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Lone parent activation and support networks

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1. Policies for lone parents in Germany

1.1. Lone parenthood

In Germany, like in many other countries, the share of households categorised as lone parent households has steadily increased since the 1970s. It was at about 19 % of all households with children in 2013. This is 1.6 million households with children under 18, about 90 % of which are headed by a mother. With high fluctuation in relationships today, a large and growing number of children and parents experience lone parenthood at some point in their lives. For most lone parents, the status is transitory rather than a final arrangement (Ott et al. 2011) and is perceived as temporary by the parents themselves (BMFSFJ 2012). Indeed, over half of lone parents in Germany exit the lone parent status within five years of entering it. Still, about 40 % of those categorised as lone parents remain so for at least 8 years (Bastin 2015). The two most prevalent routes out of lone parenthood are the child reaching majority age and the parent moving in with a partner (Ott et al. 2011). Lone mothers and lone fathers have rather different socio-demographic profiles. Lone fathers more often care for only one child than lone mothers, and the average age of children living with a lone mother is lower than that of children of lone fathers (BMFSFJ 2012). Taking number and age of children as indicators for the extent to which parents' resources are bound by childcare, this means that lone fathers resources are less restricted. However, compared to mothers in couples (37 %) lone mothers more often care for one child (58 %); and children in lone parent households are older on average than children in two-parent households (BMFSFJ 2012). It would be misleading to take this as an indication for coupled mothers' higher family responsibility, because for them household maintenance is shared with a partner. Compared with the age structure of mothers in couple families, lone mothers are also older on average. Not least, this reflects that most babies are born to couples and that lone parenthood is often a consequence of separation when children are older. These figures hint at the heterogeneity of the 'group' of lone parents in terms of its demographic profile, and in timing and duration of lone parenthood in the life course. It is important to keep in mind that the defining criterion for lone parenthood in what follows, and also in policy more generally, is the household structure made up of one parent and at least one child of minority age. This disregards not only the heterogeneity of the lone parent status, but also differences in consequences of different lone parenthood experiences (e.g. Zagel 2014).

Compared to two-parent families, the lone parent status implies a higher economic uncertainty. Lone parents and their children have a higher risk of living in poverty than any other household type, and are more often living in persistent poverty in Germany (Kraus 2014). It is this economic insecurity, rather than the family structure as such, that is also often found to have detrimental effects on children's wellbeing. Compared to other household types, lone parent households are furthermore four

times as likely to receive benefits to cover subsistence costs under the basic provision for jobseekers (Unemployment Benefit II) (BA 2015). This means that they are unable to maintain their living independently of public support. This is despite lone mothers' relatively high employment rates, which in West Germany even exceeds that of mothers in couples (Destatis 2010).¹ Lone parents are also less likely to exit benefit receipt than two-parent families (Kraus 2014). Among lone parents who receive benefits, only about 45 % are registered as unemployed; others receive statutory support because they have low incomes due to their engagement in care of children or other family members. This also implies that lone parents, even if they are employed, are often in low income jobs, which do not lift them out of poverty (Jaehrling et al. 2014). Reasons for the disadvantaged position of lone parents are manifold. Besides not being able to share childcare and household responsibilities with a co-resident partner, lone parents often experience psychological stress (e.g. due to experiences of separation or violence), lack social networks for their support, and face problems of financial debt.

The mentioned means-tested Unemployment Benefit II (UB II) may be seen as one of the most important policies for lone parents. As an addition to the standard UB II payment, lone parents may claim payments for additional demands (*Mehrbedarfe*), which is supposed to account for the particular burden of their situation. Other relevant policy measures for lone parents in Germany are housing benefit (*Wohngeld*) and the universal child benefit (*Kindergeld*), both of which contribute to reducing lone parents' dependency on UB II by increasing their disposable income. Child maintenance advance (*Unterhaltsvorschuss*), which is paid by the state if the non-resident parent fails to pay, has a similar effect. For lone parents in employment, there are relatively generous tax exemptions (*Entlastungsbetrag*), which result in higher net incomes. Lone parents in employment, who care for a very young child, may be eligible to parental leave (*Elternzeit*) with the wage replacement (*Elterngeld*) paid at 65-67 % (depending on the level of previous income) for up to 14 months after the child is born.

Against the background of the economically disadvantaged position of lone parents, policy makers in Germany have increasingly targeted lone parents since the 2000s. Because labour market integration is seen as a preferable way to reduce poverty and welfare dependency, the welfare benefit reforms of 2005 made lone parents one of the main target groups of activation policy. This was in line with broader European trends aiming at integrating 'unused labour market potential'. With a particular focus on family-employment reconciliation (defined as parents' successful involvement in the labour market), the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS), the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) together with the Federal Employment Agency (BA) started several initiatives to address lone parents since 2009.

1.2 The good practices

The German policy actors involved in initiating the good practices had done a careful review of the field and thus had a good understanding of the issues surrounding lone parenthood from the start. The programmes all tried to account for the complexity of problems encountered by lone parents in their daily lives. There seemed to be a realistic view of the mismatch between lone parents' needs, the

¹ It is equally high for coupled and lone mothers in East Germany. Lone fathers generally have higher employment rates than lone mothers.

support infrastructure that was in place, and lone parents' use of that support infrastructure. For one, the deficits in the infrastructure for lone parents, such as in childcare and in the collaboration between different actors, were acknowledged. And secondly, innovative ways of addressing these deficits were found. Table 1 lists the key facts of the four good practices initiated between 2009 and 2013.

Table 1. Good practices for lone parents in Germany

Programme	Leadership	Period	Scope
Reconciliation of family and working life for lone parents	BMFSFJ	2009-2010	12 projects (max. 30,000 EUR each)
Good work for lone parents	BMAS	2009-2012	77 projects (60 mio. EUR total)
Networks of effective assistance for lone parents	BMAS	2011-2013	102 projects (25 mio. EUR total)
Developing employment opportunities for lone parents	BA / BMAS	2012-2013	20 projects (100,000 EUR total)

As mentioned above, the initiators of the good practices were the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS), the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) and the Federal Employment Agency (BA). All programmes were set in the cooperative framework “perspectives for lone parents” (*Perspektiven für Alleinerziehende*) started by BMAS, BMFSFJ and BA in the spring of 2009 with the aim of improving labour market integration and family-employment reconciliation of lone parents in Germany (gsub & SÖSTRA 2013).

1.2.1. Aims and target groups

The overall goal of the good practices was to support lone parents' family-employment reconciliation and therewith to increase their participation in the labour market. The aim was formulated on two levels, on the individual as well as on the structural level. This means that not only lone parents themselves were the target group of the programmes, but also public, non-profit and market actors, which form the support infrastructure of lone parents.

In 2009 the BMFSFJ started its programme “Reconciliation of family and working life for lone parents” (*Entwicklungspartnerschaft “Vereinbarkeit von Familie und Beruf für Alleinerziehende”*), which ran for one year. Its main aim was to increase awareness and knowledge about the circumstances and needs of lone parents and about possibilities of support among local actors. The programme was created to strengthen the knowledge about specificities of lone parents' family-employment reconciliation within alliances of local actors, funding 12 projects across Germany.

Initiated by the BMAS the programme “Good work for lone parents” (*Gute Arbeit für Alleinerziehende*) ran between 2009 and 2013. The programme had a clear focus on the individual level and hence targeted lone parents and their families. More specifically, the programme was directed only at lone parents receiving Unemployment Benefit II (UBII) and aimed at their activation, integration and stabilisation in the labour market. In the framework of this programme, the BMAS

funded 77 projects nationwide, which developed and tested new and innovative and target-group specific approaches to support lone parents' labour market integration. Throughout its duration, the programme reached 23.134 lone parents in the project regions, about 49 % of which were low-skilled and about 18 % had children under the age of 3.

Based on the experiences and insights gained from "Good work for lone parents", the BMAS initiated the follow-up programme "Networks of effective assistance for lone parents" (*Netzwerke wirksamer Hilfen für Alleinerziehende*), now targeting the structural level. Aim of this programme was to optimise and coordinate single existing services to form holistic, tailored provision of support to lone parents. 102 projects nationwide were funded for a period of 24 months. The idea was to establish networks that could be transferred into the standard provision to lone parents (e.g. by the Jobcenters) after the programme had ended.

In an additional initiative, the BA and the BMAS initiated the programme "Developing employment opportunities for lone parents" (*Beschäftigungschancen für Alleinerziehende*) in 2012. The project aim was to improve the image of lone parents among employers by furthering employers' knowledge about the potential of lone parents as qualified staff, and hence to expand employment opportunities of lone parents. 20 projects across Germany were funded for a period of one year. Target groups were both, lone parents and employers.

1.2.2. Funding

As listed in Table 1, the programmes varied in terms of funding and scope. While "Good work for lone parents" and "Networks of effective assistance for lone parents" drew on relatively extensive resources due to their funding by the European Social Fund (ESF), "Reconciliation of family and working life for lone parents" and "Developing employment opportunities for lone parents" were operating at a much smaller scale. The ESF-funded programmes operated under the ESF condition of 'innovativeness'. The BMFSFJ project had a pilot character and its results could be used in the following good practices. The programme by the BA and BMAS on developing employment opportunities, on the other hand, was designed mostly as a targeted public relations measure. Here, single projects were selected and funded on the basis of a competition of ideas for implementation.

1.2.3. Institutional framework and implementation

The programme "Reconciliation of family and working life for lone parents" was built on the infrastructure of an existing federal initiative for supporting families called "Local alliances for families" (*Lokale Bündnisse für Familien*). "Local alliances for families" is a large country-wide ESF-funded programme for strengthening the support to families. The programme funds over 600 local third sector organisations, which provide information, organise projects and implement measures for families in order to improve the reconciliation of family life and parents' employment. The programme's particular strength is the focus on networks of agents that form the "local alliances": Public, market and third-sector agents work together on a voluntary basis for developing projects aimed at improving reconciliation for parents. "Reconciliation of family and working life for lone parents" was implemented within this framework. Besides the 12 pilot projects for lone parents that were started within the local alliances framework, a 'knowledge network' of 48 local alliances was initiated for wider exchange of good practices. Central measures within the programme were meetings and workshops of the participating projects.

“Good work for lone parents” was directed at lone parents receiving Unemployment Benefits II, which is managed by Jobcenters. The programme was implemented as an addition to the standard services Jobcenters provide to their clients. Some of the funded projects (12) were overseen by Jobcenters themselves, but the majority (65) was executed by third-sector agents who cooperated with the Jobcenters. The programme enabled the local projects to create a broad support structure tailored to the circumstances of lone parents. Measured against the aim of lone parents’ labour market integration, the success factors of the programme were a holistic, target-group specific approach to support, professional orientation and qualification tailored to lone parents’ needs, target-group specific placement strategies and employer involvement, and highlighting to lone parents the possibilities of work-family reconciliation.

The follow-up programme “Networks of effective assistance to lone parents” focused on creating the structures that would enable a holistic approach of support to lone parents. It aimed to integrate existing support structures with new initiatives, and to build strong cooperation networks. Jobcenters were seen as key actors, but additional actors such as communal offices, lobby groups, third sector service providers, employers’ representatives and other existing networks (e.g. for women) were considered crucial for the support networks. The existing local structures were analysed in a first step, and all identified actors were integrated in the network development. The programme finally operated on two institutional levels, the steering one (coordination, strategic decisions) and the operative one (practice, product development).

The programme “Developing employment opportunities for lone parents” supported selected existing local actors in their communication and marketing strategies. The focus was in particular on strengthening links between projects and employers. At the beginning of the programme period, the 20 selected projects received ‘public relations packages’ from the BMAS. The projects were then expected to develop their own communication strategies for addressing employers, making them aware of the potential of lone parents as prospective employees.

2. Results and implications for gender equality

2.1. Approach of assessment

The German policy actors involved in the good practices had defined the increase in labour market participation of lone parents as their primary aim. Each of the described programmes was directed at this aim, either by working towards an improvement of the street-level services or by optimising the management of these services. A secondary aim was to work against stereotypes about lone parents by sensitising for the specific challenges and circumstances of lone parents. Target groups were hence not only lone parents themselves, but also employers, street-level bureaucrats such as case managers, Jobcenter managements, and managers of third sector service providers. A comprehensive evaluation of the good practices should hence include the assessment of both, the quality of services and the level of labour market integration of lone parents. The quality of support services may be measured by the degree to which the programme aims were realised. The level of lone parents’ labour market integration may be measured by the employment rates of lone parents who participated in the programmes. A review of quantitative

evidence on the success of the good practices in terms of labour market integration would be desirable. However, not all programme reports provide a quantitative evaluation of lone parent employment nor do other evaluations exist to date. The only hint at quantitative success of the good practices is provided by the programme report of “Good work for lone parents”. Its results suggest that labour market integration was successful (measured as employment subject to social security contributions/*sozialversicherungspflichtige Beschäftigung*) for about 19 % of participating lone parents one month after ending their participation in the programme, and for 24 % six months after ending their participation in the programme (Rambøll Management Consulting 2013: 57-58). More recent data were not available. The rates are below those achieved by comparable standard activation measures, and do not seem to support a convincing success story. However, it has to be considered that participants in the programme “Good work for lone parents” were more likely to be low-skilled and exposed to multiple disadvantages (psychological problems, lack of social networks, debt and/or housing issues) compared to the participants of the standard activation measures, which increased the challenges to integration. Due to the lack of other data, the following assessment of the good practices is based on the qualitative results of the programme reports, focusing more generally on the main lessons that can be drawn from the programmes in terms of the quality of support to lone parents.

2.2. Key results

One of the key results of the good practices concerning the quality of support to lone parents was that the necessary first step to successful support was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation of the lone parent. Where such evaluation was done carefully, labour market integration could be approached more strategically, and yielded higher chances of success.

The second main result in terms of quality of support, which is closely related to the first one, is that support to lone parents is a multi-dimensional task. A higher chance of success could be expected if various actors with different areas of specialised expertise were coordinated for a holistic approach to lone parent support. Likewise, labour market integration was found not being successful if certain preconditions, such as lone parents’ psycho-social stabilisation, were not addressed.

The programmes furthermore demonstrated that often labour market integration was not necessarily hampered by individual deficiencies, but that the structures that lone parents needed simply did not exist. Hence, besides coordinating networks and linking existing actors, the creation of new structures is necessary. First and foremost, despite the legal right for a childcare place, provision beyond the standard work hours is virtually non-existent in Germany (particularly in West Germany usually only part-time hours are covered). The second main field of structural deficiency, jobs for lone parents, was also addressed by the programmes. Employers were approached and the role of flexible work hours acknowledged.

2.3. Main challenges

There were three main challenges to high quality support to lone parents that stuck out as particularly pertinent. Firstly, a key challenge seemed to be to achieve sustainability of the programme outcomes. A main obstacle to transferring the

results to the every-day practice of local actors is that funding periods are limited, and that projects come to an end regardless of the progress in the transfer. This problem is not specific to the good practices discussed here, but a challenge for any project-type programme. It is questionable whether project periods of 1-3 years, such as those funded by the ESF, are suitable to transform administrative practices in a sustainable way. Involving actors that are part of the existing institutional structure on the one hand, and integrating elements of learning and knowledge transfer on the other, were hence seen as central programme features. The degree to which this was successful and to which the good practices led to sustainable change in lone parent support has to be evaluated.

A second challenge to high quality support was that measures of the good practices risked being too narrow and isolated. This is related to the disputed question of whether focusing on lone parents is the preferable approach (cf. gsub & SÖSTRA: 46). The focus on lone parents seems to involve a specialisation of project workers and networks (on the needs of lone parents). The risk with this approach is that similar problems may be dealt with by different stakeholders/persons, who count as specialists for different family types. This problem intensifies if lone parenthood is acknowledged being a transitory status, and 'two-parent-type problems' precede or follow. An alternative approach could be to identify barriers to work for parents more generally and build specialisation around these (e.g. childcare; debt management; counselling).

A third challenge to high quality support concerns the coordination of different actors involved in the support of lone parents. Creating the links between such different actors as Jobcenters, employers, lobby groups for families, youth welfare offices and childcare centres seemed to have been a particularly resource-intensive element of the good practices. One of the reasons for this is the diverging and sometimes conflicting aims of the different actors. An illustrative example is the orientation at labour market integration of the Jobcenters and the aim of child wellbeing of the youth welfare offices. The programmes did a good job at addressing these links, but more work is needed to negotiate interests and aims.

2.4. Gender equality

It is not straightforward to evaluate the good practices in terms of implications for gender equality. This is mostly because furthering gender equality was not an explicit aim of the programmes. More generally, however, evaluating possible effects on gender equality requires a definition of how lone parenthood can be perceived as a gender equality issue.

It may be argued that lone parenthood is an expression of gender inequality, because children are usually understood as the product of two parents, who are expected to contribute equally (although perhaps by different means) to the child's upbringing. Gender inequality then arises, if the effort of childcare and household maintenance (practical and economic) is concentrated on the parent with whom the child is living, and because this parent is usually the mother². Two alternative strategies may be thought of how to address this kind of inequality, each stressing different aspects of gender equality.

² Other arguments may be brought up if lone fathers are considered as well.

Firstly, the focus can be on output equality, i.e. pursuing equality in parents' socio-economic wellbeing. This implies that any effort of supporting lone mothers financially or with childcare provision would strengthen equality, because it relieves them from some of the 'burden' of child upbringing. Hence, cash transfers to lone mothers such as Unemployment Benefit II on the one hand, and access to childcare on the other hand, may be understood as ways to reduce gender inequality.³

Secondly, the focus may instead be on equality of opportunity. This could be achieved by focusing on the role of the non-resident parent, pursuing a situation in which the effort of child upbringing is shared between the parents. It is difficult to imagine a regulative framework that supports equal parenting beyond some measures of family law. Equality of opportunity may also be approached in economic terms. Supporting lone mothers in their ability to participate in the labour market to an equal extent as the non-resident parent may increase equality between women and men. Aiming at strengthening lone parents' economic independence (from welfare benefits), the good practices can be understood as a way to reduce inequality in opportunities on the labour market.

It should be kept in mind, however, that the good practices were not framed in a gender equality perspective. They were not explicitly targeted at women (although most individual participants would have been women), nor were they designed as measures to address gender inequality issues in particular, which may well go beyond labour market integration. A crucial aspect in this regard is the interaction between lone parents and the different actors in the lone parent support networks. For example, there is some evidence that gender norms of case workers in Jobcenters shape their decisions about reasonableness of parents' employment (Jaehrling 2015).⁴ Had gender equality be on the agenda of the programmes, a possible tool would have been a gender mainstreaming approach.

3. Strengths and weaknesses

This section lists some of the main strengths and weaknesses of the good practices. The focus is on overarching themes regarding all four programmes, rather than on specifics of single programmes.

The main overall strengths of the good practices were the following:

- The holistic understanding of the (in)ability to work (of lone parents): Despite the explicit focus on lone parents' labour market integration the good practices did not follow a 'work-first' agenda as is sometimes the case in activation policy, but acknowledged that other barriers had to be solved before labour market integration could be successful.
- The multi-actor strategy of addressing lone parents, and the focus on networks: Following from the first point, the good practices also implemented the multi-dimensional approach on the structural level, including network partners specialised in a variety of different fields.

³ Although perhaps less so if it does not provide sufficient resources for lifting lone parent families out of poverty.

⁴ Jaehrling (2015) even finds that the gender officers in the Jobcenters often refrained from offering training courses to women and instead placed them in mini-jobs.

- The focus on establishing transferable practices for the different actors, following the idea of sustainable policy making: The good practices were designed as to change or adapt established structures of welfare support, each carrying elements of knowledge transfer and learning.

The following can be seen as the main weaknesses of the good practices:

- Measured by the programmes' aim of changing some of the practices of welfare services, programme durations were rather short. In light of the explicit goal of changing stereotypes about lone parents with a lasting effect on the behaviour of the involved actors, a long term perspective would be necessary (perhaps stretching to over a decade). Bureaucracy is slow and change in administrative practices sluggish. This point is attenuated by the fact that all four good practices may be seen as adding up to each other, but even then the total period is only 5 years.
- The focus on lone parents seems short-sighted, especially given that lone parenthood is a family status defined by family dynamics involving both coupledness and singledom. Considering that mothers in couples are often shown to have even lower labour market attachment, especially with children in certain age groups, a focus on preparing mothers with small children would be more justified. It could even be hypothesised that increasing the labour market attachment of mothers with small children would include women who become lone mothers at a later point in life.

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