leave policies, that is, they should start when the child is nine months or a year old.

There are important variations as to whether this should include all children (see the Onward and IPPR proposal) or only those whose parents are both in work (see the government's reforms). This has implications for inequality in education for very young children. Either way, the proposed changes require a substantial increase in public funding, as all of them include a substantial and sustained expansion of eligibility for childcare subsidies.

The change in language is also noticeable. The Labour Party has linked childcare reforms to widening opportunities but have rejected going as far as a childcare guarantee. Both Onward and IPPR refer to their proposals as 'universal childcare', the Irish reform is referred to as 'public service reform' by [Lloyd \(2023\)](#), and the IFS has suggested that childcare is now a part of the welfare state given the amount of government funding ([IFS, 2023](#); see also [Farquharson and Olorenshaw, 2022](#); [HoC, 2023](#)). These changes in terminology reflect the planned expansion of CEYP and investment but also a shift in policy approach towards it becoming a public good.

However, none of the proposals by the three think tanks address the broader workforce issues around recruitment and retention. These issues are broader

than low pay, though that is a key reason for staff leaving the sector. However, access to training and progression are also important factors. Building a sustainable workforce is a prerequisite for childcare expansion on this scale, which means that their proposals (including the recent government reform) may prove unworkable. Although the proposals from Onwards and the Policy Exchange include measures to increase the number of childminders, none of the proposals address training or promotion routes for childcare staff.

The proposal by the Policy Exchange stands out in that it focuses on childminders and deregulation more broadly, for example, allowing ‘good’ CEYP providers to be allowed to raise the staff–child ratios and introducing less formal registration processes for providers. This proposal risks introducing further variation in working conditions across the sector.

Furthermore, none of the proposals would reduce the complexity and number of funding streams available in England. The Policy Exchange proposes to replace tax-free childcare with the ‘Baby Boost’, and the IPPR proposes to include an additional means-tested element for parents. The current system is difficult and cumbersome to navigate for parents. Therefore, parents and providers would benefit from streamlining to provide clear incentives and expectations under which circumstances parents and children can enrol and providers can operate. The recent reforms in Ireland, which unified a complex system of universal and means-tested schemes, have been attracting considerable policy attention in England due to having reversed the reduction in workforce and providers and having increased take-up by parents.

In summary, there seems to be a consensus that CEYP should be expanded substantially, particularly for very young children. There is also consensus around aligning financial support for childcare with parental leave policies, thereby closing the current two-year gap between parental leave policies and the free hours for most parents.

The analysed proposals differ considerably as to which group of parents should receive more government support (for example, working parents versus low-income households) and are likely to affect educational outcomes. However, there is an absence of proposals to simplify funding and better support the workforce in the childcare sector. The workforce expansion required by the recent government reform does not currently look feasible and seriously risks derailing the planned reform, as well as the suggested reforms in the alternative proposals.

The early years review commissioned by Labour will be published in 2024, and policy proposals follow from there. It remains to be seen to what extent they go further in addressing the workforce recruitment and retention issues.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that there are broader social policy issues that need to be addressed at the same time, such as gender equality and the role of parental leave policies, an increasing bifurcation of

working practices in terms of in-person and hybrid working opportunities, educational inequalities, and not losing sight of the notion of childhood as being rather than becoming, that is, focusing on the future citizen. Looking ahead, the recent policy reform has committed the current (and future) government to a significant expansion of CEYP for younger children, aimed at ameliorating current labour market shortages. It is therefore unlikely that future governments will reverse the expansion, though they might change the speed and target groups. Future reforms are required in order to create the conditions for a sustainable workforce to support this expansion. It is also likely that the substantial increase in funding for CEYP will go alongside greater regulation of the sector. However, childcare has indeed emerged as a new area of activity of the welfare state, thereby bringing the UK closer to its OECD counterparts.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> The Women in Work Index is calculated based on the female participation rate, the participation rate gap between men and women, the female unemployment rate, the female full-time employment rate, and the gender pay gap.

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## Part III

# Policy developments and transformations

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# The theoretical importance of exceptional cases: social protection and its transformations in Japan and Australia in comparative welfare state research

*Masatoshi Kato*

## **Introduction: Japan and Australia in comparative welfare state research**

Comparative welfare state research (CWSR) has mainly focused on European and North American countries, constructing various comparative theoretical frameworks based on their experiences and accumulating knowledge through empirical analyses. Therefore, countries like Japan and Australia have not received enough attention.<sup>1</sup> As a result, both countries were often interpreted in general terms, based on theoretical frameworks and/or perspectives for comparative analysis. For example, if we focus on the institutional features and scale of social expenditure, the postwar welfare model in both countries is considered to be residual and/or denoting an insufficient welfare state. From a quantitative perspective, the level of social expenditure in the postwar era was low. Regarding the qualitative aspect, Japan introduced the basic pension and health insurance in 1961, which secured only the minimum standard. Australia mainly used a means/income test to provide social policy. Moreover, while compulsory health insurance was introduced in 1975, it was soon abolished.

According to welfare regime theory,<sup>2</sup> which was developed by Esping-Andersen (1990, 1997, 1999) and is considered as the standard in CWSR, Japan was categorised as ‘hybrid’ (liberal and conservative) and Australia was categorised as ‘liberal’. However, specialists interested in both countries have shown that they provided sufficient social protection in the postwar era. For example, Castles (1985, 1988, 1989, 1994, 1996, 1997, 2001) indicated that Australia used ‘social protection by other means’. The Japanese government used ‘functional equivalents’ (Estevez-Abe, 2008), ‘employment security’ (Miyamoto, 2008) or ‘welfare through work’ (Miura, 2012). Thus, both



countries provided social protection through employment security and maintenance; nevertheless, their policy options were dissimilar. As will be shown, while Australia used protective measures, such as a tariff wall and restrictive immigration policy, Japan used public works, subsidiaries and market regulations and promoted competition within the industrial sector. These differences resulted in the diverse patterns of welfare state reforms. However, these studies clarified the features of the postwar welfare models in both countries, mainly focusing on understanding and describing them. Therefore, they could not fully add to the theoretical development of CWSR.

Interestingly, both countries experienced a radical change in the age of globalisation and post-industrialisation, as these eroded the precondition of the postwar welfare model in both cases. Australia unsuccessfully tried to reform it in the 1970s. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) government introduced a radical reform in the 1980s and advanced a new model, like 'the Third Way' (Giddens, 1998), in the 1990s. However, the Coalition government also introduced a radical reform in the 1990s and advanced a new model, like 'neoliberalism' (Harvey, 2005), in the 2000s. By contrast, Japan experienced stable growth in the 1980s and faced a crisis of the postwar model in the 1990s. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government began promoting neoliberal reforms from the 2000s. Thus, the timing and sequence of welfare state realignment are different for each country. While both experienced radical reform, welfare state scholars could not explore the characteristics of the new models. Welfare regime theory mainly focuses on the characteristics of the welfare model in the postwar era and its change or continuity in later ages, based on the analytical framework focusing on individual political variables. Therefore, it overlooks the recent and dynamic changes of the welfare state and its theoretical implications.

In short, while Japan and Australia were unique and interesting cases in theoretical and comparative terms, both countries were not enough analysed. While they were not fully understood by the existing perspective, specialists on both countries mainly focused on their uniqueness, overlooking the theoretical implications that both cases could bring out for CWSR. This chapter briefly analyses the development and dynamism of the welfare states in Japan and Australia based on conceptual and case studies and considers their theoretical contribution to CWSR. In other words, the research questions in this chapter are the following: what are the features of the postwar welfare model in both countries in theoretical terms? What are the features of the welfare model after post-industrialisation and globalisation in both countries? What are the theoretical implications of this comparative analysis? The second section introduces new theoretical frameworks to capture the overall picture of the

welfare states in both countries. The third section considers the features of the postwar welfare models in both countries based on new analytical frameworks. The fourth section analyses the features of the new welfare models in the age of globalisation and post-industrialisation. Finally, the fifth section considers the theoretical implications and limitations of this study.

## **Theoretical frameworks: overall features and implications of the welfare state**

This section builds the new theoretical frameworks for understanding the welfare state's synchronic and diachronic features from a holistic perspective to capture the characteristics of the welfare models in Japan and Australia. The starting point for building these frameworks is the definition of the welfare state. Based on previous studies, this chapter defines the welfare state as a mechanism of social integration through public policies for social protection within specific socio-economic circumstances in capitalist society (see Jessop, 2002; Pierson, 2008; Garland, 2016).<sup>3</sup> This definition has some implications. First, the government takes diverse measures to provide citizens with social protection. Thus, I focus not only on social policy in a narrow sense but also on its functional equivalents that provide social protection through means other than social policy (Castles, 1985, 1988, 1989; Estevez-Abe, 2008; Miyamoto, 2008; Kim, 2010; Miura, 2012).<sup>4</sup> Second, if socio-economic situations change, the welfare state may also transform. The welfare state has its own economic, social and political bases (Kato, 2012, 2020b; Jessop, 2002; Pierson, 2008). However, this does not mean that socio-economic circumstances determine the features of the welfare state; rather, the welfare state is closely related to them and was created by political decisions and policy legacies. Therefore, I capture the diversity that comes from political decisions and policy legacies within the commonalities caused by the same economic and social environment.

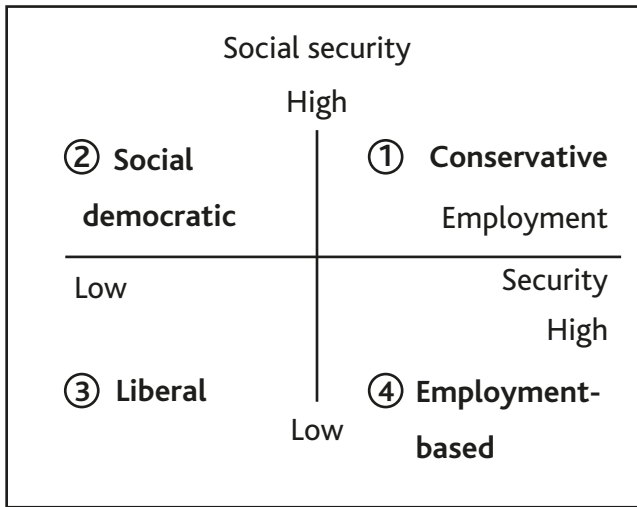
Regarding the frameworks for depicting the welfare state's synchronic and diachronic features, the definition used here reveals social protection as consisting of social security and employment security systems created through political decisions. In this context, the social security system is primarily comprised of traditional social policies for citizens, such as pensions, healthcare, social assistance, unemployment benefits and family policy (Miyamoto, 2008: 13). The employment security system mostly consists of public policies that help people maintain employment and enhance welfare through corporations (Miyamoto, 2008: 23); this includes subsidies, public investments and market regulations, in addition to the functional equivalents of social policies provided by companies. In other words, the blend of

social and employment security should be analysed to grasp the overall characteristics of the welfare state.

First, we move to explore diachronic features. The definition outlined earlier suggests that the welfare state is closely tied to socio-economic circumstances. Previous studies have shown that the welfare state can change quickly and radically. For example, Jessop (2002) claims that the Keynesian welfare national state became the Schumpeterian workfare post-national regime. Armingeon and Bonoli (2005) reveal the shift from the industrial to the post-industrial welfare state. Morel et al (2012) investigated the change from the Keynesian to the social investment welfare state. These imply globalisation (Steger, 2017) and post-industrialisation (Pierson 2001) as critical junctures; thus, we examine the socio-economic bases of the welfare state before and after these points in time. Before globalisation and post-industrialisation, during its golden age, the welfare state was based on: (1) embedded liberalism (Ruggie, 1982); (2) Fordism (Boyer, 1990); (3) the gender division of labour grounded in stable employment and the family (Lewis, 1992); and (4) a political consensus on economic growth and redistribution (Ono, 2000). Given these conditions, which made high economic growth possible, each welfare state has provided its citizens with social protection through social security and/or employment security, mainly focusing on de commodification (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1999). After globalisation and post-industrialisation, during its silver age,<sup>5</sup> the welfare state was based on: (1) disembedded liberalism as neoliberal globalisation (Steger and Roy, 2010); (2) post-Fordism (Boyer, 2011); (3) floating employment and family diversification; and (4) a decline in the political consensus on redistribution (Kato, 2012). In this age, in which economic growth stagnated and an ageing population progressed, the welfare state faced new social risks, which brought the need for recommodification and defamilialisation (Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Armingeon and Bonoli, 2005). Under the financial constraints that come from economic stagnation and an ageing society, each state had many choices to make when handling these problems.

Second, we move to examine how to capture synchronic characteristics. In the golden age of the welfare state, each state chose a level of social and employment security based on the need to cope with old social risks, such as the loss of income. There were some options, ranging from residual interventions (that is, a low level of social and employment security) to the socialisation of old social risks (that is, a high level of social security), in addition to managing risks themselves (that is, a high level of employment security). Four types of social protection are distinguishable (see Figure 8.1). They are characterised by their own features from the perspectives of welfare state regime theory (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999) and varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskice 2001; Schmidt, 2002; Hancke et al, 2007).

Figure 8.1: The four types of social protection in the golden age of the welfare state



The four types of social protection presented in Figure 8.1 are as follows:

1. A high level of both types of security (see the top-right quadrant in Figure 8.1): full employment among men based on a collective agreement between social partners within sectors with the regulation of dismissal – induced by government interventions – was able to sustain generous social insurance schemes institutionalised along occupation lines. However, underdeveloped social services made family welfare more important. In other words, a strong male-breadwinner model prevailed. This model shares the key features of the conservative regime.
2. A high level of social security and a low level of employment security (see the top-left quadrant in Figure 8.1): generous unemployment insurance and active labour market policy mitigated the risk of unemployment based on tripartite cooperation. Generous pensions and social services were used as work incentives for not only male but also female workers. In other words, despite distinctions related to gender, all society members are committed to economic growth and social development. This model is similar to the social-democratic regime.
3. A low level of both types of security (see the bottom-left quadrant in Figure 8.1): resulting from a lack of both kinds of security, people depended on the market and self-help for survival. The state played a limited role in social protection, such as providing the minimum standard of living through welfare and solving unemployment through market mechanisms. However, the rich use private insurance and services to maintain their social protection. Thus, there were serious

social divisions between the rich and poor. This model is like the liberal regime.

4. A low level of social security and a high level of employment security (see the bottom-right quadrant of [Figure 8.1](#)): family welfare based on a gender division of labour and employment security based on state interventions in the labour market were able to reduce the need for social security, except for the risk of income loss from work. Hence, governments focused on pensions, healthcare and full employment through various measures. This model assumed full employment for men through government policy (and family welfare), so it can be called an employment-based welfare state.

In the silver age of the welfare state, each welfare state faced new social risks, such as prolonged unemployment, critical school-to-work transitions and an increase in female labour, which led to difficulties in sustaining welfare through the family and the need for work-life balance. Hence, the new welfare state tried to achieve recommodification and defamilialisation. Previous studies demonstrated policy alternatives (see [Table 8.1](#)). Regarding recommodification, there were diverse options, from workfare in a narrow sense to activation or social investment policy ([Theodore and Peck 2000](#); [Jensen and Saint-Martin, 2003](#); [Morel et al, 2012](#); [Miyamoto, 2013](#); [Shinkawa, 2014](#)). In this context, while workfare implies introducing market mechanisms into social policies (especially those related to unemployment), activation or social investment policies entail enhancing employability through education, vocational training, social care services and the introduction of flexible work conditions. As for defamilialisation, there were several paths to follow, from giving citizens cash to providing care services and facilities ([Kato, 2012](#); [Miyamoto, 2013](#); [Lohmann and Zagel, 2016](#)). If we focus on the role of the state and the market, we find an affinity between both policy areas. While activation or social investment policy and the improvement of care services

**Table 8.1:** Policy options and two types of social protection in the silver age of the welfare state

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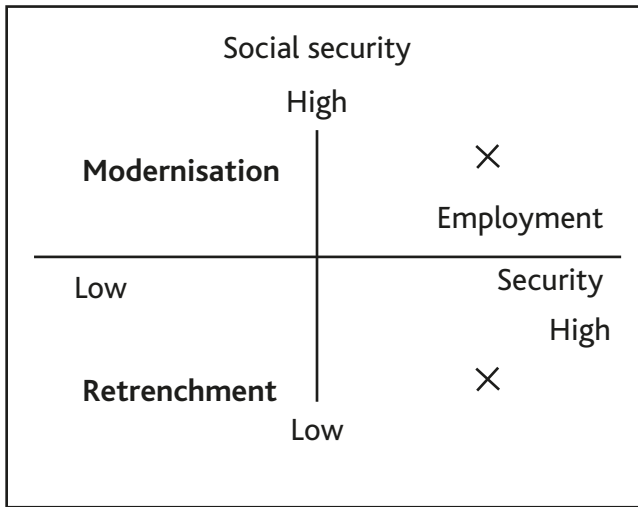
Policy alternatives in the silver age of the welfare state. While governments did not use traditional security, which distorts market mechanisms, they needed to deal with new social risks. There were some options:

- Recommodification: (1) workfare, which brought the retrenchment of the welfare state; and (2) activation or social investment, which brought the modernisation of the welfare state.
- Defamilialisation: (1) expand cash benefits that are market-friendly; and (2) expand social services by governments.

Two types of social protection in the silver age of the welfare state:

- The modernisation of the welfare state through government involvement.
  - The retrenchment of the welfare state by introducing market mechanisms.
-

Figure 8.2: The two types of social protection in the silver age of the welfare state



and facilities require the state to play a positive role, workfare and cash benefits do not need the state to play a positive role, revealing dependence on the market or self-help. Moreover, neoliberal globalisation made it more difficult to use employment security, which distorted market mechanisms (Harvey, 2005; Steger and Roy, 2010). For example, subsidies, public works and market regulations were considered to hinder market mechanisms and have a negative impact on the economy. Thus, traditional employment security was no longer effective or legitimate in the new socio-economic situation.

Given the preceding discussion, we find two types of social protections in the silver age, focusing on social and employment security (see Figure 8.2):

1. The modernisation of the welfare state (see Giddens, 1998): given globalisation and post-industrialisation, they stop using employment security in order to increase labour market flexibility, which would bring economic growth, and they use activation or social investment policies, along with improvements in care services and facilities, to enhance social fairness. Therefore, this model tries to balance economic competitiveness with social goals. This model has a high level of social security and a low level of employment security (see the top-left quadrant in Figure 8.2).
2. The neoliberal retrenchment of the welfare state (see Harvey, 2005): Given globalisation and post-industrialisation, they not only strengthen market mechanisms in labour market and economic policy areas but also introduce it into social policy areas, such as workfare, which would lead to worse social problems, such as poverty and inequality. Therefore, this model emphasises

economic competitiveness and downplays social goals. This model has a low level of both types of security (see the bottom-left quadrant in [Figure 8.2](#)).

In the following sections, I use these frameworks to express the features and dynamics of the welfare models in Japan and Australia.

## **Features of the postwar welfare state in Japan and Australia: the foundation of the employment-based welfare state**

This section considers the features of the postwar welfare models in Japan and Australia following the new frameworks. Based on previous studies, I clarify the features of social protection in each country and discuss their similarities and differences.

### *The postwar welfare state in Japan*

First, I focus on the social protection in postwar Japan.<sup>6</sup> The social security system in the postwar era had three features. First, despite an early introduction, social policies were underdeveloped. For example, the Employee Pension Plan was established in 1941 and revised in 1954. Employee health insurance was introduced in 1926 and revised in 1958. The National Pension Plan and National Health Service were founded in 1961. Social assistance through a means test was created in 1946 and revised in 1950. Unemployment insurance was introduced in 1947 and changed into employment insurance in 1974. Thus, traditional social policies were introduced early ([Kasza, 2006](#)). However, due to low social expenditure, their benefit levels were relatively low ([Miyamoto, 2008](#)). LDP governments prioritised economic growth over social policies ([Estevez-Abe, 2008](#)). Second, social insurance was divided along occupational categories. For example, the Employee Pension Plan and employee health insurance mainly covered workers at medium and large companies; other people such as self employments and farmers were protected by the National Pension Plan and the National Health Service. The gap in benefits between the two systems was large. In other words, social policies promoted social stratification ([Shinkawa, 2005](#)). Third, care and family policies were underdeveloped. For example, the Family Allowance was launched in 1971; however, it was low and restrictive. Care for the elderly and young children was also quite restrictive. People in need only used care services. Thus, in general, families had to supply care services ([Miyamoto, 2008](#)).

Next, we turn to employment security, examining Japanese-style employment and industrial and employment policy. Regarding the former, government initiatives made lifetime employment and seniority wages possible, for example: long-term capital investment through public funds

and the main banking system; peaceful industrial relations at the company level; collective wage bargaining systems for large companies and their diffusion into small companies and the public sector; a retirement allowance for retiring-age workers; and tax exemptions for company welfare (see [Aoki, 1984](#); [Hall and Sockice, 2001](#); [Estevez-Abe, 2008](#)). Regarding industrial and employment policy, for productive sectors, ‘partitioned competition’ ([Murakami, 1984](#)) or ‘bureau-pluralism’ ([Aoki, 1984](#)) not only provided market protections at the sector level to protect industry as a whole but also stimulated competition within sectors, which was known as the ‘convoy system’. This contributed to economic growth with employment security. As for non-productive sectors, Japanese governments provided employment through subsidies (that is, for the primary sector), public works (that is, for rural construction) and market regulations (that is, for small retailers and self-employed individuals) (see [Estevez-Abe, 2008](#); [Miyamoto, 2008](#); [Kim, 2010](#)).

Thus, we can summarise the general features of the postwar Japanese model as comprising (1) underdeveloped social security, (2) a male-breadwinner model and (3) overdeveloped employment security. Hence, the postwar Japanese model contained a low level of social security and a high level of employment security, prioritising partially economic growth (see the bottom-right quadrant in [Figure 8.1](#)). The LDP governments dismissed the development of social policy and burdened families with care responsibilities. However, they provided employment security, which supported everyday living and promoted economic growth.

### *The postwar welfare state in Australia*

The postwar welfare state in Australia is called a ‘wage-earners welfare state’ ([Castles, 1985, 1988, 1994, 1996, 1997, 2001](#); see also [Bell, 1997](#); [Mendes, 2003, 2008](#)).<sup>7</sup> This concept was constructed and developed by Francis Castles to show that Australia provided enough social protection but a low level of public social spending. According to Castles ([1989](#)), an essential aspect is ‘social protection by other means’. Castles showed that social protection in postwar Australia had four features: (1) the protection of the manufacturing industry through tariffs and other trade barriers; (2) the arbitration and mediation of labour disputes through a compulsory system; (3) the control of immigrant inflows; and (4) a residual social policy, which implied that income security was restricted to people outside the labour market and care depended on the family. In other words, the wage-earners welfare state realised full employment through protectionist and macroeconomic policies ([Bell, 1997](#)). High wages (and rich allowances that complemented them) were spread using a compulsory arbitration system. Moreover, the social division of labour made family welfare work ([Shaver, 2002](#)) but underdeveloped social care services. Therefore, the level and coverage of social policy were limited. Cash benefits were mainly



based on a means/income test and provided a minimum standard of living. Moreover, a compulsory health insurance system was not introduced. This policy mix allowed financially small governments to provide people with enough social protection through the employment policy and effective redistribution. However, this model was based on protection from international economic competition and the presence of resources and primary industry, which was very competitive (Schwartz, 2000). In other words, this model did not have mechanisms to enhance competitiveness internally.

Thus, we can summarise the general features of the postwar Australian model as comprising (1) the underdevelopment of social security, (2) a male-breadwinner model and (3) the overdevelopment of employment security. In other words, the postwar Australian model contained a low level of social security and a high level of employment security (see the bottom-right quadrant in Figure 8.1). Both the Coalition and the ALP governments had a consensus on the development and maintenance of this model. While public authorities, such as governments and compulsory arbitration systems, secured full employment and high wages, the norm of the modern family made dependence on family welfare possible. As a result, the role of social policy was very limited.

### *Comparative analysis of the postwar welfare models in both countries*

Considering the features of the postwar welfare models in Japan and Australia, it is shown that both: (1) used public policy for employment creation and maintenance; (2) had an underdeveloped social and welfare policy; and (3) were dependent on family welfare. Thus, both countries were considered 'employment-based welfare states', which have a high level of employment security and a low level of social security (see the bottom-right quadrant in Figure 8.1). However, there were some crucial differences. For example, industrial policy in Japan not only protected the competitive industry as a whole but also encouraged competition within various industries. Therefore, while Japan had a low productivity sector that depended on state interventions, it achieved high economic growth based on the manufacturing industry, such as automobile and electrical equipment, which was internationally competitive. By contrast, Australia focused on protection from international competition based on protectionist policies, such as tariffs and restrictive immigration. While they depended on the presence of resources and the primary sector, which was already competitive, they did not have the policy measures to improve competitiveness in other sectors internally. Moreover, while social insurance, such as for pensions and healthcare, was compulsory in Japan, Australia was based more on a target system of social policy. In other words, while the social security systems in both countries were relatively low, Japan was more institutionalised than Australia. Therefore, Australia had

opportunities for the expansion of social policy, but the limited number of beneficiaries also meant less support for social policy. While the commonality of employment-based welfare states would anticipate that both faced similar problems, the differences between Japan and Australia would bring divergence. The next section tackles the features of the welfare models in the age of globalisation and post-industrialisation.

## **Features of the new welfare states in Japan and Australia: the transformation of the employment-based welfare state**

This section considers the features of the welfare models in the age of globalisation and post-industrialisation in both countries. Based on previous studies, we first clarify the features of social protection in each country and then discuss their similarities and differences.

Assumptions about the postwar model include such elements as economic growth based on manufacturing, full employment, the gender division of labour, family stability and political consensus. However, socio-economic shifts, such as demographic changes, economic globalisation and post-industrialisation, eroded these assumptions (Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Armingeon and Bonoli, 2005). For example, the demographic transformation worsened financial conditions. Citizens could no longer depend on family welfare, leading to a new need for eldercare and childcare. Economic globalisation and post-industrialisation made economic growth more difficult, creating a more volatile labour market and raising the risk of unemployment. In addition, they made government interventions ineffective and illegitimate. Hence, the postwar models in Japan and Australia were vulnerable to socio-economic shifts. This explains why the performance (and appraisal) of the postwar model in both countries changed; however, it does not explain why the timing and content of reforms were different. Moreover, socio-economic shifts did not determine policy choices but rather constrained them. Thus, policy choices in some areas need to be explored.

### *The new welfare model in Japan*

The social security system had two specific features following the socio-economic transformation (Shinkawa, 2005; Estevez-Abe, 2008; Miyamoto, 2008; Miura, 2012; Tanaka, 2017). First, to handle fiscal problems, retrenchment was ongoing. For example, in pensions (for which reforms occurred in 1985 and 2004) and healthcare (for which reforms took place in 1984, 1997 and 2003), the benefits were cut and the burdens, such as insurance contributions and self-pay amounts, were increased. Moreover, governments emphasised self-reliance in social assistance (reformed in 2005) and disability welfare (reformed in 2006). Second, to moderate new

social risks, new social policies were introduced. For example, the Insurance of the Elderly Care was introduced in 1998 to mitigate dependence on family welfare. Moreover, to realise gender equality, important laws were passed (such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law 1985, which was revised in 1997 and 2007, and the Basic Act for Gender Equal Society 1999). In addition, to counter the falling birth rate and promote female workforce participation, governments expanded care services for preschool children to help women achieve work–life balance from the 2000s.

In short, we find two trends in social security reform: (1) modernisation and (2) retrenchment. However, the fiscal problems that come from economic stagnation constrained governments, making them unable to adequately deal with the new social risks. Despite underdeveloped social policies in the postwar era, market-friendly social policies were also introduced (for example, pensions, healthcare, social assistance and disability benefits). As a result, people were more vulnerable in the social security system.

Next, I turn to elements of employment security following the socio-economic changes (Estevez-Abe, 2008; Miyamoto, 2008; Miura, 2012). First, a decline in the Japanese-style employment system could be observed. Globalisation and post-industrialisation made economic competition harsher. Each company sought to rein in labour costs. As a result, the number of people working in the Japanese-style employment system continued to fall. By contrast, the number of atypical workers rose (especially in the service sector). Collective wage-setting systems were changing, from the diffusion of high wages to protecting insider workers. Second, shifts in industrial and employment policies appeared. Globalisation limited the government's options (Harvey, 2005; Steger and Roy, 2010). Subsidies, public works and market regulations that had anti-market effects were considered ineffective and illegitimate. While employment creation through such means was decreasing, current trends consisted of liberalisation (for example, abolishing market regulations for small retailers in 2006) and deregulation (for example, labour laws were repeatedly revised in the 2000s). Budgets for subsidies and public works shrank rapidly in the 2000s (especially under the Koizumi government). In short, employment security – which had provided citizens with social protection in the postwar era – was not working well. Thus, people generally became more vulnerable regarding employment security.

The general features of the recent changes can be summarised as (1) retrenchment, (2) partial modernisation corresponding to new social risks and (3) a decline in employment security. The LDP Coalition governments sought to address new social issues, such as care and gender equality. However, in addition to other underdeveloped social policies, fiscal challenges constrained the government's choices. Citizens could not obtain enough social protection through social security. Moreover, as socio-economic shifts made state intervention ineffective and illegitimate, governments could

not sustain the employment security of the postwar model. They tried to insert market mechanisms into employment and industrial policies. In short, social protection in Japan became very weak. The preceding discussion demonstrates that while employment security based on state intervention was vulnerable to globalisation, the underdevelopment of old social policies hindered the expansion of new ones. Moreover, governments after the 1990s chose market-friendly policies. Thus, the Japanese welfare model shifted from a non-market type (see the bottom-right quadrant in [Figure 8.1](#)), based on employment security and informal welfare, to a more market-friendly type (see the bottom-left quadrant in [Figure 8.2](#)), grounded in policy legacies and political decisions.

### *The new welfare model in Australia*

Before focusing on the new welfare model's features in Australia, attention is given to the changes in the wage-earners welfare state in the 1970s. The Whitlam government (ALP) advanced social-democratic reform and the reduction of tariffs to modernise the postwar welfare model ([Schwartz, 2000](#); [Mendes, 2003, 2008](#)). For example, compulsory health insurance, 'Medibank', was introduced in 1975. Moreover, Whitlam expanded social policy to such areas as pensions and social care. However, after a change in government, the Fraser (Coalition) government reversed this trend. The retrenchment of social policies, such as for healthcare, unemployment and family allowances, was implemented and the reduction of tariffs was stopped ([Schwartz, 2000](#); [Mendes, 2003, 2008](#)). Therefore, the postwar model continued in the 1970s. In other words, the radical reform was introduced by the ALP governments in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Hawke and Keating (ALP) governments in the 1980s and 1990s fully abolished the postwar welfare model ([Castles, 1994, 1996, 2001](#); [Bell, 1997](#); [Schwartz, 2000](#); [Mendes, 2003, 2008](#)) and introduced a new model: like 'the Third Way' ([Giddens, 1998](#); [Pierson, 2002](#)). Regarding economic policies, they promoted liberalisation and deregulation. However, they tried to enhance competitiveness through industrial policies, such as strategic intervention to cultivate new industries ([Bell, 1993](#)). As for labour market policy, based on Accord which is the agreement by Labor government and union, they first restrained wages and then promoted flexibility by linking productivity and wage increases, as well as promoting decisions at the company level. However, they used an arbitration system to set minimum standards ([Schwartz, 2000](#); [Ramia and Wailes, 2006](#)). In terms of social policy, they promoted fairness through the expansion and soft targeting of social policies ([Cass, 1988](#); [Jonson and Tonkiss, 2002](#); [Mendes, 2003, 2008](#)). Moreover, under the slogan 'reciprocal obligation', which implies that the government should prepare the conditions in which people actively

participate, they used active social policy to accomplish social inclusion and gender equality (that is, the activation and promotion of social fairness).

Thus, we can summarise the general features of the ALP government's initiatives as: (1) the introduction of a market mechanism that eroded the assumptions of the postwar model; (2) a strategic industrial policy to compensate for its negative effects; and (3) the enhancement of social fairness by an arbitration system and activation policy. Therefore, the policy mix of the ALP government can be understood as the introduction of market mechanisms to renew the postwar welfare model and the reduction of the side effects by providing compensation measures. Moreover, they tried to introduce innovative policy measures, such as activation, which could be considered similar to the modernisation of the welfare state or 'the Third Way' in the UK (see the top-left quadrant in [Figure 8.2](#)). However, because the ALP lost elections and thus their power, this initiative could not be implemented fully.

Next, the initiatives of the Coalition governments (in the 1990s and 2000s) are reviewed. The Howard government abolished the model built by the ALP and moved to 'neoliberalism' ([Harvey, 2005](#)). Regarding economic policy, they introduced goods and service taxes and fully promoted privatisation. However, some pragmatic aspects were also introduced, such as the implementation of strategic industrial policies and compromises in tariff policies ([Goldfinch, 2000](#)). Referring to labour market policy, the Coalition government introduced the Workplace Relations Act 1996, which offered limited liberalisation to compromise within the Senate ([Schwartz, 2000](#)). However, when they had power in the Senate, they introduced the Workplace Relations Amendment Act 2005, known as 'Work Choices', for the purpose of radical liberalisation ([Hill, 2006](#); [Ramia and Wailes, 2006](#)). As for social policy, under the slogan of 'mutual obligation', which implies state withdrawal and individual responsibility in social protection, they forced the unemployed to integrate into the labour market by emphasising employment obligations and introducing market mechanisms ([Harris, 2001](#); [Shaver, 2002](#); [Mendes 2003, 2008](#); [Hill, 2006](#)). However, they expanded family policy to give preferential treatment to modern families, such as reforming the Family Allowance.

Thus, we can summarise the general features of the Coalition government's policy as follows: (1) a deepening of the market mechanism in economic and labour market policy; and (2) its introduction into social policy. Therefore, the policy mix of the Coalition government seemed to reorganise the welfare state under the doctrine of neoliberalism, which led to the retrenchment of the welfare state (see the bottom-left quadrant in [Figure 8.2](#)).

### *Comparative analysis of new welfare models in both countries*

This section has explored the features of the new welfare models in Japan and Australia. Both were similar in that they used the market mechanism

to renew the postwar welfare model, which was based on employment security through anti-market mechanisms; as a result, they both chose the retrenchment of social policies, creating a neoliberal or residual welfare state and generating multiple social problems, such as social exclusion and inequality. However, there were some significant differences. First, I find a difference in the timing of the radical reforms. While Australia faced the crisis of the postwar welfare model in the 1970s and introduced radical reform in the 1980s, Japan suffered the crisis in the 1990s and tried to reform in the 2000s. This different timing of the radical reform came from the economic competitiveness of the postwar model. The postwar model in Australia did not have the mechanisms to improve competitiveness internally and faced the crisis earlier than that of Japan, which had the mechanisms to facilitate competition. Second, their route to a neoliberal/residual welfare state was also different. While the ALP governments tried to introduce another route, such as 'the Third Way' or 'the modernisation of the welfare state', the Coalition government reversed this trend and moved closer to 'neoliberalism' or 'the retrenchment of the welfare state'. However, Japanese governments consistently tried to advance neoliberal reforms. These differences came from both the policy legacy of the postwar model and the political choice within given political institutions and ideational conditions. In other words, political interests, institutions and ideas influence choices. While the overall policy directions depended on the partisanship and ideational conditions of governments, they faced constraints to accomplishing them in political institutions. Both countries have strong bicameral systems, which created concessions in political decisions (especially since they did not have a majority in the Senate) (Lijphart, 2012; Ganghof, 2017). In short, the difference in the timing and routes of radical reform came from policy legacies and decisions within political institutions and ideational conditions. In the next section, we summarise the two case studies based on the conceptual study and consider their implications and contributions to CWSR.

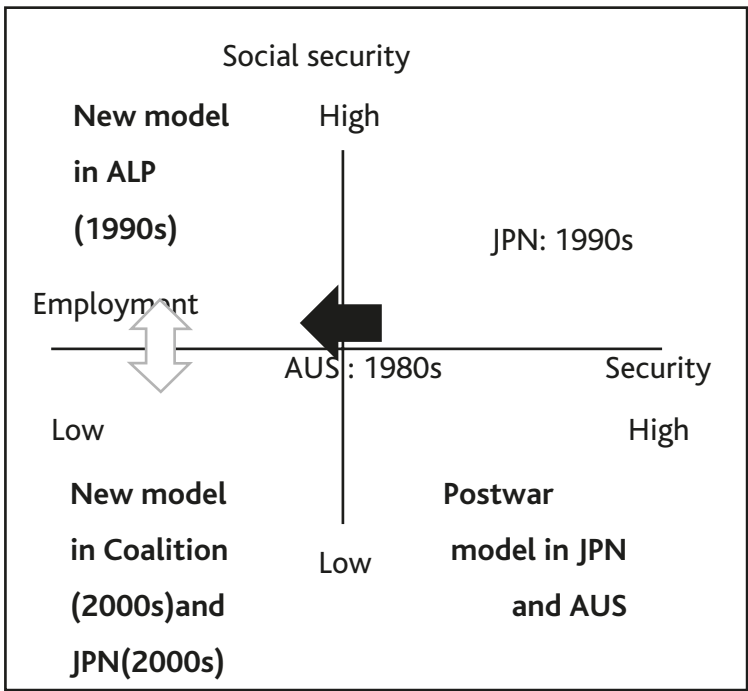
## **Conclusion: the theoretical implications of the two cases**

This chapter has considered the development and theoretical implications of the welfare state and its political backgrounds in Japan and Australia. As CWSR researchers mainly consider the experience of European and North American countries, these two states have been overlooked. Consequently, focusing on the low level of social expenditure and the institutional features of social policy, both countries are perceived as residual/insufficient welfare states in CWSR. According to researchers specialised in both countries, while this view is appropriate because it captures some of their features, it completely overlooks others. Moreover,

while both countries experienced radical reform in the 1990s and 2000s, CWSR could not fully explain their dynamics. On the other hand, because specialists who mainly focus on both countries emphasize the uniqueness of their welfare models, they did not enough consider the theoretical contribution of own studies to CWSR.

This chapter has addressed an existing gap by going back to the definition of the welfare state and considering its implications for an theoretical framework. We found: (1) the necessity of understanding the features of the welfare state as a whole; and (2) the necessity of capturing the welfare state's synchronic and diachronic characteristics. Thus, focusing on a mix of social and employment security, we presented four and two types of social protection before and after globalisation and post-industrialisation, respectively (see [Figures 8.1](#) and [8.2](#) and [Table 8.1](#)). While there were policy options in social security in the new socio-economic circumstances, employment security was no longer effective and legitimate as a measure for social protection. This resulted in a shift from four types (that is, conservative, social-democratic, liberal and employment-based) in the golden age of the welfare state to two types (that is, modernisation and retrenchment) in the silver age, as presented in [Figure 8.3](#).

**Figure 8.3:** The welfare model transformation in Japan and Australia



Presented case studies have shown that the postwar welfare models in Japan and Australia were considered ‘employment-based welfare state’ models, which did not mainly use social security but used employment security to provide social protection (see the bottom-right quadrant in [Figure 8.3](#)). However, the policy measures used by each country differed. While the industrial policy in Japan not only protected the competitive industry as a whole but also encouraged competition within productive sectors, Australia focused on protection from competition. Moreover, while social insurance, such as elderly pensions and healthcare insurance, was compulsory in Japan, Australia was more based on a target system of social policy. These differences impacted the timing of radical reforms (see the black arrow in [Figure 8.3](#)): Australia faced the crisis of the postwar model in the 1970s and moved to the new model in the 1980s. Japan faced the crisis and moved to the new model in the late 1990s. In other words, because Australia used a protectionist economic policy that did not enhance competitiveness in the global market, as well as a residual social policy based on income/means test to provide national minimums, it faced the crisis earlier than Japan, which had mechanisms to enhance competition and compulsory social insurance in national pensions and healthcare. Regarding the contents of the radical reform, we found interesting facts (see the white arrow in [Figure 8.3](#)). Australia experienced two types of new welfare state. That is to say, while the ALP government in the 1980s and 1990s tried to introduce the modernisation of the welfare state, the Coalition government in the 1990s and 2000s tried to advance its retrenchment. However, because of political institutions (Coalition) and political competition (ALP), they could not fully accomplish their projects. On the other hand, in Japan, given the political institutions that concentrated power in the chief executive, the LDP Coalition government consistently introduced neoliberal reforms in the 2000s. However, they had to respond to the need for new social policies, such as regards eldercare and gender equality. As a result, despite their preference for neoliberal and conservative values, they introduced new social policies.

The findings presented in this chapter have some implications for CWSR. First, if we want to understand the features of social protection in one country in the golden age of the welfare state, we should focus on the welfare state as a whole. Governments had many options to provide social protection through public policy: for social security, from self-help to promoting decommodification; for employment security, from self-help to achieving full employment through public policy. Thus, we should pay attention to the mix of social security and employment security. Based on the mix of low/high social security and employment security, we find four types of social protection before globalisation and post-industrialisation. Based on these frameworks, Japan and Australia form a unique and characteristic type, which is called an ‘employment-based



welfare state'. Second, if we want to understand the radical change in the silver age of the welfare state, we should also focus on the welfare state as a whole. As in Japan and Australia, some countries that used employment security in the postwar welfare model, such as Germany and Netherlands, would also experience radical reform (Scharpf and Schmidt, 2000). That is to say, socio-economic transformations like globalisation and post-industrialisation made the use of employment security for social protection more difficult and insufficient. This produced a crisis of the postwar welfare model in those countries. In other words, if we want to understand the scale of welfare state reform, we should focus on not only the legacy of social policy but also employment policy. Third, if we want to understand the dynamics of radical reform, we should focus on the differences within the particular welfare state model in the golden age of the welfare state and decisions within political institutions. As mentioned, Australia and Japan had the same 'employment-based welfare state'; however, they used different policy measures regarding maintaining international competitiveness within countries. This difference affected the sustainability of each 'employment-based welfare state' and created differences in the timing of reforms. In other words, policy legacy had an impact on the timing of reform but did not determine the course of reform. Rather, decisions made by political actors in the context of given political institutions, policy legacies and ideational situations had an impact on the course of reform. In short, if we want to understand the features and dynamics of social protection in some countries, we should focus on the mix of social and employment security and its transformation, and we should pay attention to the interplay of political interests, institutions, and ideas. In other words, while CWSR mainly focuses on social policy in a narrow sense and the continuity/change in each regime based on analytical framework focussing on particular political variables, it overlooks the diversity and dynamics of welfare state development. By not only considering the synchronic and diachronic features of the welfare state based on focusing on the mix of social and employment security, but also analysing political decisions about welfare state reform relied on capturing the interplay of interests, institutions and ideas, we can understand the diversity and dynamics of welfare state development well.

This chapter has some limitations. More detailed case studies based on primary sources are needed to clarify the characteristics of the welfare models in both countries before and after globalisation and post-industrialisation. Moreover, this chapter has shown only the commonalities and differences of the welfare models in both countries from conceptual and comparative perspectives. Therefore, more analysis is needed to explain why and how both countries diverge in the new age, based on the clear analytical frameworks. I will try to deal with these issues in the near future.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There are few comparative studies focusing on Japan and Australia, therefore. For an exceptional study, see [Hwang \(2016\)](#), which is significant in that it reveals the commonalities and differences between the two countries.
- <sup>2</sup> According to [Esping-Andersen \(1990, 1999\)](#), liberal regimes have a low level of decommodification, a high level of social stratification and a medium level of defamilialisation. Due to their focus on eliminating poverty, such regimes are based on a minimum welfare given by state and market mechanisms. Conservative regimes have a high level of decommodification, a high level of social stratification and a low level of defamilialisation. Since they mainly stress maintaining social status, they emphasise subsidiarity and family welfare. Social-democratic regimes have a high level of decommodification, a low level of social stratification and a high level of defamilialisation. Since they underscore equality and solidarity, they attach importance to state welfare.
- <sup>3</sup> Sociologist David Garland (2016: 7–8) defines the welfare state as ‘welfare for the poor’, ‘social insurance, social rights, and social services’ and ‘economic management’. Pierson (2008: 10), a political scientist, defines the welfare state as ‘state measures for meeting key welfare needs’ in a narrow sense, and ‘(1) a particular form of state; (2) a distinctive form of polity; [and] (3) a specific type of society’ in the broad sense. Both show that the welfare state exists not only for the poor but for everyone. Moreover, the welfare state is the core of economic governance and political stability, which accomplishes social integration in advanced capitalist societies.
- <sup>4</sup> For recent studies on ‘social policy by other means’, see the 2019 special issue of *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, 21(3).
- <sup>5</sup> [Ferrera \(2008\)](#) called the period before globalisation and after industrialisation ‘the golden age of the welfare state’. Moreover, he called the era after socio-economic transformation ‘the silver age of the welfare state’. See also [Kato \(2020b\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> For a general review of the Japanese welfare model and its changes, see [Estevez-Abe \(2008\)](#), [Kato \(2020a\)](#), [Kasza \(2006\)](#), [Miura \(2012\)](#), [Miyamoto \(2008, 2013\)](#), [Osawa \(2007\)](#), [Shinkawa \(2005, 2014\)](#), [Shizume et al \(2021\)](#), [Uzuhashi \(1997\)](#) and [Yokoyama \(2002\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> For a general review of the Australian welfare model and its changes, see [Bell \(1997\)](#), [Castles \(1985, 1988, 1994, 1997, 2001\)](#), [Castles et al \(1996\)](#), [Mendes \(2003, 2008\)](#), [Ramia and Wails \(2006\)](#), the 2013 special issue of *Social Policy and Administration*, 47(6), and the 2006 special issue of the *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 41(2).

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# Countering dominant immigration trends: an evaluation of the implication of bespoke UK resettlement schemes

*Haya Fakoush and Richard Machin*

## Background and context

Resettlement policies are a long-standing practice in the UK and globally. Migration is a fluid concept, and types of migration have been defined and redefined throughout history. Today, mobility equals migrant and sedentary equals state (Nail, 2015), and to some extent, migration is defined by states. This framing of migration by the state paves the way for resettlement policies that are reflective of not only the government's overall stance towards immigration but also the perception of particular migrants based on demographics, the geopolitical landscape and international norms. Within the UK, much of the debate around migrants and migration policies is driven by hostility (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). Resettlement policies largely sit outside this dominant narrative as outliers in immigration policy. The aim of this chapter is to examine this paradox, recognising the importance of government-sponsored resettlement schemes and their place in the broader, hostile immigration ecosystem.

Resettlement policies are not unfamiliar to the migration system in the UK. Earlier resettlement policies, such as the European Voluntary Workers in Britain (1945–51), are examples of humanitarian resettlement that blur the dichotomy between humanitarian and economic migration (Kay and Miles, 1988). This underscores the notion of the economic benefit of refugees and the unveiling of the 'accidental Keynesian' (Hansen, 2017). Resettlement is considered the most desired pathway for forced migrants, particularly those residing in refugee camps (Dryden-Petersen, 2016). However, the resettlement pathway fails to adequately alleviate the increasing pressures of forced migration. The gap between resettlement needs and annual departure following the submission of resettlement to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is increasing (UNHCR, 2022). In the following, we present an overview of the three policies under examination, set out the research approach, present the policy evaluation, and discuss key themes raised by the evaluation and implications for future policy.

## Policies under review

### *The Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme*

The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) was introduced in January 2014 to aid those requiring urgent medical treatment, torture survivors, children at risk and those with existing family links in the UK (Home Office, 2017). The scheme is facilitated by the UNHCR and is only available for registered refugees in one of the neighbouring countries of Syria, that is, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt. This scheme is available to 20,000 people.

### *The Hong Kong British Nationals (Overseas) visa*

On 31 January 2021, the Home Office introduced the Hong Kong British Nationals (Overseas) (HK BN[O]) visa, a specialised migration route for selected people from Hong Kong. The policy was structured to provide an avenue to citizenship for eligible Hong Kong residents and their families, providing a secure environment to live and work in the UK. Those applying for the HK BN(O) visa have to pay for the visa application and National Health Service (NHS) surcharges and provide proof that applicants and families can maintain financial independence (Home Office, 2021). An estimated 5.4 million Hong Kong residents (2.9 million HK BN[O]s and their dependent family members) are potentially eligible (Home Office, 2021).

### *Homes for Ukraine scheme*

The Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, referred to as ‘Homes for Ukraine’, allows Ukrainians with no established links to the UK to secure accommodation provided by individual or group sponsors. People arriving through this scheme are permitted to live and work in the UK for up to three years, as well as access healthcare and public funds, including immediate access to social security benefits (DLUHC, 2023a). Sponsors are eligible for a monthly ‘thank you’ payment from the UK government of £350, increasing to £500 after 12 months for a maximum period of two years.

## Research approach and methods

We evaluate the chosen resettlement policies through the global lens of policy analysis, considering three elements: contextual issues; policy and textual issues; and implementation and outcome issues (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Our approach seeks to understand the conception of the policies and their impact on refugees’ lived experiences. Our choice of framework allows us to consider the relationship between dominant ideology and policy outcomes.



Contextual issues consider historical, political and bureaucratic matters. Policy and textual issues focus on the framing of policy ‘problems’, the linguistic construction of policy text and ideology. This allows us to explore the articulated intention of the government and the representation of different migrant groups. Considerations in the implementation and outcomes realm centre on the mobilisation of policy, resources and policy outcomes.

Our analysis draws on academic literature, parliamentary and policy statements, the public home pages of UK government departments, official statistics, and government guidance documents for migrants, local authorities and voluntary sector groups. Reports and media content from groups that campaign for and represent migrants were analysed, particularly in relation to policy reception and the dominant logics of professional practice.

The overall aim of our evaluation is to analyse the significance of government-sponsored resettlement schemes and the benefits that may be derived from state-supported migration for refugees. The study is of significance given the increase in government-sponsored resettlement schemes globally (Hashimoto, 2018). Our analysis seeks to identify elements of good practice, highlight the limitations and administrative burdens, and compare the differing legal rights conferred.

We are mindful of the agenda set by the UK government and how migration is depicted in different ways in the three policies: vulnerability for Syrians; citizenship for Hong Kong nationals; and an endorsed welcome for Ukrainians. We recognise the limitations of choosing specific policies to the exclusion of others. However, in limiting the analysis to three schemes, we wanted to ensure clarity and depth of evaluation.

The debate and discourse on the UK’s general asylum rules are markedly different and characterised by hostility. This chapter does not seek to provide an analysis of the general asylum rules. We recognise the reduced rights of UK asylum seekers compared to those assigned by the three schemes analysed here. Our position throughout the analysis is to consider the viability of the models that underpin the three schemes and the extent to which they should inform future policy responses.

## **Policy evaluation**

### *Contextual issues*

#### *The VPRS*

The VPRS is a response to the conflict in Syria, which began in 2011 and resulted in 6 million internally displaced and 5.5 million internationally displaced people (UNHCR, 2018). As the number of refugees arriving in Europe increased, the Syrian conflict transformed from a Middle Eastern problem to an international issue. The scale of the humanitarian crisis in

Syria has had an impact on the number of refugees globally (UNHCR, 2018). Pressure from the British public (UK Government and Parliament, 2015), criticism from the international community (BBC News, 2015) and the picture of a drowned child, Aylan Al-Kurdi, washed up on the seashore (Dathan, 2015) strongly influenced Prime Minister David Cameron to launch the policy in September 2015.

The UK government committed to resettle 20,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees by May 2020. The target number for this resettlement policy is relatively small compared to the number of vulnerable individuals residing in the neighbouring countries of Syria and the number of those displaced from other countries. The VPRS programme was introduced at a time when the UK was pursuing a programme of austerity that resulted in multiple public funding cuts (Haycox, 2023).

Eligibility for this scheme depends largely on the ‘vulnerability’ of the individuals seeking resettlement in the UK. These refugees deemed ‘worthy of support’ (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014: 33) are those most vulnerable and deserving of an opportunity to start a new life in a new home country. The scheme relied on the UNHCR to determine the most vulnerable refugees, and the Home Secretary emphasised the government’s commitment to working with the UNHCR, stating: ‘We will continue to work with local authorities and the UNHCR, whose hard work so far has made sure that the scheme is a success’ (Home Office, 2017b). The scheme was designed in a political environment that often focused on alleged threats to state security and integration and a desire to reduce overall migration to the UK, themes that have dominated the anti-migration rhetoric in the UK since the 2005 British election campaign (Charteris-Black, 2006).

Resettled Syrians initially received humanitarian protection status; this changed in 2017 to five-year refugee status (Rudd, 2017). Those who were resettled prior to 2017 were able to apply for a change of status. A further amendment to include other nationalities who fled the conflict in Syria was subsequently introduced (Home Office, 2017a). People resettled through this scheme were afforded the same legal rights as others granted refugee status in the UK and have full access to welfare benefits, education and health.

### *The HK BN(O) visa*

Over time, the status of Hong Kong residents in Britain’s immigration and nationality legislation has undergone changes. The Commonwealth Immigration Act 1962 initiated immigration controls for people from Hong Kong. Despite this, a preferential quota for HK BN(O) in the late 1960s led to the issuance of 1,500 out of 4,000 work vouchers to non-patrial citizens (Benson, 2023).

The introduction of the HK BN(O) visa, a specialised migration route for select people from Hong Kong, opened for applications on 31 January 2021 (Home Office, 2021), building upon this altered status. The UK Home Office justifies the establishment of the HK BN(O) status as a direct response to the political situation in Hong Kong, prompted by China's imposition of the National Security Law in 2020, which raised concerns about civil liberties and freedoms in the region.

Given its historical ties with Hong Kong as a former colony, the UK government viewed it as a moral and ethical obligation to offer support and resettlement to Hong Kong residents holding British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) status (Home Office, 2023d). While this status, granted to many Hong Kong citizens before the 1997 handover to China, did not confer full British citizenship, it did afford holders specific rights, including the ability to visit the UK without a visa for up to six months (Home Office, 2021).

The programme was considered a demonstration of the UK's dedication to human rights, democracy and the rule of law – values that were increasingly imperilled in Hong Kong. The scheme attracted cross-party political support and the endorsement of Hong Kong Watch, a UK-based human rights charity (Hong Kong Watch, 2020a).

Two main visa categories were initially launched for the scheme: the BN(O) Status Holder route for people from Hong Kong with BN(O) status, dependent partners and children; and the BN(O) Household Member Route for the adult children of those from Hong Kong with BN(O) status, providing the children were born on or after 1 July 1997. Both visa routes allow a five-year stay in the UK. After this period, visa holders are permitted to apply for permanent settlement and British citizenship. Applications are approved where there is evidence that accommodation and income can be independently secured for the first six months in the UK. There are no restrictions on work and study, but the visa does not confer immediate rights to welfare benefits or home status for higher education students.

### *Homes for Ukraine*

Although the actions of the Russian government were the subject of intense scrutiny in the early part of 2022, the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 came as a surprise to many commentators. By March 2022, the UK government had introduced a package of social welfare support for displaced Ukrainians, which is broader in scope than the provision for most other displaced groups arriving in the UK (Machin, 2023a).

The Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, referred to as 'Homes for Ukraine', formed a key component of the policy response. This allows Ukrainians with no established links to the UK to secure accommodation provided by individual or group sponsors. People arriving through this scheme are

permitted to live and work in the UK for up to three years and can access healthcare and public funds, including immediate access to the full range of means- and non-means-tested social security benefits (DLUHC, 2023a). Sponsors are eligible for a monthly ‘thank you’ payment from the UK government of £350, increasing to £500 after 12 months for a maximum period of two years.

The statement given to Parliament on 1 March 2022 by then Home Secretary Priti Patel gives a clear insight into why the Homes for Ukraine policy was adopted: ‘We are united across this House in the horror at what is happening and the whole country stands with the heroic people of Ukraine’ (Home Office, 2022). In common with other government statements on immigration, the rhetoric was uncompromising, but the tone was uncharacteristically supportive. Policies to support displaced Ukrainians were seen as an essential humanitarian response to the conflict and were formed after direct consultation with the Ukrainian government. Policy was predicated on the need to protect democracy, oppose autocracy and support those displaced by the conflict until they could safely return to Ukraine. The UK government was keen to stress the generosity of the policies adopted to support Ukrainians, claiming that the scope and speed of implementation were unprecedented, that capacity could be intensified, and that there would be no limit on the number of people who could be supported.

Militarily, the UK has worked closely with international partners to support Ukraine (Mills, 2023). Social welfare provision is not coordinated in this way. For example, Homes for Ukraine applicants must apply for a visa, whereas in European Union (EU) countries, Ukrainian nationals are eligible for temporary protection without visa requirements (European Commission, 2023). In general, access to social welfare assistance, housing and the labour market is subject to individual national regulations.

### *Textual considerations*

#### *The VPRS*

A concern for the well-being of refugees and their vulnerability dominates the ‘Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme’ and is implicit in its title. This is aligned with British and international public perceptions of refugees, as well as the shift in resettlement policies from labour demand (for example, the Polish Resettlement Act 1947) to humanitarian aid. By targeting the vulnerable and children, the policy addresses security concerns in the UK.

The policy text is introduced by confirming the number of refugees Britain is willing to resettle: ‘Prime Minister made a commitment to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees through the programme by 2020’ (Home Office, 2015). The deliberate use of figures in the policy text, both the number of refugees to be admitted and the cost of the programme, is aimed at addressing

concerns about migrants changing the demographic of the UK. [Dustmann and Frattini \(2014\)](#) report that the UK public is concerned about migrants' tax contributions and access to the welfare system.

This policy was formed and introduced with caution and created what has been described as a 'two-tier' immigration system ([Madziva and Thondhlana, 2017](#)). One tier includes those resettled via the VPRS, that is, vulnerable Syrian refugees, and only those recognised by the UNHCR as vulnerable who are residing in the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. Not opening the programme to Syrian refugees on European borders is a message to those leading the anti-migration debate that this policy will not motivate refugees to make their way to Europe through illegal means. The second tier is recognised refugees via the asylum-seeking route, with lengthy delays in decision making ([Refugee Council, 2020](#)). Asylum seekers lack access to social welfare and the right to work, thereby impeding their ability to integrate and build networks in the UK over an extended period. This contributes to widening the gap between refugees resettled by the government and other forced migrants in the UK.

### *The HK BN(O) visa*

The intent of this policy is to focus on the hospitality of the British government rather than the vulnerability of the eligible people, and the programme is promoted as a pathway to citizenship ([Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2021](#)). The introduction of this programme underscored the UK's historical connection with Hong Kong as a former colonial power. The Home Office presents the policy as a moral responsibility to offer support to Hong Kong residents who hold BNO status. The programme was framed in terms of providing refuge for individuals and families who may face persecution or significant restrictions on their freedoms in Hong Kong for political reasons.

Then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Dominic Raab described the provision of citizenship as the UK's 'historic responsibility' ([House of Commons, 2020](#)). He emphasised the values shared by the UK and Hong Kong, describing the 'autonomy, its freedoms and the remarkable resourcefulness and determination of its people' ([House of Commons, 2020](#)). This was framed as being in stark comparison to the authoritarian stance of the Chinese government. The UK did not wish to intervene in the internal affairs of another country but expected an adherence to 'the international covenant on civil and political rights' ([House of Commons, 2020](#)). Raab emphasised a commitment to stand united with other international partners, including Australia, Canada, the US, Japan and the EU.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Prime Minister Boris Johnson ([HM Government, 2020](#)). He brought forward some of the most significant changes

to visa rules in history and stressed the importance of democracy: ‘Hong Kong succeeds because its people are free. They can pursue their dreams and scale as many heights as their talents allow’ (HM Government, 2020).

### *Homes for Ukraine*

The Homes for Ukraine scheme is an example of the continuing ‘deputising’ of key functions of the UK immigration system, which are aligned with an increasingly ‘hostile environment’ (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). In this case, the provision of accommodation is delegated to members of the public and the matching process between hosts and guests largely lies with voluntary sector groups. Central government deputisation is apparent in the way that safeguarding and accommodation-matching responsibilities are devolved to local government and the charitable sector.

Although deputisation is a clear element of the policy, there is a marked absence of hostility. The ‘policy problem’ is conceptualised in an approving way: the war in Ukraine has created unjust suffering for fellow Europeans, many of whom are women and children. The UK government affirmed that a tailored response was needed and that it would not be appropriate for Ukrainians to rely on the general asylum system. Homes for Ukraine broadly aligns with the Syrian and Hong Kong schemes as bespoke immigration policies that respond to distinct international crises and sit outside the general immigration rules.

The linguist construction and promotion of policy to support Ukrainians is overwhelmingly positive. On 24 February 2022, in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, Prime Minister Boris Johnson confirmed that Ukraine would have the ‘unwavering support of the United Kingdom’ and that ‘in this moment of agony, I say we are with you, and we are on your side’ (Prime Minister’s Office, 2022). The following week, this translated into a firm policy commitment: the Homes for Ukraine scheme was launched to ‘support our displaced Ukrainian friends’ as part of a ‘generous, expansive and unprecedented package’ (Home Office, 2022). This language extended to policy documents which pledged that the ‘United Kingdom is standing shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine’ (Home Office, 2022) and that ‘thousands of families who opened their homes to Ukrainians fleeing Putin’s illegal war will now receive a package of further support’ (DLUHC, 2022).

Homes for Ukraine was designed and implemented at pace and provides a clear route to the UK and immediate entitlement to social welfare; this meant that there was reserved support for the scheme from the voluntary and community sector. The policy launch on 14 March 2022 was endorsed by the Sanctuary Foundation (which ‘welcome[d] with great enthusiasm the UK government’s “Homes for Ukraine” scheme’ [Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022]) and Reset Communities

for Refugees: ‘communities in the UK can open their doors to welcome those who so urgently need help’ (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022). However, significant concerns were raised about the compatibility of the policy with international standards and the 1951 Refugee Convention. These centred on the requirement for applicants to apply for a visa and the failure of the scheme to grant refugee status (RefuAid, 2022; Refugee Action, 2022), concerns about the capacity of community sponsorship to respond to the scale of the problem (Refugee Action, 2022), unnecessary bureaucracy, and unrealistic expectations placed on hosts: ‘It’s like asking people to be foster carers without any robust checks, training or having a social worker in place to support them’ (Refugee Council, 2022). By April 2022, these safeguarding concerns had been picked up by the UN Refugee Agency, particularly in relation to vulnerability for women (UNHCR, 2022).

### *Implementation and outcome issues*

#### *The VPRS*

Outcomes for recipients of the VPRS were favourable compared to many other migrant groups arriving in the UK. Resident permits confirming legal status were issued within days of arrival. Families were supported not only by local authorities but also through a local refugee charity that secured a resettlement officer (RO) who had the authority to assist families in their engagement with the government and its services. ROs acted as a point of contact for families, continuously checking on settlement progress and ensuring scheme beneficiaries were far more likely to access welfare, healthcare, education and other public services. Policy created in one department of the government often impacts others. However, the role of local authorities in this programme was unclear, and their participation was voluntary (Home Office, 2017).

Changes were made to the policy in 2017, promoting the responsiveness of the UK government in addressing the needs of refugees. The change from humanitarian protection to refugee status was significant. Then Home Secretary Amber Rudd (2017) acknowledged that humanitarian protection was initially granted to ensure that the government could ‘quickly assist and resettle the most vulnerable’; however, ‘it does not carry the same entitlements as refugee status’, particularly in terms of access to social welfare, student support, home status fees for higher education and travel documents. The second change to include other nationalities fleeing the Syrian conflict came following the advice of the UNHCR. These changes enhance the scheme’s capacity to promptly address the needs of stakeholders, fostering increased responsiveness.

This scheme represents an institutional effort by the government, local authorities, the public sector and charities to support vulnerable Syrians

legally resettled in the UK. Questions remain, however, as to whether this type of scheme can be considered a comprehensive response to the growing numbers of international refugees.

### *The HK BN(O) visa*

The Home Office is responsible for the administration and implementation of the Hong Kong Welcome Programme, including processing visa applications and coordinating with other government departments. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) is involved in diplomatic aspects, including any implications for UK–China relations and international discussions related to the programme. Local authorities participated in the resettlement and support of individuals and families under the programme, including the provision of housing, social services and community integration. Refugee support organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provided various forms of assistance, including resettlement services, language training and social integration programmes. Local authorities and support organisations were provided with funding for language and destitution support, as well as the creation of 12 UK-wide welcome hubs and a hate-crime reporting service (Chief Inspector of [Borders and Immigration, 2022](#)).

In anticipation of the programme, the registered charity Hongkongers in Britain (HKB) commissioned research to ascertain the motivations of people who were considering moving to the UK. It found that most people considering applying for a visa were below 40, university-educated and in employment. Only 16 per cent said that they could not afford the first six months of living costs in the UK; 93 per cent stated that in the long term, they intended to apply for British citizenship ([HKB, 2020](#)). The profile of people seeking to move to the UK and close UK–Hong Kong links contributed to comprehensive political support for the scheme. However, organisations such as Migration Watch ([2020](#)), with concerns for the scale of UK immigration, urged the government to cap the scheme's numbers, describing the policy as a 'potential disaster for immigration control' and out of step with manifesto pledges.

The Chinese government clearly opposes the scheme and does not recognise BN(O) passports, contending that they contravene the UK–China Joint Declaration ([Wintour, 2020](#)). Hong Kong Watch ([2020b](#)) has called for greater international coordination to ensure that this programme is not disconnected from other policies. For example, they report that Canada's Young Talents student visa scheme meets some of the gaps in UK provision and that Australia has introduced bespoke student visa schemes.

From the policy inception date of 31 January to 31 December 2022, 160,700 applications were made under this scheme. During this period,



129,415 applications were accepted and 105,200 people arrived in the UK (Home Office, 2023b).

### *Homes for Ukraine*

The UK government has provided £2.1 billion for the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Of this, £1.1 billion has been allocated to local authorities to support integration and £650 million for housing support, though this is not ring-fenced for Ukrainian support (National Audit Office, 2023). Local authority funding for the first year of the policy was £10,500 per person, subsequently reduced to £5,900 from January 2023. This is intended to cover all costs related to integration, including welcoming, safeguarding, transition to work and sustainable accommodation. The Local Government Association (LGA, 2023) welcomed the funding but raised concerns about whether the long-term costs of integration can be met from the existing funding arrangements.

Research indicates that under the current resource allocation, 45 per cent of Homes for Ukraine guests have difficulty accessing private-rented accommodation, 50 per cent experience barriers in gaining employment, 60 per cent have insufficient short-term resources and 32 per cent report receiving no English language support (LGA, 2023). The adequacy of host 'thank you' payments has been questioned: 18 per cent of hosts have reported increasing difficulty supporting guests as a result of the cost-of-living crisis (ONS, 2022).

There are a wide range of domestic stakeholders responsible for implementing the policy. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) delivered the scheme, with the Department for Work and Pensions responsible for the associated administration of social security benefits (Department for Work and Pensions, 2022). The Home Office is responsible for criminal record and safety checks for hosts, and local authorities are responsible for accommodation inspections and safeguarding issues. The speed at which the policy was introduced meant that consultation with groups like the Social Security Advisory Committee was not possible. Homes for Ukraine largely relies on the cooperation of the public and the participation of voluntary sector agencies. Charities and community and faith-based groups play an integral part in the matching process that connects people displaced by the war with potential sponsors. The effective functioning of Homes for Ukraine relies, in part, on the capacity of voluntary sector groups to facilitate the matching process; for the organisations involved, this requires robust governance, data protection, safeguarding and modern slavery protocols.

Homes for Ukraine provides no clear path to resettlement but rather, for most people, a temporary accommodation solution followed by exposure to

an unforgiving housing environment. Typically, minimal support is provided to navigate a poorly functioning social security system and to deal with a complex range of integration, health and well-being issues.

As of 28 November 2023, 176,600 visas were issued, with 138,200 actual arrivals in the UK. In the first 14 months of the war, 8.2 million people left Ukraine for other European countries; approximately 2 per cent arrived in the UK (Home Office, 2023c).

## Discussion and implications for the future

This evaluation has shown that bespoke UK resettlement schemes provide expedited rights to specific groups but are emblematic of a broader move away from the international protection of refugees (for a comparison of the three schemes, see Table 9.1).

These types of policies shift responsibilities away from the state, creating a ‘hierarchy of deservedness’ and a ‘tool of migration management instead of international protection’ (D’avino, 2022: 328–9). This hierarchy of deservedness is linked to values-based assumptions about different types of refugees. ‘Vulnerability’ of resettled Syrians was central to the VPRS. Homes for Ukraine was underpinned by a clear message of openness, support and a ‘welcome’ for those displaced by conflict in that region. The Hong Kong Welcome programme emphasised ‘historic links’ that created a ‘responsibility’ to act. Although imperfect, this evaluation has shown that there are undoubted merits to these schemes. However, the absence of this affirming approach and the adherence to a hostile stance towards most migrant groups coming or seeking to come to the UK demonstrates that these resettlement schemes are policy outliers in the neoliberal, hostile immigration environment.

### *Disconnect between professional and government perspectives on the schemes*

This evaluation has demonstrated a disconnect between the prevailing opinions of professional practice and the UK government’s perspective of the three schemes. Our analysis has revealed a wide gap between the positive narratives embedded within parliamentary and policy statements and the ‘on the ground’ concerns that were raised through official committees and auditing bodies, which had often taken evidence from professionals working in the voluntary sector. Some key examples of this divergence are detailed in the following.

Caseworker support has been recognised as a positive feature of the VPRS (Home Office, 2023e). However, recommendations that this should be extended were not implemented (Brown, 2018).

**Table 9.1:** Comparison of the three schemes

	The VPRS	The HK BN(O) visa	Homes for Ukraine
<b>Contextual issues</b>			
Potential numbers and fees	Cap of 20,000 No application fee	No cap on numbers 30-month visa: £180 5-year visa: £250 30-month health surcharge: £1,560 5-year health surcharge: £3,120	No cap on numbers No application fee
Rights conferred	Immediate access to social welfare, including social security, arranged accommodation prior to resettlement, work, education and health	Able to work and study but No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)	Immediate access to welfare benefits, work, education and health
Settlement rights	Leave to remain was initially 3 years humanitarian protection, amended to 5 years refugee status in 2017; eligible for permanent settlement application after the 5 years	Leave to remain for 5 years, then an application for permanent settlement and British citizenship	Permission to stay for 3 years
<b>Textual issues</b>			
Values articulated	Vulnerability: 'This will be a truly national effort in supporting these refugees in their hour of need.' <sup>a</sup>	Democracy: 'Hong Kong succeeds because its people are free.' <sup>b</sup>	Welcome: 'United Kingdom is standing shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine.' <sup>c</sup>
<b>Implementation and outcomes</b>			
Eligibility	UNHCR criteria to identify the most vulnerable in the region, with priority given to women and children, people with severe medical needs, and survivors of torture and violence	BN(O) status citizens who normally live in the UK, Crown Dependencies or Hong Kong permitted to come to the UK with their close family members for 5 years	Ukrainian nationals and their immediate family members who lived in Ukraine before 1 January 2022 UK hosts must be over 18 and be able to provide accommodation for a minimum of 6 months
Funding	First year funded by central government overseas aid budget: £129 million of funding available for local authorities to assist in Years 2–5	£43.1 million (initial funding); a further £2.6 million Year 3 funding was provided in 2023 for 47 voluntary and community sector projects	£2.1 billion (to September 2023)
Number of arrivals	20,319 (239 were resettled before the programme and were not accounted for in the commitment of 20,000)	105,200 (to 31 December 2022)	138,200 (to 28 November 2023)

Sources: <sup>a</sup> Home Office (2015); <sup>b</sup> HM Government (2020); <sup>c</sup> Home Office (2022).

Although the UNHCR reported positive ‘life-changing’ stories for scheme recipients, particularly in relation to specialised medical care, finding employment and starting up a small business (UNHCR, 2021), inspections found that there are ‘fundamental concerns’ (Home Office, 2020). These centred on the waiting time between acceptance and arrival in the UK. Many resettled families were significantly impacted by welfare reform and a lack of access to appropriate housing. For larger families, the two-child limit continues to have a regressive impact (Haycox, 2023).

Homes for Ukraine has been subject to evaluation from the National Audit Office (NAO, 2023). The report identified that the DLUHC has six key performance indicators in relation to the policy. To September 2023, two of these targets were met (providing safe accommodation and preventing homelessness in line with wider trends) and four targets were missed (successfully rematching guests needing new accommodation, successful transition into private sector accommodation, supporting people into work and the take-up of English language and employment support schemes).

A similarly mixed picture was reported in relation to visas and safeguarding. A specialist task force commissioned to assess safeguarding and modern slavery issues has judged that the risks posed through the scheme are moderate or low but recommended that the DLUHC improves monitoring and reporting mechanisms (NAO, 2023).

The concerns about the Homes for Ukraine scheme raised in the NAO report largely align with those advanced by professional bodies working in the field of refugee support. These misgivings were raised at the outset of the scheme and have proved to be well founded (principally in relation to visa requirements, safeguarding, reliance on public goodwill, short-termism and burdens placed on hosts).

The Home Affairs Committee (2021) identified a range of issues with the Hong Kong visa scheme. Of particular concern was the plight of young people disproportionately involved in the pro-democracy movement but excluded from BN(O) status if they were born on or after 1 July 1997 (Home Affairs Committee, 2021). The government announced a concession to this rule in February 2022, allowing young people aged 18–25 to be able to move to the UK, even if their parent with BN(O) status remains in Hong Kong. A significant area of concern identified through inspection was decision-making delays for adult dependent relatives (ADR) of those with BN(O) status. A lack of policy and administrative clarity led to the delay of more than 600 ADR applications, often for over a year.

### *Differing rules, differing outcomes*

The differences in scheme rules should not be seen as merely technical; they create inconsistent outcomes for the different groups of migrants that have

an inevitable impact on short- and longer-term integration. The practical manifestation of a system underpinned by a 'hierarchy of deservedness' means that while resettlement schemes can give accelerated rights, they also contribute to an inconsistent and fractured immigration system. This often leads to confusion on the ground for migrants themselves and stakeholders in the community who support them. While recognising the individual merits of each scheme, they create a patchwork of distinct provisions.

The VPRS offers Syrian refugees a fully funded journey to the UK, with additional resources provided to promote integration, such as education and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) training. Conversely, the Hong Kong visa requires individuals to prove their ability to financially fund the resettlement journey, including proof of funds for the first six months in the UK. Homes for Ukraine requires an application from a Ukrainian national or UK-based sponsor for each person coming to the UK. The government does not incur direct accommodation costs; these rest with the public hosts. Placing migrant support in a domestic setting is significant. [Monforte et al \(2021\)](#) found that 'private hospitality' is often motivated by a desire to challenge the prevailing powers of border politics but can result in unrealistic expectations being placed on guests, a need for reciprocal approval and judgements about legitimacy.

The overall emphasis on vulnerability may have harnessed the power to push the government to introduce a scheme of resettlement for Syrians, but depicting Syrian refugees as vulnerable people highlighted their need for dependency on the state. In many instances, this dependency image has created friction between refugees and members of the community.

As the Hong Kong scheme becomes more established, longer-term integration issues are becoming prominent. A survey of 2,000 BN(O) visa holders found that 99 per cent plan to permanently remain in the UK, but despite high levels of education, approximately 50 per cent are unemployed, with many who are in work securing positions that are not commensurate with skills. Most respondents had built links with established UK-based Hong Kongers, but financial well-being was an issue for over 40 per cent and 10 per cent expressed feeling socially isolated in the workplace ([Rolfe and Benson, 2023](#)). Reports suggest that both education providers and employers find the Hong Kong visa rules confusing, leading to delays in school enrolment and barriers to employment ([Rawlinson and Otte, 2021](#)).

The most striking consequence of integration problems with the Homes for Ukraine scheme is shown by the breakdown in hosting arrangements, in tandem with acute problems accessing alternative accommodation ([Machin, 2023c](#)). By the end of September 2023, nearly 8,000 Ukrainian households had been classified as homeless, including over 5,000 households with children ([DLUHC, 2023b](#)). Many hosts have reported that they are unable to provide accommodation beyond the minimum

six-month period and have found hosting arrangements to be challenging (BBC News, 2023). There are marked cost and access issues for Ukrainians seeking accommodation in the private rented sector. Available private rented sector housing is often located in different areas to accommodation provided by hosts and results in a disruption to established support networks (Machin, 2023b).

People arriving in the UK under the three schemes discussed are exposed to the intrinsic weaknesses of the UK social welfare system. Although Syrians and Ukrainians have access to welfare payments, bureaucratic and practical problems often arise. The telephony and online processes that drive the social security system can be hard to navigate where English is not the first language. Acquiring a National Insurance number and opening a bank account are basic requirements to access welfare payments but can be problematic. Challenges caused by cultural differences have been observed; these include an unwillingness to claim benefits or to challenge incorrect decisions.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that resettled people are represented differently in the UK; each of the policies analysed here contributes to their image through the text of the policy and the rights extended to them. The government's responsiveness to both the political turmoil in Hong Kong and the conflict in Ukraine has been notably accelerated, especially when compared to its reaction to the Syrian conflict. This goes beyond logistics and bureaucracy, as 'time is intertwined with power relations' (Gokmenoglu, 2022: 644).

In public discussions and electoral debates, the chosen linguistic approach served as a defensive mechanism, bolstering the government's image and shaping the perception of newly arrived individuals. These schemes highlight the UK government's willingness to respond to specific global challenges, but only when it is deemed politically and ideologically expedient.

Our analysis shows that Syrians, Hong Kongers with BN(O) status and Ukrainians were not perceived on an equal footing. The Hong Kong visa scheme and Homes for Ukraine policy, grounded in the principles of hospitality, and the VPRS, with an emphasis on the vulnerability of Syrians, created disparities. Those granted a more established legal status through the VPRS experienced palpable advantages. Resettled Syrians received independent accommodation, access to welfare and an extended leave to remain, ensuring that none were at risk of homelessness.

The disparity in these three ad hoc and reactive schemes reflects the political realities of immigration policy and the way in which it serves electoral agendas. The concern is that these schemes are merely outliers and are marginal to the broader, now well-established, hostile attitudes to migrants and forced migrants.

The dominant rationale for not offering refuge to forced migrants is predicated on the risk to national security and the strain on public services and funds. UK policy is experiencing a redirection and potential reversal of fundamental rights, such as those afforded through the European Convention on Human Rights. Yeo (2022) warns that resettlement programmes ‘should not be used as an excuse for retreat from the international rights-based regime’. This risks resettlement schemes becoming trivial.

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