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The development of certain facets of Poland's social protection system since the collapse of state socialism in 1989 is analyzed using a comparative policy process analysis model. Particular attention is given to the programs of social assistance, child-care and family benefits, and old-age pensions in the Polish context. On the basis of the analysis it is argued that policy makers should give greater consideration to Poland's unique historical and cultural experience relative to addressing social issues.

Six years after the collapse of state socialism in many Central and Eastern European countries, the impact of societal transformation on the public social protection systems of these nations remains a pressing issue. During the initial period of transition, economic and political mechanisms have been subject to comprehensive reform, yet many of the social programs inherited from the state socialist legacy continue to be operational (Rys, 1993; Voirin, 1993). These programs distribute vital income support, in-kind benefits, health care, and social services to pensioners, widows and dependents, injured and sick workers, and families. At the same time, new programs have been added to address those contingencies borne by the process of changing to a capitalist economy, such as unemployment benefits. Presently, the fiscal liability of maintaining the previous level of state expenditure on social benefits is often perceived by the new governments as a constraint on their attempt to create conditions for an economically efficient market (Holzmann, 1991; Kopits, 1993). Many political leaders have accordingly sought to restructure public social systems by limiting their financial and administrative burdens. However, the concurrent development of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe means that any attempt at modifying the social protection system is dependent upon popular consent. Consequently, the governments in Central and Eastern Europe are in a new and difficult situation, one in which they must precariously balance both economic and political considerations in their decisions on social policy (Dziewiecka-Bokun, 1994; Gotting, 1994; Marklund, 1993).

Among the nations of Central and Eastern Europe, social policy reform during the transition has been experienced with greatly differing results, reflecting a significant diversity of cultural environments. For example, Hungary has a historical legacy of mutual benefit societies which flourished before the Second World War, and of the growth of heavy informal economic activity over the last thirty years. Both of these factors have contributed to the promotion of non-governmental organizations and the principle of subsidiarity (policies should always be made at the lowest possible level of government) as prevalent means to address present needs for pensions and social services (Batty, Stumpa, & Kovari, 1994; Kuti, 1994). In the Czech Republic, the tradition of a strong industrial base and highly developed social protection for workers before the communist coup in 1948 has influenced that country's current economic stability and the strong support for insurance principles in social security (Harris, 1994; Potucek, 1993; Mares, Musil, & Rabusic, 1994).

Relative to Hungary and the Czech Republic, Poland has faced greater difficulties in effecting a smooth transition in social policy from a socialist to a capitalist environment. At root of the country's problems are economic difficulties, brought about in part by "shock therapy" marketization measures, which were designed to stimulate capitalist development but which in the process contributed to high unemployment and a substantial decrease in the standard of living (Jonczyk, 1992; Ksiezopolski, 1991). To compound these problems, the governments in Poland during the initial transition generally neglected to respond legislatively to the growth in social need (Ksiezopolski, 1993). As mentioned above, it is argued that government leaders in Poland can not afford to ignore the political implications of this need nor the economic burden that is being placed on the state socialist social insurance system. Indeed, Polish policy makers are confronted with the challenge to shape social policy that assists the development of capitalism yet engenders public support.

These leaders, however, are in conflict over the course of social policy reform. Influencing their debate are a variety of internal and external agents, each with an abundance of advice. Yet within the general discussion an important element that does not seem to be widely considered is the influence of Poland's historically unique tradition of social protection. This tradition has important implications for the decision-making process and potential effectiveness of changes in social policy. This article analyzes the impact of historical and current forces on three specific areas of social programs in Poland: social assistance, child and family benefits, and old-age pensions.

Methodology

The method of analysis is a comparative policy process framework that has been used to compare social programs among nations at a similar stage of economic development (Tracy, 1992). Comparative process analysis is designed to compare social programs and provisions by analyzing the processes used to address social problems that are shared by one or more nation (Dierkes, Weiler, & Antal, 1987). It examines the conditions under which a given programmatic strategy is chosen by a country to address an identified problem and the consequences of using that strategy. The model borrows from a seminal comparative research methodology developed in the early 1970s which focuses on the stages in decision making and policy formation, including policy initiation, implementation, operation, and impact (Rose, 1973). This model also examines how social issues and policy objectives are influenced by cultural, social, economic and political factors that shape, constrict, and direct government action.

The framework consists of nine points of inquiry, which are not necessarily bound to each other in a specific order:

1. The governments' (national, state, and local) legal responsibility for social programs.

2. The conceptual frameworks that help to determine the nature of government programs.
3. The obstacles and constraints to governmental intervention.
4. The social, economic, and political forces that exert pressure for government action.
5. Service and benefit needs as defined by government programs.
6. Specific government goals, objectives, and strategies relative to social programs.
7. A description of the provisions under existing programs and services.
8. An evaluation of the effects of programs.
9. A synthesis of these factors and implications for future policies.

The Polish Context

The application of this analytical framework to Poland is useful in distinguishing those approaches to social policy that are unique to Poland and those that are shared with the other nations of Central and Eastern Europe that are also experiencing the transition to a market economy. This feature is of no small significance, since identifying country-specific behavior challenges a pervasive perception that the former Soviet Bloc countries were largely homogenous in their social protection systems, and therefore may be considered collectively when discussing the future of social policy. Indeed, this perception is understandable, since each of the nations in question was subject to a Soviet social philosophy, and since each has similarly sought the development of a political democracy and a capitalist economy after the dissolution of Soviet control in 1989.

Unfortunately, these commonalities are often stressed at the expense of recognizing differences. Many advisers have prescribed a standard approach to social policy reform in transition countries with considerable attention to economic development and little consideration for the distinctive social welfare characteristics of each particular nation conducive to social development. Since advisers are in many instances vital in supplying needed financial aid, their recommendations are usually given a high priority in consideration. It is ironic that an emphasis on a universally applicable social policy program approach as a means of facilitating capitalism mimics in many ways the determination of the Soviets after the Second World War to implement social policies that would unite these same nations in the pursuit of socialism.

The following is an analysis of how the development of particular social programs has evolved in Poland, and what implications current approaches may have for future social policy.

Social Assistance

In Western Europe the concept of a safety net comprising social assistance benefits for the demonstrably impoverished with no other means of protection has been an openly accepted fixture of social policy for many years. However, in Poland any similar historical development was interrupted by the imposition of state socialism after World War II, specifically by the state's obligation to provide full employment. In the Soviet Bloc nations, citizens were encouraged to fulfill their right to work through an explicit connection of social benefits and employment. The state as employer provided access to general provisions such as retirement pensions, and specific state-run enterprises granted special perks such as extra commodities and vacation destinations.

Ideological doctrine proclaimed that people who did not work must be physically unable to do so, through no fault of their own, since the obvious advantages of socialism precluded any other reasons for not participating in the labor force (Butler, 1995; Wiktorow & Mierzewski, 1991). As a result of this ideology, social problems such as substance abuse went largely unrecognized. Furthermore, any benefits outside of the scope of employment that could be comparable to Western social assistance were only provided to physically challenged individuals who had been evaluated by a social worker from the Ministry of Health (Millard, 1992).

In the Polish context, the historical importance of social workers is fundamental to the current debate over reforming the social assistance policy inherited from the socialists. The practice of the profession dates back to before the Second World War, when it was guided by a philosophy of personal interaction in a collective context, particularly in the spheres of family and parish, the cornerstones of Polish society (Constable & Frysztacki, 1994). Social workers became accepted features of social support networks, and they further defined themselves during the socialist era by giving detailed attention to each client through in-home visits and checkups and personally designed programs of services and benefits.

When socialism collapsed in 1989, the new government sought to reduce the scope of state social insurance and expand that of social assistance. This was accompanied by an elimination of the full employment guarantee which, in turn, led to a rapid rise in unemployment rates, from near zero to 15.7 percent by the end of 1993 (Topinska, 1994). At the same time, consumer subsidies were drastically reduced as part of the program to stimulate capitalism, and many households were unable to supply their needs. Initially many people took early retirement or an invalidity pension to provide income support, spurred in part by the fear of future pension restrictions (Maret & Schwartz, 1994). In fact, eligibility for early retirement and invalidity pensions was only tightened very recently (K. Hagemeier, personal communication, May 1995).

Others took advantage of the newly introduced unemployment compensation benefit, which was offered without requiring contribution periods, for an unlimited duration, and at a relatively generous replacement rate of one's previous earnings (Ksiezopolski, in press). However, the unexpectedly overwhelming takeup of unemployment compensation convinced legislators to drastically tighten eligibility conditions and benefit duration in 1991. Although this measure solved the financial crisis of the Unemployment Fund, it did not address the needs of those whose joblessness continued after their benefit eligibility expired, a total of 57 percent of all unemployed in August of 1993 (Butler, 1995).

The current solution to meet the needs of the long-term unemployed, as well as others impacted adversely by the transition to a market economy, has been to further develop the system of social assistance, which was reconstructed in legislation during 1990 (Florek, 1994). Eligibility for assistance has been expanded to all who demonstrate their poverty through a means-test and concurrently meet one of ten conditions, including: orphanhood, homelessness, unemployment, physical and mental disability, helplessness in running a household, substance abuse, prison release, need from motherhood protection, chronic illness, and natural or ecological disaster (World Bank, 1993). However, the determination of social assistance eligibility remains the duty of social workers, who operate out of social welfare centers at the gmnia (district) level and continue the practice of evaluating each applicant through an in-home visit and intensive case management. The benefits given can be either cash or in-kind, and either on a permanent or temporary basis. Most cash benefits are known as "commissioned," and are equal to 28 percent of the average monthly wage, plus a supplement of 9 percent of that wage if the applicant meets a further set of criteria, such as being over age 75 or pregnant (Topinska, 1994).

The respect for the authority of the local social worker in the 1990 legislation can in part be attributed to the central government's aim of reducing its role in welfare provision, and thereby relieving an excessive budgetary expense. The law seeks to encourage the development of micro-level support systems, with the social worker helping to coordinate the resources of the community through family, church, and voluntary organizations to address the difficulties of those in need (Constable & Frysztacki, 1994; Gammon & Dziegielewska, in press).

Although such a scheme might appear to have many advantages, Poland is in fact experiencing difficulties in successfully implementing this strategy. First of all, some voivods (regions) in Poland are experiencing much higher rates of unemployment, and do not have the local resource base to be as generous in the dispensation of social assistance as other voivods. Secondly, many of the administrative units at the regional level lack the expertise to efficiently budget expenses and coordinate programs, since many managers at this level have been used to passively receiving directives from the central government (Butler, 1995). In addition, since all "commissioned" benefits are state-financed, the central government has not succeeded in reducing its financial burden, which now is around 73 percent of all social assistance expenditure. Furthermore, the fiscal strain has progressively worsened, as the number of claimants receiving "commissioned" benefits has increased, especially in the case of temporary payments, whose recipients rose from 53,000 in 1993 to over 1 million in 1993 (Topinska, 1994).

Perhaps the most significant disadvantage of the current social assistance scheme is precisely one of its most commendable points, namely the empowerment of social workers to develop a systems-based approach to problem situations. Since the new composition of applicants draws heavily from the ranks of the unemployed, not all are going to be in need of an intensive case management structure that emphasizes a comprehensive social services program. Obviously, the needs of an unemployed single man are much different from those of a single homeless mother with an alcohol addiction, but currently both cases are exposed to the same degree of scrutiny from a social worker. The integration in Poland of a cultural respect for the social work profession and the impetus to embrace a Western social assistance scheme has clouded the distinction between the functions of income support and social services. Not all who need the former necessarily require the latter.

This discrepancy has been pointed out by several international advisers, and the Polish government appears to be at a crossroads with regard to making its social assistance scheme more efficient. The government must consider proposals from the World Bank which call for introducing a distinct occupation of benefit assessor to deal with applicants that do not need extensive services (World Bank, 1993). This would help to relieve overburdened social workers, who were dealing with an average of 200 clients each in the early 1990s (Ksiezopolski, 1993). In addition, the Bank has also suggested eliminating the process of home visits for some applicants.

In light of both the social welfare consciousness in Poland and some of the problems incurred by social assistance schemes in the West, the Bank's proposals that would enhance the role of social assistance as a basic means of income support are not above a certain degree of speculative criticism. For instance, would the elimination of a portion of social worker home visits help dissuade claimants from identifying the receipt of social assistance with the stigma of having one or more social problems or incapacities? Historically, the public perception in Poland has been that payment depends on the disclosure of a debilitating condition to a social worker. Would takeup be encouraged by a change of application venue to the social welfare center and the presence of a benefit assessor? On the contrary, it has generally been the experience of Western nations that social assistance applicants feel stigmatized when they must go to an office to complete a benefit application, and that takeup suffers in the process.

Along the same lines, the recommendation to employ benefit assessors would facilitate means-testing on a large scale, although the extension of means-testing to a much broader segment of society would be quite alien to traditional Polish social policy (Beattie, 1993). Furthermore, the implementation of a entirely new bureaucratic class, even if it is more efficient in the long-term, will initially represent a heavy administrative cost in terms of training and staffing, a cost that fiscally strained governments might find difficult to afford.

It might arguably be more sensible, from a fiscal and psychological point of view, for Poland to utilize the already established social insurance framework to disperse basic income support (Zukowski, 1994). In fact, a universal national pension that guarantees a minimum benefit was recently proposed by the Ministry of Labor as part of a three-tiered pension insurance reform. Such a program would appear to preserve the role of the social worker in case assessment for multiple-problem households and community development while ensuring that a minimal level of support existed for all, regardless of locality or circumstance.

However, this option for reforming social assistance also neglects some specifically Polish social welfare traditions. Although public opinion surveys have revealed greater support for income equality relative to other industrialized nations, the idea that only hard work and a desire for self-improvement should merit reward is a core value for many Poles (Butler, 1995; Kolarska-Bobinska, 1992). A universal guaranteed income would seem to directly challenge this supposition.

The Role of NGOs in Social Assistance

An emerging factor in the debate over social welfare in Poland is the mix of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or private not-for-profit voluntary organizations (PVOs) that are responding to needs as the government tries to limit their extent of protection. Volunteer services are not new to Poland, and had been historically strong under the Catholic Church, which coordinated a number of charitable institutions before the 1950s (Constable & Frysztacki, 1994). However, the state socialist government coopted control over the Church's charities and directed other volunteer groups, including the Association of the Friends of Children, the Polish Red Cross, and the Polish Social Welfare Committee, the latter two of which focused in great part on the needs of the elderly. Membership in these organizations declined after the imposition of martial law in 1981 as many Poles distrusted the administration of these groups by communist party officials.

The transition to democratic principles has facilitated the development of new NGOs and some increase in membership among those that were formerly run by the government. However, the distrust of state authority has inhibited cooperation between the state and the volunteer groups, thereby limiting the scope of their service provision (Anheier & Seibel, 1993; Gammon & Dziegielewska, 1995). Unless the government can bridge the gap with NGOs through financial assistance and social worker cooperation, volunteer services, although successful in micro-level environments, will prove to be insufficient in filling the macro-level social welfare needs created by economic transition and retracting state protection.

As mentioned above, several volunteer organizations are focusing their attention on two particularly vulnerable groups during the time of transition, children and the elderly. The impact of the transition to a market economy on the social protection of these two groups will now be considered in more detail.

Children and Family Benefits

Prior to and following the transition children have benefitted from comprehensive maternity and child care provisions, which include fully replaced paid leave for the period after childbirth (16 to 18 weeks) and for caring for a sick child under the age of eight (up to 60 days a year) (Topinska, 1994). In addition, mothers can take three years of unpaid leave to care for infants. While six years after the transition these provisions remain intact, their effectiveness is questionable. As unemployment has increased, women have suffered redundancies at a higher rate than men, and employers are generally more reluctant to hire women, as the leave time available to female employees is perceived as a liability (Lado, 1992). There is also a groundswell of popular sentiment that women should return to more "traditional" roles, such as that of a housewife. Consequently, women with children who have been excluded from employment have lost access to many benefits they used to rely upon (with the exception of the lumpsum birth grant, which can be given based on the husband's contributions to social insurance).

This development is consistent with the government's apparent aim to limit social insurance and shift the burden to families and a safety net of social assistance. Yet Butler (1995) has argued that these maternity and child-care benefits actually can strengthen the two parent family and help prevent divorce. Furthermore, it seems that these benefits might also limit the incidence of single mothers needing social assistance.

In addition to these benefits, workers with children were eligible between 1970 and 1988 for a family allowance that varied according to the number of children and the level of household income. This benefit had grown to become quite unpopular before the advent of democracy in 1989, as it was perceived by many as unjustly raising the income of low-wage workers with large families to a level comparable to other workers' families (Butler, 1995). In other words, it offered little incentive to work, since increased earnings would offset decreased family benefits.

In 1989 the government attempted to redress these criticisms by modifying the level of family allowance to a single payment for each child of an insured worker (with limited exceptions) at 8 percent of the average salary. This payment was reduced to 4.7 percent of the average salary in 1993, without any provision for indexation (adjustment for inflation). Although this form of the family allowance effectively targeted lower-income families, since many large families are low-income households, and addressed the detractions made about the income-testing component of the state socialist benefit, a new law was implemented in December of 1994 which switched financing of the family benefit to the state budget and limited eligibility to any household receiving less than 50 percent of the average salary (ISSA, 1995). Even though this reform extends coverage to persons regardless of work history, income-testing raises all of the problems of stigmatization and administrative cost, plus the dilemma of protecting families whose income barely exceeds the cutoff level. While diverting the fund to the state budget is quite sensible, a procedure that would seem to be less administratively complex and politically popular than income-testing would be to distribute a family benefit universally and then progressively tax higher income groups.

The Elderly and Old-Age Pensions

The elderly in Poland have by and large been affected particularly hard by the transition to a capitalist economy, as subsidies for housing and pharmaceuticals have been drastically reduced. Concurrently, social workers have limited their time with the elderly as new groups in need demand their attention (Synak & Czekanowski, 1994). NGOs have been helpful in the areas where they are located, but are generally underdeveloped, and in fact only three percent of the elderly receive home service programs. Most elderly receive at least a minimum pension, set at 39 percent of the average wage, but this hardly ensures a decent standard of living, particularly at a time when opportunities for the elderly to supplement their income through such options as part-time employment are quite limited. To complicate matters, many low-income elderly take a strongly negative view towards applying for social assistance (HelpAge, 1993).

The future standard-of-living for the elderly in Poland will be determined by the outcome of a current intergovernmental debate over modifying the old-age pension scheme. One factor in this discussion is the recognition that the conditions of full employment under state socialism no longer apply, and that there is the distinct possibility that many elderly will reach retirement age without having contributed for a sufficient time to be eligible for the basic social insurance provision.

The former system has already been initially revised, replaced by the current system, which has sought to mitigate both the previous emphasis on replacing personal earnings (formerly at 55 percent, plus 1 percent for each contribution year over 20) and the number of abuses (i.e. raising the salary during the last year of employment to receive a higher pension) (Wisniewski, 1992). The present scheme instead mandates a flat-rate benefit for all insured workers at 24 percent of the average salary, supplemented by 1.3 percent of one's pension base for each contributory year and 0.7 percent for non-contributory years, spent on activities such as child-raising (Milewicz, 1992).

In reality the current system seems to be an interim step towards a more comprehensively reformed old-age pension. A debate, as mentioned above, is being waged over what the next evolution should entail. One proposal that was introduced shortly after the transfer of power calls for integrating funded private pensions, like those found in Chile, into the retirement system (Horlick, 1991). This reform suggested three tiers, the first of which would be a pay-as-you-go scheme limiting an employee's contribution base to 120 percent of the national average wage. At the second tier employees would be required to invest contributions beyond the first tier level to funded private pensions. At a third tier employees would have the option of contributing to volunteer pension funds.

While adoption of the Chilean model has been promoted by the World Bank (World Bank, 1994), others have contested the viability of funded private pensions (Beattie, 1995; Tamburi, 1992). Interestingly, some analysts associated with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have specifically criticized any immediate implementation of funded private pensions, citing: 1) poor long-term return capacity, 2) inadequately developed investment opportunities, and 3) raised financial commitment of the state government, which must compensate investors who retire before funds have matured and must guarantee the fiscal soundness of funds through supervision and subsidies (World Bank, 1993; Maret & Schwartz, 1994). Also at risk through adoption of such a proposal is intergenerational solidarity, a concept which may, upon analysis, particularly resonate in the minds of Poles who value interdependence higher than individual return.

In contrast to this type of reform, a program for a comprehensive pension overhaul (implicitly covering old-age) was, as already mentioned, put forth in 1995 by the Ministry of Labor. This proposal seeks to establish three tiers as well, the first being a universal national pension, funded by the state budget, which would provide protection for all regardless of work record. At the second tier would be insurance provisions based on contributions and length of service, financed by a separate social insurance fund. Finally, supplemental voluntary schemes would be offered on a third tier. This proposal, which is being contested by the Ministry of Finance, can be criticized for placing a high social protection responsibility on the state budget. However, when contrasted with the administrative cost of social assistance and the historical presence of social insurance as the primary means of income support in Poland, this proposal might gain an advantage in economic and political viability.

Conclusion

Currently, social policy in Poland is at a critical juncture. On one hand, the transition from state socialism to a market economy and democratic polity has not produced a substantial transformation in many inherited social programs. As economic circumstances have changed, these programs have not, thereby creating a gap in the extent of their coverage in some cases and coming to be perceived as an excessive burden on state resources in other cases. On the other hand, those social policy initiatives which have been introduced are often in conflict with cultural attitudes towards social protection. The attempt to incorporate social assistance on a large scale, for example, challenges public perceptions about the traditional role of social workers.

The demands of Polish policy makers to design economically efficient and comprehensive social policy *and* to be attentive to public sentiment are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, if policy makers could synthesize these two components, they might avoid the mistakes of the socialist regime, which issued social policy with little consideration for unique historical cultural-based approaches to social programs. In another regard, they might be able to retain the unique identity of Polish society while simultaneously pursuing an equal footing with Western industrialized nations. In the end, it may be this earnest attempt by Poland to analyze and appreciate those social characteristics that are specific to Poland, as well as those that are shared with other countries, that will significantly influence the effectiveness of their social policy.

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