No child should be left behind

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1. A brief assessment of the potential learning value of the Belgian policy and its relevance to Germany

There exists a widespread consensus among national and international actors (governments as well as civil society) in the European Union on the need for a comprehensive approach to tackle and prevent child poverty and to promote child well-being in all EU Member States. Policies to this end ought to be based on three pillars: access to adequate resources and support for all households, access to quality services and the provision of measures to increase children’s participation in social, recreational, sporting and cultural activities (SPC 2012).

Starting point: differences in children’s participation in early education and social activities

Measured by family income rates and the degree of material deprivation, Germany is one of the EU Member States in which child poverty is comparatively low. This is because social benefits considerably reduce the poverty risk of households. For the majority of children living in Germany, the basic supply with food, clothes and toys is guaranteed (Federal Statistical Office 2011). With a poverty risk of 17.5% for children and juveniles – which is roughly two percentage points above the at-risk-of-poverty rate of the overall population – Germany lies below EU average (see EU-SILC data, 2009). There are, however, significant regional differences. In some cities, up to one-third of minors lives in households which depend on minimum income benefits.

Empirical studies show that in Germany – as it is the case in Belgium – insufficient household income, parents’ low workforce participation and education levels, as well as certain socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. lone parenthood or migration background) constitute major risk factors for children’s development. From an early age, therefore, out-of-home child-care can have significant positive effects on children’s development (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2012). For instance, early enrolment in child-care considerably increases the chances for children of parents with a low education background to gain a higher qualification level. However, in Germany both children with a migration background and those whose parents have received little education attend child day-care centres for a shorter period of time than children from other family backgrounds.

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In addition to enrolment in out-of-home child-care facilities, the participation in sports, artistic and leisure activities is also important for children’s development and self-efficacy. In such settings, friendships are made which can transcend socio-economic boundaries and can expose children – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – to new experiences. According to a study based on data from the German Socio Economic Panel (GSOEP), the degree of children’s socio-cultural participation is linked to factors such as the parents’ education, income, and migration background as well as the level of parents’ gainful employment (Schmiade/Spiess 2010). This means that children’s participation in these activities also depends on social background, and accordingly may differ considerably.³

**Supporting children through cash and/or in-kind-benefits**

These differences, combined with the unequal access to socio-cultural activities, are the reason why state benefits should – in addition to a guarantee of universal family support – also encompass and encourage participation activities benefitting children from social risk groups. One question in this context is, what role Jobcentres⁴ should play in supporting the socio-cultural participation of children and juveniles. The German Jobcentres are more or less equivalents to the Belgian Public Centres of Social Action/Welfare (PCSA/W). However, German Jobcentres are responsible for a much larger population group than the PCSA/W, since a greater number of (poor) people in Belgium claim assistance through other channels of the Belgium social security system. As of 2012, almost ten percent of the German population was entitled to claim basic (job-seekers’) income support, which constitutes the largest part of the state’s basic income provision (Second Book of the German Social Code). Among minors, this “assistance rate” is greater than 14 percent.

Basic income support aims to enable beneficiaries to live a dignified life. This fundamental right to security above the subsistence level⁵ includes not only physical subsistence, but also the possibility to maintain interpersonal relationships and a minimum level of participation in social, cultural and political life. When the German basic security benefit system was reformed in 2005, one objective was to work increasingly with lump-sum monetary payments rather than with payments in kinds and services. The intent was to increase beneficiaries’ personal responsibility over dealing with their resources. The granting of benefits in kind and services has, however, now become an important benefit distribution mechanism for children and juveniles. It was initiated by a judgment of the Federal Constitutional Court of 9 February 2010. The Court ruled that the benefits for children and juveniles may not be simply set as percentages of the standard benefits defined for adults, but must instead be independently assessed. The Court also ruled that the benefits for education and participation of needy children, which up until then had only been granted to a restricted degree, had to be expanded.

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³ For an overview of recent national studies see Engels/Thielebein 2011.
⁴ The Jobcentres are responsible for working-age people who are able to work and who are needy because their income or assets are too low, as well as for their relatives (communities of need). The Employment Agencies and the local authorities are either competent for respective individual tasks within joint facilities, or all tasks are taken on by the local authorities (“licensed local authority agencies”).
⁵ See articles 1 and 20 of Germany’s ‘Basic Law’, which outline human dignity as basic right and social welfare state as basic institutional principle.
Delivering an educational package for poor children

The judgment of the Federal Constitutional Court ultimately ensures a legal right to such benefits for roughly 2.5 million children, juveniles and young adults in Germany. This constitutes a major difference to the Belgian approach, in which the granting of individual allowances for the participation in community events is at the discretion of the PCSA/W or their social workers. Another difference vis-à-vis Belgium is that in Germany the “list” of educational and participational services is defined by law. As of 2011, the following measures are provided to children as part of the so-called educational package:

- 10 € each month are paid to help with fees for culture, sports and leisure activities.
- If (hot) meals are provided at the day care centre or at school, the costs for these meals are covered (though contributions of one euro a day may be deducted).
- The costs of taking part in excursions or trips lasting one or several days are paid for, if they are organised by the day care centre or school.
- If a child is falling behind in class and is at risk of having to repeat a school year, he or she is entitled to appropriate learning support.
- Children receive a monthly allowance to cover the costs of transportation to/from the nearest secondary school, given that the costs are not covered by anyone else and that they cannot be met through basic income support.
- 70 € are made available in the first half of the school year and 30 € in the second half respectively for the purchase of school materials, such as school bags, pens and paper.

The latter two benefits are granted in the form of monetary payments, the others as benefits in kind and services (e.g. vouchers or payments directly to the providers of the services in question). This allocation principle is intended to ensure that the benefit actually reaches the child. This system is sometimes criticised as being overly bureaucratic since it creates a “relationship triangle” between the granting administrative body, the children as recipients and the providers in question.

The education and participation package has been introduced by federal statute, but it is the local authorities who are solely responsible for its implementation in organisational and financial terms. The Federal Länder exercise supervision rights, but the federal (national) government has no right of intervention or instruction. Unlike in Belgium, the German federal state does not provide local authorities with any funding to implement the participation package.

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6 This includes both children, juveniles and young adults aged under 25 (the latter if they are attending school) and, in the communities of need in accordance with the Second and Twelfth Books of the Social Code, additionally all children and juveniles whose families receive the supplementary child allowance or housing benefits.

7 Vermeersch et. al. (2011: 9 and 12) refer to the danger of skimming effects since social workers are so crucial to the provision of granted services.

8 The Basic Law in Germany rules out direct financial relationships between the Federation and local authorities. The Federation and the Länder have agreed at policy level to create compensation elsewhere for the additional financial burdens incurred by the local authorities because of the benefits for education and participation.
Apart from the school materials allowance (which is obligatory), benefits are only paid out if applied for. The federal government advertises this, amongst other things with brochures in several languages and a special website. The local authorities have to provide advice and encourage acceptance. To this end, they are also to underline the local benefits and where appropriate reach agreements with public and private providers.

Is no poor child left out?

The current political debate over the German education and participation package is dominated by questions over how much of the benefits actually reach the children and juveniles in need. Because the main responsibility over the implementation of measures lies with the local authorities, there is as yet no complete picture at federal level. A survey among parents and children suggests that the take-up rate of the benefits has risen over time and that the education package is being increasingly accepted (cf. Apel/Engels 2012): Almost six families out of ten with eligible juveniles and children had applied for at least one of the services by the first quarter of 2012 (roughly one year after their introduction). The elements of the education package taken up most frequently are support for school lunches and school trips. By contrast, the 10 € (e.g. vouchers) for participation in social and cultural activities have so far only been taken up by only roughly 15% of beneficiaries – and the majority of these children and teenagers having already been members of sports clubs or other social clubs prior to introduction of the new measures. Hence, it is a matter of importance to ensure that even more children and juveniles will make use of the participation opportunities offered in the fields of sports, music or culture in future.

The cited survey shows that it is first and foremost the lack of knowledge on the existence of these benefits from the education and participation package, which stands in the way of greater take-up rates. This lack of knowledge is particularly widespread among families with a migration background. The concern that people may feel stigmatised when claiming participation benefits in kindergartens, schools or other affiliated institutions has, however, proven to be unfounded. A comprehensive evaluation will however not be possible until the years to come on the basis of further evaluations.

2. How to overcome potential barriers to children’s socio-cultural participation

In Germany, encouraging children’s social participation is understood as a primary task of local authorities. Additional services offered by Länder and federal programmes may only be implemented “in situ”. Discussions over the appropriate implementation of measures take up a large part of the German political debate. One should note in this context that the principal right to decide over children’s education lies with the parents and is guaranteed by the Basic Law (article 6 of Basic Law). This ‘parental priority’ principle is the reason why many programmes in Germany aim to strengthen parents’ own ability to support their children. This approach is based on the assumption that the family forms the main framework for children’s living conditions (it is summed up in a popular parents’ education programme with the slogan “Strong parents – strong children”).

From an educational policy point of view, socio-cultural participation of children in Germany is seen above all as one element of a holistic policy strategy. This holistic strategy aims above all to improve children’s education, that is to reduce the stark disparities that exist in education levels between children of different social groups. The current discussion can be outlined as follows:
Education starts at birth; education extends beyond the classroom, and (early) learning is a central precondition both for a later integration into the labour market and for social participation more generally. Against this background, promoting socio-cultural participation of children should not be regarded as a separate goal, but as one instrument of a holistic education policy strategy. Such a strategy ideally accompanies children’s educational careers from the very beginning, tackling the difficulties that may arise at different stages of their lives and educational biography.

**Early assistance**

In view of the significant role played by parents, inter alia under the umbrella term “early assistance”, large numbers of programmes, projects and statutes were developed at federal, Land and local level in recent years, aiming to reach young families and to provide children with support from birth. Most initiatives have in common that they seek to establish cooperation between the healthcare system and youth welfare centres. It is actors in the healthcare sector – from gynaecological surgeons, birth clinic staff and midwives, to paediatricians – who have early contact with young families in a non-stigmatising, ordinary context. A successful example of such initiatives is the establishment of the “National Centre for Early Assistance” (NZFH), which took up its work nation-wide in March 2007. The Centre trains practitioners to recognise family strains earlier and more effectively and to provide support as it is needed. The Federal Child Protection Act, which came into force in January 2012, also points in this direction both by strengthening local networks, and by promoting the deployment of family midwives. The Land Act for the Protection of Child Well-Being and Child Health, which was adopted in Rhineland-Palatinate at the beginning of 2008 and which formed the basis for the establishment and financial support of early assistance networks under Land law, serves as a good example of relevant initiatives at Land level. A survey among youth welfare offices in the Ruhr Area in 2011 showed that such local early assistance networks now exist in three-quarters of youth welfare office districts (Regionalverband Ruhr 2012). Cooperation between youth welfare centres and the healthcare system appears to be both a necessary precondition, yet also a major challenge, for the establishment of early assistance networks (Kasper 2009).

**Expanded function of child day-care centres**

There appears to be an international trend towards expanding the availability of day-care facilities for children: Following the example of the English “Early Excellence Centres” (EEC), child day-care centres are to become centres for integrated, universal services and support systems for children and families. These facilities are to approach families at grassroots level and reach specific target groups – such as those with poor educational backgrounds, those living in poverty, and/or immobile persons – who otherwise would be unreachable. Against this background, for instance, a process was initiated in North Rhine-Westphalia at the beginning of 2006 to gradually expand roughly one-third of the good 9,000 child day-care centres to become family centres. Family centres collaborate with family education and advice services to make these services accessible to a larger number of families. Amongst other things, they offer placements and skills-training and provide expanded services for reconciling family and work. Family centres receive a lump sum allowance per year for this.

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9 [www.fruehehilfen.de/1867.0.html](http://www.fruehehilfen.de/1867.0.html)
10 [www.bmfsfj.de/BMFSFJ/Kinder-und-Jugend/kinder-und-jugendschutz.html](http://www.bmfsfj.de/BMFSFJ/Kinder-und-Jugend/kinder-und-jugendschutz.html)
Schools and environments

The expansion of all-day-schools (traditionally, schools in Germany only open on a half-working day basis) follows the principle of supporting children and juveniles and their families by expanding the services of standard institutions. It should be stressed at this point that schools are increasingly regarded as more than just “a place for teaching” (Holtappels 2008: 495). There is therefore a need for increased cooperation with social and educational youth work. This can be achieved for instance by bringing together and combining initiatives for cultural participation with projects for a better transition between school and work, or with the work with children and juveniles in need (e.g. those with psychosocial problems). This requires the cooperation of both school and social workers, and between schools and other social institutions (see for instance “local education landscapes”; cf. Ratermann/Stöbe-Blossey 2012). The Federal Government’s 12th Child and Youth Report speaks of a “system of education, care and child-raising which is coordinated at the local level” (BMFSFJ 2005). It aims towards the creation of local educational landscapes in which a broad variety of institutions participate – from youth welfare centres, to schools, to youth welfare services, to civil society and the industry.

3. What policy domains are relevant and how can an integrated and coordinated approach be implemented?

The debate in Germany centres less around individual financial support for socio-cultural participation than on the extension of a networking infrastructure between various players (especially at local level) in which the functions of standard institutions (e.g. kindergarten, school) are supported. Individual financial support plays only a supplementary role.

In the context of the Belgian example, the following questions on policy domains are of relevance:

- How are the benefits under the SCP measure linked with the local infrastructure (such as with schools/kindergartens, with family education and advice and with civil society organisations such as sports clubs)?

- Whilst there are budgets for social assistance centres in Belgium, Germany has individual claims standardised by law. What are the advantages and disadvantages of these two forms? (acceptance? management? differences in implementation according to responsibility of PCSA/W?)

- Is there any information on the efficiency of allocation of measures (vouchers, allowances, direct payments to local providers)?

- What is Belgium’s experience with regard to cooperation between the players? A major bottleneck factor in Germany appears to lie in the lack of networking between the various policy fields (for instance between health and youth welfare, and between labour market policy and youth welfare). This is reflected at local level, and also in fragmented competences of the Federal Ministries12.

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How does the interplay and the overlap of competences between the various levels of the federal state work? In Germany a problem for the implementation of an integrated and coordinated approach lies in the fact that, firstly, it is presumed that the local authorities have central competence, and, secondly, their funding is problematic. Moreover, provisions of the Basic Law stand in the way of cooperation between the levels of the Federation.

References


