

Social Policy in Dispute: Perceptions of Social Workers on the Minimum Income Schemes

Francisco Estepa-Maestre and Beltran Roca

Universidad de Cádiz, Jerez de la Frontera, 11405 Spain
E-mail: francisco.estepa@uca.es, beltran.roca@uca.es

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ABSTRACT This paper investigates the Minimum Income (MI) scheme in Spain by analyzing the content of semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants (social workers of regional and local administrations). Drawing on the concepts of welfare regime and the approach that views social policy in terms of cultural practices, this study has focused on the perceptions on the policy process of public servants. The study confirms the initial hypothesis that the Minimum Income scheme was designed for a context of moderate unemployment and social exclusion, and in order to give response to the current context of massive poverty and social exclusion, the Decree that regulates it must be updated. It identifies five shortcomings in the MI policy, which include the delay in the concession, the lack of coordination among public administrations, the non-binding character of the “social report” of the social workers, the lack of integration efficiency, and the absence of control and monitoring procedures.

INTRODUCTION

Minimum Income (MI) refers to economic benefits conceived in order to ensure that no citizen ends up with nothing on which to live. They represent a minimal level of social protection (Milano 1990). There are different models of MI, but all have in common the following characteristics, which include that they are complementary, and not substitutive, to the system of social welfare, so they are different from universal subsidies, they are universal benefits, that can be conceded to every citizen who needs it, they are a right or a quasi-right, and they aim at satisfying basic needs for the time that a situation of privation lasts (Euzeby 1989).

This social policy was introduced in Spanish Social Services in the 1980s. They were regulated following universalistic criterion, but the government had scarce resources and tradition. The levels of coverage were unequal among the different regions of the country, since they devoted different amounts to this social benefit (Aguilar et al. 1995). The first MI initiative was

in the Basque Country in 1988, after which this type of scheme spread to other Spanish regions.

In Andalusia (the southern region of Spain), the MI was introduced in February 1990 with the name “Solidarity Scheme of the Andalusian people.” Its formal goal was to “eradicate marginalization and inequality in Andalusia.” It was initially conceived not as a mere assistance measure, but as a policy with a clear, inclusive objective. For this purpose, the scheme introduced essential dimensions such that it would give priority to labor integration, it would be implemented by municipal administrations and non-profit organizations, the responsibility would be of the Department of Employment of the regional government, and it would be directed towards those households with incomes lower than sixty-two percent of the existing minimum wage. It was regulated by Decree 400/1990 of November 27, later modified by the Decree 2/1999 of January 12.

In its new formulation, the norm included the condition of being a resident of Andalusia for a full year prior to application for the benefit and being over 25 years old (with a few exceptions). It also introduced the idea of acting as a first measure in order to respond to urgent situations, of connecting it to other social policies more connected with social and labor integration, housing, and education. The idea of giving a

Address for correspondence:

Beltran Roca
Universidad de Cádiz. Av. de la Universidad
S/n 11405 Jerez de la Frontera, Spain
Fax: (+34) 956015386,
E-mail: beltran.roca@uca.es

rapid response to the demands due to the urgent character of the situation of the potential beneficiaries also appears in the new legislation.

The objective of this paper is to assess this social policy in the context of an economic crisis. For this purpose, it will analyze the perceptions of municipal social workers on the Minimum Income (MI). It will focus on Andalusia, one of the regions of Spain and the European Union where the economic crisis and austerity policies have had the most dramatic effects on the situation of the population. The hypothesis is that this policy was designed from a standpoint of official acceptance of a moderate level of unemployment and social exclusion, in order to give response to the new context of massive poverty and social exclusion. The researchers further argue that the Decree that regulates it must be updated.

Theoretical Approach: Welfare Regimes and the Place of Perceptions in Social Policy

The approach employed in this paper draws on two key concepts. First, the concept of *welfare regime* of Esping-Andersen (1993), and second, on the idea of the role of perceptions and practices of public servants and professionals in determining policy processes (Shore and Wright 1997).

On the one hand, Esping-Andersen's (1993) concept of welfare regime allows one to underscore that the production and distribution of welfare is not an exclusive attribute of the state. Markets and families also take part in it. The process of neo-liberalization and dismantling of the welfare state after the 1970s has reintroduced the role of families and markets in social welfare. Esping-Andersen advocates for wider perspectives on social policy that pay attention not only to the state and the decisions of policymakers, but also to the historical, political, economic, and cultural characteristics of each context in which social policy is located. In the case of Spain, it is argued here, social policy is part of a "continental" model of welfare regime, characterized by what has been called "familism", that is, the increasing role of family as a welfare provider in areas where the state and the market are unable or unwilling to satisfy people's needs.

On the other hand, Shore and Wright (1997) highlight that policy processes cannot be understood without paying attention to the everyday experiences and perceptions of public ser-

vants and professionals that put it into practice. A growing number of scholars are developing recently new approaches in order to surpass the limitations of conventional unreflexive, positivistic studies (Rhodes et al. 2007). However, they have not been able to avoid thinking of policy as an "object." As Shore states, "Being an 'artifact' it follows that policies must have author-rational actors called 'policymakers', who 'make' policy through a process of calculation and authorization" (Shore 2012: 90). For this reason, several current studies propose to understand social policy as cultural and social practices, instead as an artifact. This implies investigating it as social constructions, studying its contexts and meanings.

In this sense, Won (2007) concludes after conducting interviews with public servants that the political rhetoric about the Korean Women's Bureau is a symbolic gesture that does not substantially change institutional practices. Lewis (2008) also applies this type of approach, studying the connections among the private, public, and non-profit sectors by means of the technique of life story. This paper attempts to escape from the conventional and rational-choice theoretical models that prevail in the study of social policy by focusing on the perceptions and practices of social workers that work in the management of the Minimum Income scheme.

Most of the research on MI consists of quantitative assessment of its economic costs (Marshall et al. 2010; Clavet et al. 2013) and its political feasibility (Monti and Pellizzari 2010). Other research has focused on the political and economic factors that lead to different MI schemes (Lalioti 2016). A recent report, based on a questionnaire to different national experts within the European Union, highlights that the Spanish Minimum Income policy had an inadequate adequacy, a very limited coverage, a quite limited take-up, and a very limited impact on poverty reduction (Frazer and Marlier 2016: 37). In order to complement experts' views, this paper will focus instead on the perceptions of practitioners (social workers). This type of qualitative assessment can be an essential complement to quantitative valuation (Samsonsen and Turney 2017) and other approaches.

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents the partial results of a PhD dissertation titled, "The Minimum Income:

A Sociological Approach to the 'Solidarity Scheme of the Andalusian People' in the Province of Cádiz." It is part of a qualitative study of this social policy, based on the analysis of documents and 50 semi-structured interviews with beneficiaries ($n=40$) and other key informants ($n=10$), including public servants and political representatives who work full-time or part-time in the management of this social policy. In all cases, the selection of the informants has taken place by means of a purposive sampling. For the selection of beneficiaries, this study sought to represent the different asset accumulation strategies. For the selection of key informants, it endeavored to get strategic information about the MI from public servants and political representatives from several Andalusian cities. The number of interviews was determined by theoretical saturation. The researchers stopped conducting interviews when they found that the interviews had ceased to provide additional substantive information. The interviews were conducted in 2014 and 2015 in the offices of the social services agencies of several Spanish cities.

In order to fulfill the scientific objectives of this paper, the authors will undertake a content analysis of eight interviews with key or strategic informants, social workers of local and regional administrations involved in the management and distribution of this benefit.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analyzing the Perceptions of Social Workers

The content analysis of the interviews with the social workers of Andalusian regional and local administrations reveals that they have a negative view of the MI policy. They think there are many things that must be changed and updated in this policy in order to be truly effective. In particular, most informants tended to highlight five great shortcomings including the delay in the concession, the lack of coordination among public administrations, the non-binding character of the "social report" of the social workers, the lack of integration efficiency, and the absence of control and monitoring mechanisms.

The Delay in the Granting

All the informants interviewed concur in denouncing the long delay with which the benefit

is resolved. Decree 2/1999 stipulates that if three months have elapsed since the submission of an application and no express decision has been taken, it can be understood that it has been rejected. In contrast, according to the testimony of the informants, the average time for granting or rejecting the benefit is nine months.

The fact that aid intended for people in situations of social emergency is so late is a clear contradiction and a prejudice suffered by citizens. This is understood by the technicians and policymakers who were interviewed. The social workers interviewed recognized this inconsistency in the management of the benefit, and said, "Because it takes too long. Because the MI should be a measure of urgency. If you are applying because you have no income, or a very small income, it is obviously a benefit that in theory is of urgency."¹

Informants pointed to a variety of causes to explain the delay, although sometimes the point of view expressed was affected by the position that the interviewees occupied within the structure of the administration. The causes indicated by the interview subjects included lack of staff and volume of requests, lack of interest of municipal social workers, the bureaucratic requirements of the regulations, and the low cultural capital of the beneficiaries.

Lack of Staff and High Volume of Requests

All of the informants agreed on pointing to the lack of personnel as the main cause of the delays. The high number of applications, especially after the onset of the economic crisis, together with the policies of staff cuts in public administrations, makes the MI scheme not work as quickly as the norm establishes and that beneficiaries need. One informant acknowledged that, given the delays, they "are not when they are needed" and pointed to the lack of personnel in the administration as the main cause, and said, "We started counting the average nine months that is taking the benefit, since it enters the local council and we are sent, but it can take a year. In the delay we all are responsible, from the City Council that receives it and sends it to us [*the regional government*]. It's not the same also large populations and smaller populations. It is not logical that we take this time. Deadlines are not met. No staff."²

A municipal social worker confirmed the high volume of applications and the lack of personnel due to the budgetary adjustments in the administration. She also pointed out problems of coordination (to be described later), and said, "We think that another big problem is that there are too many records and little money, they do not have a budget from the Board, they are overflowing with files and not very personal, as is the case here, and then perhaps because of that overflow there is no good coordination between administrations."³

The same informant also pointed to the lack of political will. From his point of view, policy-makers (understood as both municipal and regional) should strive to improve staffing constraints and coordination.

"Social workers do not have that time. Too much to do with processing the income applications. But there is also no political interest to meet and improve the work system."

The head of the Provincial Delegation explains that the conclusions of evaluation commissions depend on the availability of credit and accumulated records already reviewed by the technicians. Thus, in a context of few resources and few staff, the conditions for convening the commissions are not met on a monthly basis, which affects the dispensing of the benefit.

"It depends also on credit, which we have not yet quoted. The regional government depending on the available budget offers more or less money for the MI and that allows us to award more or fewer commissions. Money and having too many applications. It is what really happens most the time."⁴

From political positions (representatives of the Andalusian government), it is argued that the lack of personnel that affects the dispensation of the MI is due to the budgetary and contractual constraints imposed by the central government and the European Union in the context of the crisis.

Lack of Interest of Municipal Social Workers

A direct consequence of the fact that it is an external resource is that municipal social workers, given the excess of workload, do not devote the time necessary for their proper management. As the informants say, they tend to prioritize the resources of the City Council from the benefits of the regional government or other administra-

tions. Social workers perceive the MI as an imposition, a work that does not belong to them. Sometimes there are cases where they do not manage it properly. This is explained by a social worker.

"The MI here, nobody wants it. In fact, social workers do not want to be in charge of the MI because it is a lot of work and we are saturated. It's like a kind of obligation, because it's a lot of work. The MI is not respected or treated well, but we are forced to work with the MI."⁵

This fact affects the beneficiaries directly when the applications are not resolved correctly (for example, with incomplete information or outdated forms) or are delayed in being sent on to the administrative registry of the regional government's Provincial Delegation (which is where the procedure formally begins).

At the Provincial Delegation level, especially from the political point of view, the social workers of the municipalities are also responsible for filling the void when the documentation arrives in their hands incomplete, causing a cumbersome process of corrections that delays the resolution. One interview subject in particular, a member of the Provincial Delegation, speaks of the "indifference" of the technicians of the local corporations (although he also refers to the low cultural capital of many applicants), and said, "The applications usually don't come complete. It's one of the great failures of the system, because from the Community Social Services the documentation doesn't arrive properly. The reasons for that can be neglect on the part of the social worker of the community who cites the applicant and sends the papers, who gives him this one without checking it. Well, I believe that in some cases it is negligence, and in other cases it is difficult, because the collection is complicated, because you require eight papers and they never bring them all. And when you have met them six times you say, 'Look. I've had enough and this goes to the Delegation.'"⁶

The Bureaucratic Demands of the Regulations

The process of application for the MI requires a large number of documents from the applicants. Getting these documents is a costly and complex task. In addition, sometimes it does not fit the reality of these people. This is explained by a public servant, who said, "The MI, the thing has become more complicated. It has become

more complicated in relation to the paperwork in the sense that before, for example, if you divorced, or if you didn't receive help for the maintenance of the children, you were eligible with an affidavit. But now you have to file a complaint with an attorney-in-fact, a divorce petition, and a regulatory agreement. This and many other technical complications of the MI can drive people back when it comes to applying for it."⁷

To this situation it is necessary to add the scrupulous control to which the provision is submitted by the auditors of the regional administration, which increases the time that elapses between the user's request for help and the resolution.

The Low Cultural Capital of the Applicants

The procedure for applying for and processing the benefit seems simple, but the fact is that the enormous amount of documentation required, together with the low cultural capital of a large number of users that impedes understanding of technical vocabulary and bureaucratic procedures, makes it a difficult task for potential beneficiaries. In order to complete their applications, they need numerous additional meetings or phone calls with social workers, saturating their agendas and overloading their work. The following informant, a municipal social worker, observes that the applicants "usually do not know" what documents they have to present and that this is a "mess" for them. In addition, it constitutes an "extra task" for social workers.

"The applicant comes to us and is given a report with all the data and documentation he has to provide. Our mission is to explain again and again the documentation because they do not usually find out, because all this is a mess, and a task for us. It is very common that we have to be calling the person over and over again."⁸

In this same line, another social worker affirms that the population that applies for assistance has its "own characteristics", essentially referring to the low cultural capital, which includes limited ability to understand language and bureaucratic procedures. This, in his view, makes the processing process difficult.

"When you start with the documentation, you come to the interview, and now you ask for the documentation that is written, but because of your own characteristics, then you do not understand it, or they think it's something else.

Documentation that you have requested, so you have to make another appointment to bring the documentation and see it."⁹

Poor Coordination Between Administrations

A problem identified by the technical staff involved in the management of the MI is the lack of coordination between the municipal and the regional administrations, which is also responsible for the delay in resolving the aid. This is related to the obsolescence of communication channels between administrations. A municipal public servant suggested during the interview that given the high number of applications, his work is limited to receiving and sending them, without studying in depth the documents provided by the applicants. The lack of sufficient implementation of electronic means of administration in municipalities also contributes, in this informant's opinion, to delaying the processing of the benefit and to hampering coordination among public bodies.

"The volume of MI requests is so high that we can only do the host interview and the report. We are not doing more than that by taking the documents, checking them and seeing that there is not anything missing. The MI reports do not have online measures, so we have to send it by postal mail, and this delays the question."¹⁰

At the Provincial Delegation level, informants recognize that the system of communication between administrations is "archaic" and that the processing would be smoother using electronic means.

"All files are mailed. He brings them an ordinance from each of the city councils and leaves them on record. The method is a bit archaic. There are no computer programs. If there were a well-worked, coordinated computer program, data could be crossed, it would be great. If we do not have powerful computer systems, everything is delayed. It would be a possible solution to streamline processes."¹¹

The Optional Character of Social Reports

Another problem raised by public servants in relation to the management of the MI is the optional or non-binding nature of the reports that elaborate on the applicants. During the interviews, the person in charge of the MI in the

Provincial Delegation emphasized the importance of the social report and the role of the municipal social workers. From his point of view, although the social report is not binding according to technical regulations, in practice it is.

"The social report is optional, not binding, but we understand them as mandatory and even binding, because we understand that it's the social workers of the municipalities who know the true reality of these people many times even if they go against the Decree itself."

He added that the role of the Community Social Services is fundamental for the regional government, since its social workers have a personal knowledge of the applicants, and the regional government does not. He suggested that he considered municipal professionals as part of his team, and said, "From our point of view, the Community Social Services are the basic elements for our smooth operation. I do not exaggerate that I see them as part of our team. We need them. It is the social report that makes us see the social reality of the beneficiaries."

Despite these statements of the responsible official of the MI, the interviewed municipal public servants did not share that impression about the importance of their reports. A social worker of the San Fernando City Council affirmed that sometimes he gives favorable reports and the aid is denied, and at other times he issues unfavorable reports and still it is granted. In addition, the Board does not pay attention to the reports processed in a rush.

"I think the Board doesn't read the social reports we make. I don't think the Board will read it. The Board is interested in having the documentation correct, because I have made favorable reports that have been denied and vice versa. Or I have sent reports as a matter of urgency and they have ignored me. The Board looks a lot at the documentation, basically."¹²

Lack of Effectiveness in Social Inclusion

In addition to these three criticisms mentioned, municipal technicians point out that the low amount of the benefit and its uniform design make it an ineffective instrument for the purpose of social inclusion. A technician interviewed criticizes the low amount of the provision, which forces users "to do magic" to get ahead, and its inability to insert them socially.

"Many times we say that he finally receives the MI, but this benefit is a very low amount. We want the MI to do magic and that is impossible because they have many expenses. It is necessary to update the MI scheme. In addition, the MI doesn't fulfill the objective of inclusion. Money is important, but it is necessary to insert them socially."¹³

There is consensus among all the interviewed public servants about the failure of this social policy in relation to the objective of social inclusion. Another social worker stated it in the following manner, "I don't think that the beneficiaries of the MI are offered anything beyond money. I doubt it. At least I haven't seen that the beneficiaries of the MI are offered job training."¹⁴

The responsible administrator of the Provincial Delegation pointed out that the alternative itineraries included in the MI regulations are not fulfilled. There are no other social policies derived from the Decree.

"The alternative itineraries presented by the decree in terms of insertion are not met. They simply offer the economic amount that is the MI. I don't say that the regional administration can establish some type of measures for people at risk of social exclusion under specific programs of training or employment, but in particular derived from the Decree and the measures contemplated by the Decree is not contemplated."

Absence of Control and Monitoring Measures

The absence of measures for the social integration of the beneficiaries of the MI is intertwined with the lack of mechanisms for controlling and monitoring this social policy. The control commitment is included in Paper 10 of Chapter II, Section 2 of the Decree. It indicates that the Provincial Delegations are responsible for carrying out, with the collaboration of the municipalities, the control of the fulfillment of the commitment of insertion of the users.

"The competent Provincial Delegations, by themselves, and with the collaboration of local corporations, will periodically monitor the correct fulfillment of the commitment of insertion by the members of the beneficiary family units of the MI scheme."

However, from the point of view of the Provincial Delegation, it is stated that the control is limited to verifying that a small, non-statistical sample of beneficiaries still fulfills the require-

ments for receiving the benefit while enjoying it. The responsible official of the Delegation interviewed pointed out that it is impossible to control so many people with the few human resources they have, “We grant the aid, and after that grant, a posteriori is done with a control sample. Obviously we can’t control all the requests, because we do not have the specific equipment to control them. Once you start charging and before we control all the requests, then we take a survey of the service, but it is not a statistical or representative sampling.”

One of the municipal social workers believed that there should be more control mechanisms to withdraw aid from those families that have more resources, for example through the underground economy. She advocates for the instrument of “home visits,” through which professionals inspect the homes of beneficiaries to detect irregularities. The problem, from her perspective, is that they do not have the time or the staff to do so. The following extract draws attention to the concept of control that has the public servants. They tend to understand monitoring as the detection of fraud, instead of as an evaluation of the degree to which the benefit is favoring a process of social insertion.

“Our main function with regard to the MI is to process the social reports and explain the documentation, not to go after the people who receive the MI. But I also tell you that social workers should have time, for example, to do home visits.”¹⁵

Finally, it can be concluded that the policy of the MI lacks control and monitoring, and that the speeches of the social workers reflect that they have ended up assuming the most punitive aspects of their profession (the detection of irregularities), instead of other dimensions of their work (for example, those more related to social inclusion).

Whilst recent comparative research drawn on experts views points out different limitations of Spanish minimum policy, such as its lack of adequacy, coverage, take-up, and impact on poverty reduction (Frazer and Marlier 2016), this paper has studied the perceptions of professionals, who have addressed different concerns about this social policy as a result of their on-the-ground position. This paper highlights the relevance of this sort of qualitative approach in order to assess social policy, and advocates for its complementarity with quantitative assessments.

CONCLUSION

This paper has assessed the Minimum Income policy in Spain by analyzing the content of semi-structured interviews conducted with social workers and political representatives of regional and local administrations. Drawing on the concepts of welfare regime and the approach that views social policy as a sum total of cultural practices, this study has focused on the perceptions on the policy process of public servants.

The study has identified five shortcomings in the MI policy, that is, the delay in the concession, the lack of coordination among public administrations, the non-binding character of the “social report” of the social workers, the lack of integration efficiency, and the absence of control and monitoring mechanisms. These shortcomings make this policy highly inefficient. Further research demonstrates that most of the applicants and beneficiaries survive thanks to the help of their relatives, with the state playing only a secondary role in the provision of welfare. Thus, the initial hypothesis about the need to update this policy is confirmed. Future reforms of this social policy should bear in mind the perceptions and practices of the professionals involved in the distribution and management of this benefit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the shortcomings of the Minimum Income policy that have been identified in this qualitative inquiry on the perceptions of social workers, the researchers can conclude that there is an urgent requirement to reformulate this social policy. Particularly, policymakers should work on reducing the concession lapse, promoting the coordination among public administrations involved in the management of this benefit, developing monitoring mechanisms (such as periodical external research), and combining the MI with other policies for social inclusion.

NOTES

1. Social worker 1. City Council of El Puerto de Santa María. Conducted on 24 October 2014.
2. Responsible for the Minimum Income of the Government of Andalusia in the province of Cádiz. Conducted on 21 January 2015.
3. Social worker 4. City Council of Jerez de la Frontera. Conducted on 9 December 2014.

4. Responsible for the Minimum Income of the Government of Andalusia in the province of Cádiz. Conducted on 21 January 2015.
 5. Social worker 2. City Council of El Puerto de Santa María. Conducted on 24 October 2014.
 6. Responsible for the Minimum Income of the Government of Andalusia in the province of Cádiz. Conducted on 21 January 2015.
 7. Social worker 3. City Council of San Fernando. Conducted on 17 December 2014.
 8. Social worker 2. City Council of El Puerto de Santa María. Conducted on 24 October 2014.
 9. Social worker 2. City Council of San Fernando. Conducted on 17 December 2014.
 10. Social worker 5. City Council of Jerez de la Frontera. Conducted on 9 December 2014.
 11. Responsible for the Minimum Income of the Government of Andalusia in the province of Cádiz. Conducted on 21 January 2015.
 12. Social worker 3. City Council of San Fernando. Conducted on 17 December 2014.
 13. Social worker 1. City Council of El Puerto de Santa María. Conducted on 24 October 2014.
 14. Social worker 4. City Council of Jerez de la Frontera. Conducted on 9 December 2014.
 15. Social worker 2. City Council of El Puerto de Santa María. Conducted on 24 October 2014.
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