

All that Glitters is not Gold – Sustainability Discourse in German Family Policy

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and challenges to social policy (Mia Hakovirta and Anita Haataja)

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Abstract

Socioeconomic transformations have led to new social risks which provoked a changing role of welfare systems. Family policies have been notably shaped by these developments which affect the policy field on an actor-centred, a structural and on a discursive level. Concerning the latter, sustainability discourse – addressing amongst others new social risks – has emerged in German family policy at the turn of the new millennium. In this perspective, strategic networks were established, economic and demographic argumentation gained importance and evaluation of family policy measures was set up. Indeed, actors frequently refer to sustainability as being an apt way to respond to recent socioeconomic challenges. However, the understanding of sustainability in family policy is very heterogeneous, depending on the actors' points of view.

Empirically, the paper provides an expansion and reflection of definitions given in the context of sustainability in family policy. Furthermore, it analyzes the implementation of participative aspects as integral element of sustainability. The analysis is based on the most important expertises in this field and on 32 interviews conducted with scientists, representatives from welfare and family organizations, relevant foundations and the judicial sphere as well as with policy makers on all federal levels.

In detail, the paper reveals that although the concept of sustainability is referred to as innovative solution to socioeconomic transformations, sustainability discourse can be supposed to be (also) a means to other ends: Amongst others, it can be seen as a sort of ex-post legitimation for political changes that had already been induced on national level earlier. Using the example of the *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie* (bringing together state and societal actors at the local level), the paper shows that – contrary to what is suggested in sustainability discourse – unconventional types of networks may not just like that be considered to be sustainable ones.