

Attitudinal change to the welfare state: From compensating social risks to creating opportunities

It is often said that research on welfare is more concerned with examining social disadvantage and gaps in wellbeing than with welfare itself. The emphasis on welfare gaps is understandable, as the welfare state was originally created to protect the vulnerable and to compensate the consequences of social risks – and the system continues to serve also this purpose. Both the political decision makers and employees involved in the welfare state need information about disadvantage, and its prevalence and causes. This information is used as the basis for targeting and evaluating activities. Research on social disadvantage reveals us where there are gaps in the welfare state, in both compensating the consequences of social risks as well as in preventing problems.

The welfare state as an investment

Recently the welfare state has been perceived more broadly than as a mere expenditure. In addition to serving as an insurance, the welfare state is a social investment in wellbeing and stability. The social security, services and education that the welfare state provides create predictability in life and enable everyone to use their potential – and generate good and stable environments to business life. A highly educated population, reliable legal system, and social peace as well as a well-functioning administration and infrastructure can be considered as outcomes of the social investments made in the welfare state.

The Inequalities, Interventions, and New Welfare State (INVEST) research flagship by the University of Turku and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare was launched at the beginning of the year 2019. The flagship aims at exploring the effectiveness of the social investments made in the welfare state using scientific approaches and implementing the idea of scientific impact assessment in the decision-making of the welfare state. The flagship research allows identifying early and immediate risk factors in people's life trajectories. It includes innovating the identification and targeting of needs based on an information system, and related steering measures. The flagship research experiments with, simulates and assesses the effectiveness of interventions and policy measures, and the impacts of changes at the system level.

New research knowledge to support decision-making

Finland has extensive and internationally unique administrative registers, which can be used to examine the effectiveness of the service and transfer payment system. While research on the impacts of health services has become established, we know very little about the effectiveness of social services and services aimed at families with children. The aim is to examine issues such as the effectiveness of child protection and rehabilitative work activities based on registers with long-term data and by inventing quasi-experimental research settings. To support this goal, the flagship will carry out a pilot in the Findata remote access data environment including ready-made data compiled from several different registers.

The comparative welfare state research and the microsimulation study provide(s) information about the special features, strengths and weaknesses of Finland's system and welfare policy compared to other countries. The comparative study also allows approaching many of Finland's politicised issues from a more neutral standpoint as a result of seeing how different countries have solved the same societal issues. International comparative data of the welfare state and the wellbeing of Finns compared to others is crucial for the decision-making and specialist work conducted in Finland.

The implementation of research may require a shift in the way we think

The implementation of research knowledge concerning experimentations and comparative studies requires a shift in the way people think in the context of decision-making in the welfare state. First, the experimentations and the culture of experimentation may produce results that challenge the current ways of thinking and doing. All well-intentioned activities may not result in anticipated impacts, and even if they do, spending the same amount of money in a different way might produce more wellbeing. The cost-effectiveness of services will become more and more important questions due to aging population and shrinking workforce.

Second, there is a need to determine the goals of all activities in a manner that allows objective assessment of goal achievement. Impact assessment that meets scientific criteria is necessary for assessing the impacts of services and benefits.

Third, our system and problems are not unique. All developed nations largely encounter the same societal issues, and welfare states have been built to solve these. Different welfare states, even those located near Finland, aim to solve problems using measures and approaches that can differ considerably. Comparing these approaches teaches us about our own welfare system, including its measures and goals – and perhaps also provides information about how sensible they are.



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