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Social service innovation and welfare recalibration: a case study of a local training to work trajectory in Belgium

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Abstract

Despite a growing interest in the relation between local social innovation in welfare services and ongoing welfare reform in Europe, both the social innovation and welfare studies literature currently lack a conceptually grounded framework to analyse how both are mutually implicated. Building on different, recent contributions in institutional theory the present paper proposes to analyse such changing relations as an interactive social learning process between ‘habits in motion’ (Berk and Galvan 2009) of reflexive, situated actors at the local level and the gradual and multidimensional process of macro-level welfare reform or ‘welfare recalibration’ (Hemerijck 2013). The value of this framework is explored through a case study of an innovative training to work trajectory for foreign language newcomers that receive welfare assistance in a medium-sized Belgian city.

Keywords: Social innovation; welfare reform; employment trajectories; social learning; social policy; local public services

1. Introduction

‘At the PCSW we are all social workers. We are trained in caretaking, in helping people. But now our team is entering that other world. It is really a different world. [...] We need to stop our cumbersome way of working and be flexible. We actually sell products, in this case jobseekers’. (I: Team coordinator Public Centre of Social Welfare)

This quote comes from an interview with the coordinators of Ten for Cooking (TfC), a local, innovative training trajectory for people on social assistance benefits that aims to have them employed in the local catering sector. This ESF (European Social Fund) funded project was developed by the Social Department of the local Public Centre of Social Welfare (PCSW) in a medium-sized city in Flanders, Belgium. The present article aims to refine our understanding of the relationship between socially innovative practices in local welfare services and on-going macro level welfare reform. This endeavour started from general questions: Can local actors innovate and change systems from below or are they merely implementing and ‘acting out’ macro-level welfare reform in a local context? Is the atypical ‘saleswoman’ self-description of the social worker reflecting a creative re-orientation at the local level or is it best understood as an effect of contemporary policy discourse and expectations? Or if it is an interaction between both, as we propose here, how to conceptualize this interactive process? Driven by these questions this article uses the case of TfC to develop a conceptually grounded understanding of the relationships between the development and implementation of innovative social services ‘on the ground’ and macro-level welfare reform.

Local social innovation generally refers to locally embedded initiatives that address unmet social needs by reconfiguring established social relations through new collaborations or social learning processes (see, e.g. Chambon, David, and Devevey 1982; Moolaert et al. 2013; Nicholls, Simon, and Gabriel 2015). While having a much longer history (Godin 2015), since 2008 'social innovation' (henceforth SI) became increasingly influential in high-level policy documents and (research) funding programmes in the EU and beyond (Sinclair and Baglioni 2014). Under former president Barroso, the European Commission promoted SI as a new 'paradigm' for social policy interventions. It expressed their ambition to develop an 'enabling welfare state' that simultaneously tackles budgetary challenges and societal problems 'with, rather than for, stakeholders' (BEPA 2010, 14). In this perspective, SI refers to the ability to develop instruments and policies that use public private partnerships, market mechanisms, social entrepreneurship and social investments to foster social cohesion and inclusion and address new social risks. This implies rethinking the purposes of social policy interventions and the distribution of roles between state and non-state actors and between social professionals and beneficiaries (Ferrera and Maino 2014; Jenson 2015).

Despite the high hopes and resources invested in SI, mainstream social policy studies hardly engaged with the idea that local SI might provide blueprints for structural welfare reform. These context-specific and statistically insignificant experiences operate under the radar of those studying macro-level institutional change. To them 'social innovation and change through welfare reform seem to be quite different topics' (Ewert and Evers 2014, 424). Therefore they are seldom studied in relation to one another. However, this situation is gradually changing as a growing number of scholars in both fields are calling to better align the study of SI with the analysis of changing welfare states (see, e.g. Cantillon and Van Mechelen 2014, 288; Ferrera and Maino 2014, 23; Evers and Ewert 2015). Drawing on two recent contributions to the theory of institutional change this article proposes to study the relationship between social innovation dynamics and macro-level welfare regime change as an interactive social learning processes between 'habits in motion' (Berk and Galvan 2009) of reflexive, situated actors and the gradual and multidimensional process of macro-level welfare reform or 'welfare recalibration' (Hemerijck 2013). Aiming to overcome overly strict distinctions between top-down and bottom-up or structure and agency we follow Berk and Galvan (2009) in adopting a 'phenomenological approach' to institutional change, i.e.: starting from the experiences of involved actors to understand the dynamics of change in the institutions they inhabit. After developing a conceptual framework along these lines, we test its analytical strength (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007) by applying it to our case of an innovative local active labour market policy (ALMP).

2. Social innovation and welfare-institutional change

2.1. Beyond structuralism

After remaining out of sight for several decades SI scholars are once again considering the relationship and interactions between local SI and evolving macro-level structures (Jessop et al. 2013; Mulgan 2015). Most of them prioritize one direction of change, focusing either on how SI dynamics at the micro and meso-level are shaped by historical, institutional contexts and emerging policy paradigms (see for instance Kazepov 2010; Kerlin 2012; Ferrera and Maino 2014; Jenson 2015) or on the potential of local social innovation to transform (power) relations and macrostructures (see for instance Antadze and Westley 2010; Moolaert et al. 2010; Wittmayer et al. 2015). Some research, for instance on 'bottom linked' SI strategies (Garçía 2006), the relation between social economy and employment policies (Nyssens 2014) and recent comparative research on service SI in European cities (Evers and Ewert 2015; Evers and Brandsen 2016), consider a more interactive, two-way relationship. Two particularly notable contributions are those by Evers and Brandsen (2016) who introduce the idea of SI as messages to study the diffusion dynamics that are particular to social innovations and the work by Sabel (2012) on 'democratic experimentalism' that deals with how the cultivation and adoption of

innovations within large institutional systems could be improved. These contributions highlight the importance of interactive social learning across policy levels and the (the scope for) strategic action by reflexive actors. However, a coherent and operational framework to analyse how macro-level social policy-making and local dynamics SI are mutually implicated is still lacking (Sinclair and Baglioni 2014).

To this end, we turn to Berk and Galvan's (2009) writings on 'creative syncretism' and Anton Hemerijck's work (2013) on 'welfare recalibration as social learning'. While the latter focusses on the macro-level policy evolutions and the former on the micro-level innovation dynamics, both authors criticize influential neo-institutionalist theories for their persistent structural-determinist bias and overemphasizing configurations (i.e. materialist distributions of power) over interactions and path dependency over transformation (cf. Martin 2010; Berk, Galvan, and Hattam 2013). Both contributions recognize the processes of social learning by reflexive, creative actors as key elements of institutional change. Starting with a working definition, institutions can be understood in general as 'stable, valued, recurring patterns of behaviour' (Huntington 1965, 394). Neo-institutionalism (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; March and Olsen 2006) goes beyond 'old institutionalism', which focussed on the stability and predictability of organizational life, to analyse 'conditions under which institutions emerge, grow and change' (Berk and Galvan 2009, 546). Despite this ambition, neo-institutionalism is increasingly criticized for being 'much better at explaining continuity than change' (Schmidt 2010, 1–2). Neo-institutionalists have been slow to incorporate the insight that change is not only triggered by exogenous shocks, but also by cognitive and discursive processes through which 'sentient agents' within institutions interact with ideas and impulses from both inside and outside institutional structures (Schmidt 2010; cf. Berk and Galvan 2009). Some promising attempts notwithstanding (e.g. Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Streeck and Thelen 2005), 'structuralist' tendencies remain. According to Berk and Galvan (2009) most neo-institutionalists overemphasize the materialist distribution of interest within institutions at the expense of the cognitive dimension and changing (normative) motivations of creative, reflexive actors because they still situate the source of institutional change in the imperfect application and enforcement of rules (cf. Hemerijck 2013). Consequently, ambiguity and other sources of agency appear as exceptional, deviating features of institutional structures rather than a standard feature of institutional relations. Such 'structuralist' theories do not suit our research question because SI is exactly about the (potentially) 'path-breaking' institutional developments. These alternative trajectories are charted by creative and reflexive agents. These are partly located outside and 'under the radar' of mainstream welfare policy institutions (Ewert and Evers 2014) and informed by new ideas emerging, amongst others, from 'spill over dynamics across interdependent social and economic policy areas' (Hemerijck 2013, 87).

2.2. Welfare recalibration and habits in motion as social learning

In reaction to dominant conceptualizations of welfare regimes as 'frozen landscapes' (Pierson 2001, 2011; Jacobs 2010) Hemerijck and colleagues (Ferrera, Hemerijck, and Rhodes 2000; Ferrera and Hemerijck 2003) developed the heuristic of 'welfare recalibration' to demonstrate and analyse processes of on-going institutional change. They propose to study it as a form of social learning.

'Welfare recalibration refers to all initiatives that aim to transform the welfare state into a new configuration, far beyond core social insurance programmes [...] As an instance of 'social learning' the notion of 'recalibration' suggests that reform decisions nearly always pass through, and are based upon, cognitive and normative judgement, distributive bargaining, and institutional redesign, in an attempt to improve policy performance of welfare programmes'. (Hemerijck 2013, 104, 88)

Hemerijck's (2013, 87) 'more open and dynamic institutional perspective on welfare reform and institutional change' draws attention to its cognitive and discursive dimensions. Drawing on Hecló,

Hemerijck understands social learning in social policy as ‘relatively enduring changes in thought or behavioural intention that result from experience and/or new information with the attainment or revision of policy objectives’ (Hecló 1974, 306). Hemerijck focusses on a specific type of actors and social learning within highlevel policy circles, while SI often emerges through the practical experiences of local actors operating at a distance of macro-level policy-making. However, recognizing the relevance of creative practice, awareness raising and social learning to grasp how welfare policy instruments are gradually expanded or used differently, he implicitly includes local SI experiences as possible drivers of institutional change (cf. Moulaert et al. 2013). In this sense, we propose to consider local SI initiatives in welfare provision as welfare recalibration ‘on the ground’.

Hemerijck (2013, 105–112) distinguishes four intimately related dimensions of welfare recalibration: functional, institutional, distributive and normative. Functional recalibration considers policy changes as rational responses to changing social risks. EU discourse on SI and plenty of active labour market policy experiments are generally informed by functional arguments derived from the social investment paradigm (cf. Morel, Palier, and Palme 2009; Jenson 2015; Sabato, Vanhercke, and Verschraegen 2017). They propose, for instance, to use social policy spending to raise the stock of human capital and ease the flows of labour market transitions as a response to the ‘new’ risk of little or inadequate schooling (Esping-Andersen 2002; Bonoli and Natali 2012). Institutional recalibration is about the design of institutions and processes of governance, stakeholder involvement and decision-making, while distributive recalibration concerns rebalancing budgets and welfare provision across client groups and organized interests. Lastly, normative recalibration involves the changing normative orientations, underpinnings, values, symbols, and discourses of social policy emerging from felt incongruence between the broad value premises behind existing programmes and adaptive pressures. (Hemerijck 2013, 107) A key contribution of Hemerijck’s framework is that it attributes explicit attention to the normative dimension, which is often lacking in SI analysis (cf. European Commission 2013). Changing normative orientations can inform policy reform as they call into question the ‘justness’ of the established way of doing things. It is therefore important to unveil often-implicit ideas about fairness, and ‘what is good for people’ that underpin alternative policy pathways and SI initiatives (cf. Fraser 1989).

Overall, the welfare recalibration perspective is useful for SI analysis in that it helps to situate local SI initiatives and the behaviour of its driving actors in relation to budgetary constraints, macro-level policy trends, shifting priorities and normative frames of policy-making across different (local, regional, national, EU) policy levels. However, the welfare recalibration perspective is initially conceived to analyse long-term, macrolevel policy, with a rather restrictive focus on ‘critical policy middlemen’ like influential civil servants and economic experts. Furthermore, Ferrera and Hemerijck do not detail how experimental courses of action come into being. In order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the relation between these macro-level evolutions and the development of SI initiatives ‘on the ground’ we turn to the perspective of ‘habits in motion’.

Berk and Galvan (2009, 543) argue that institutions are not monoliths but ‘syncretic’, i.e. ‘composed of an indeterminate number of features, which are decomposable and combinable in unpredictable ways’. Drawing on pragmatists like Dewey (2002 [1922]) they add that institutional rules and procedures are always ‘overflown’ by human experience. People are not necessarily playing by the rules; they are playing with the rules (cf. Lipsky 1980). They are creatively drawing from various cultural and institutional resources to reproduce, recombine and adapt social practice to new experiences, information and expectations (impulses for social learning). In this ‘experiential’ perspective institutions are ‘no longer order-making machines, they become the medium of creative action and thus sites for political contestation’ (Berk and Galvan 2009, 576). Berk and Galvan reformulate rules as ‘skills’ (rather than enacted schemas) and institutional change as ‘habits-in-motion’. The prospect of changing habits emerges when existing habits – i.e. ‘acquired predisposition

to ways or modes of response' (Dewey 2002 [1922], 40) – are perceived in conflict with impulses. Such impulses include the recognition of (new) unmet needs, limited budget, regulatory changes and others which can be grouped under one of the welfare recalibration dimensions. These dynamics of changing (chains of) habits, can be regarded as SI to the extent that they transform social relations in an effort to alleviate unmet needs. In practice, processes of testing and fine-tuning ideas ('puzzling') are often intertwined with processes of 'powering', i.e. framing problems and using power resources (Hecló 1974; Hall 1993; cf. Fraser 1989). Depending on the position, resources and ambitions of these 'bricoleurs' (cf. Levi-Strauss 1966) their creative actions transform broader institutional narratives and habitual practices across policy levels. As such can local SI initiatives resonate – as messages (Evers and Brandsen 2016) – through the large systems of welfare provision.

By joining the perspectives of welfare recalibration and institutional change as 'habits-in-motion', we constructed a framework that is sensitive for how impulses from both inside and outside institutional structures influence strategies, understandings, normative orientations and habits of relevant policymakers and local SI practitioners. The following explores the value of this framework through the analysis of a local, innovative active labour market policy (hence ALMP).

3. Understanding SI through the changing habits of social professionals

Aiming for theoretical and not empirical generalization (Tsang 2014) the main purpose of our theory-driven case study (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007) is advancing our understanding of socially innovative local welfare services in relation to changing welfare regimes. The choice for 'Ten for Cooking' (TfC) results from a strategic 'information oriented selection', i.e. 'on the basis of expectation about their information content' with the purpose 'to maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases' (Flyvbjerg 2006, 230). Initially, information was obtained through a 'call for promising initiatives' sent to over 400 Flemish organizations involved in local social services in 2013. TfC is an ESF-funded training to employment trajectory for people on social assistance benefits to work in the catering sector in a medium-sized ($\pm 100,000$ inhabitants) regional centre city with a large university and catering sector. Participants are 'clients'¹ of the local public centre of social welfare (PCSW). Most of them are foreign-language newcomers with a limited educational background. TfC claims to respond to the latter's need for social inclusion through employment in the 'regular labour market'. The project is socially innovative in the Belgian context for its focus on workplace-based education, tailored support and mediating contacts between the PCSW 'clients' and catering employers who experience difficulties to find trustworthy and flexible workers. This 'new' approach fits within an international trend of 'innovative employer-oriented activation policies', that aim to engage employers of shortage occupations (see, e.g. Martin 2004; Van der Aa and Berkel 2014).

TfC is recognized as a proven concept in the regional PCSW sector. After three-year ESF funding the project was continued with local resources and the same partners. ESF resources to experiment with 'activation preparatory pathways'² are regarded an indispensable enabling factor that provided the institutional space and freedom needed to develop this initiative (I: Social Department funding expert). TfC's success is measured by the number of participants that continue to work in the 'regular' catering sector after the project, with or without job subsidies. While success rates varied quite a lot per group, regular labour market participation was attained for about 50 per cent of all beneficiaries, which exceeded expectations (I: Team coordinator PCSW).

The Social Department of the PCSW and the social economy firm SPIT vzw comanage the project. The former is the initiator and commissioner and guides participants to it. The latter coordinates the daily operations and offers workplace-based training. Other partners are the local catering branch of the multinational company (internships), an adult education centre (job oriented learning), the local Centre for Basic Education (language and math), the public labour placement firm VDAB (accrediting

the training) and the Regional sector fund Horeca Vorming Vlaanderen³ (network and additional funding). They all participate in the steering group of the project, which meets three to four times each half-year cycle. The curriculum is adapted to participant's profile and previous project experiences each term. Steering the project through stakeholder-deliberation and developing a network of engaged employers are regarded as key innovative features (focus group).

The ESF funding, the social investment approach to labour market activation and the multi-stakeholders approach were important features to select this case. This rather conventional case of local SI in local welfare services (cf. Evers and Ewert 2015; Sabato and Verschraegen 2016), with a strong relation between different (local, national, EU) policy levels is deemed appropriate to explore the added value of our analytical frame. It is reasonable to assume that the experiences and theoretical implications of this case study will be relevant for the larger population of similar projects.

The actual data collection was organized in three phases between June 2014 and December 2015. The first and most intensive one (between June and September 2014) consisted of desktop analysis of 44 documents including policy briefs, evaluation reports, communication documents and relevant academic and grey literature about the PCSW and employment policies; six semi-structured in-depth interviews with key actors including project coordinators, management and instructors; and a focus group discussion with nine participants (five of which were already interviewed separately) including representatives of all project partners. These interviews are referred to as (I: professional position of the respondent) or (focus group). The experiences of project participants, engaged employers or macro level 'policy middlemen' have not been part of this research. Asking involved actors to describe and explain their change in habits (if any) illuminated how they made sense of on-going change. The combination of individual interviews and the focus group helped to grasp both individual experiences and the shared narrative of the initiative (cf. Berk and Galvan 2009; Berk et al. 2013). In February 2015 all respondents were invited to read and comment on the pre-final version of the case study report (Cools and Oosterlynck 2015). Five of them provided comments via email, which were taken into account when revising the report. Lastly, in December 2015 the new and the former project coordinator were interviewed together and the project managers responded to follow up questions via email. Thematic content analysis was used to interpret this case study data in light of our theoretical framework (Silverman 2013).

The following analyses how TfC is implicated in the on-going transformation of the Belgian welfare regime. Using our analytical framework we aim to answer the following research questions.

Which innovative features of this policy initiative can be explained by ongoing macro-level welfare reform and policy frameworks? Which innovative elements of this policy initiative can be explained by creative bottom-up action in reaction to unmet social needs? How are they mutually implicated?

How did these learning processes change the 'habits' and normative orientations of the social professionals that implement this initiative?

Who learns what from this SI initiative?

4. The case study

TfC started in March 2011. Each six-month cycle ten participants are enrolled, hence Ten for Cooking. The intensive training programme consists of language and basic math courses, hygiene and safety instructions, workplace-based learning and internships with local employers. Participants receive one additional Euro on top of their social assistance benefits per hour of attended class. The trajectory

includes one month at the end in which participants are supported individually to find work or appropriate follow-up training. The empirical analysis first looks at how Tfc changed habitual PCSW practice. It then zooms in on how social professionals recalibrated their normative orientations through stakeholder deliberation and implementation of this project. The third section considers who learns what from the Tfc experiences and to what extent it informs learning processes beyond its particular local context.

4.1. The development of a new local social policy instrument

Three main innovative features of this initiative ‘recalibrated’ habitual PCSW practice. Firstly, Tfc introduces a tailored and intensive training to work trajectory, which emphasizes the importance of gaining work experience (internships) on the regular labour market (corresponding with the functional recalibration dimension). This departs from the Belgian-French social economy tradition of ‘protected employment’ (Bonoli 2010; Nyssens 2014). The second innovative feature is an explicit focus on foreign language newcomers (corresponding with redistributive recalibration). The third is the collaboration with various (not) for-profit partners that deliver parts of the Tfc services and are actively involved in the project’s steering committee (institutional recalibration).

Social Department staff narrates the development of Tfc as a search for a response to ‘disappointing’ outcomes in terms of regular labour market participation of PCSW beneficiaries that received training and work experience in social economy firms (I: Director Social Department; financial expert Social Department). Working in a municipality with a large catering sector the department has plenty of experience with employing people in the catering sector using the ‘Art. 60’⁴ procedure. Art. 60 is the most important PCSW policy instrument for labour market activation (Cousaert 2015). It enables PCSW’s to employ people in social economy firms, which has been its most prevalent use, but it can also be used in the public or private sector. Over a period of one to two years ‘clients’ would gain the hard and soft skills for labour market participation while building up their right to unemployment benefits.

The department started problematizing habitual Art. 60 use years ago as they observed that only a minority of beneficiaries went on working in the regular catering sector. Employers argue that social economy trajectories do not reflect the reality of a regular catering firm and therefore fail to prepare participants (I: Cook-instructor; focus group). Project coordinators and social workers largely agree but also observe other thresholds to labour market transitions such as lack of resources for tailored support and employers’ reluctance to hire (foreign-language) PCSW ‘clients’. (I: Spit vzw coordinator A and B).

Social Department staff incorporated this feedback in the Tfc project proposal. The project builds on the conviction that intensive and tailored support (human capital investment), experience in private firms (internships) and mediation with employers by social professionals would enable motivated PCSW beneficiaries to participate on the regular labour market, including those that are vulnerable or have little knowledge of Dutch. The Flemish ESF resources for ‘activation preparatory pathways’ created institutional space to experiment with intensive support trajectories for relatively small groups for three years, without stringent output criteria (different subsequent work or education trajectories, including subsidized employment, were valued equally) or involvement of municipal politics. Each cycle coordinates actively gather feedback from employers, stakeholders and beneficiaries to optimize the curriculum and support (I: Coordinator SPIT vzw A).

During the project, participants are not receiving a wage and they are not building up their right to unemployment benefits, in contrast to Art. 60 trajectories. However, stakeholders argue (focus group) that it is still in participants’ interest as it increases their chances on regular labour market

participation. In short, a defining innovative feature of this project is that it aims to raise the stock of human capital and ease the transition to the regular labour market in a relatively short-term tailored trajectory for a select group of participants with a high risk of unemployment because of inadequate schooling and work experience (cf. Bonoli and Natali 2012).

This (functional) focus of TFC reflects a much broader evolution in habitual PCSW practice that unfolded over the past decade and a half. According to its team coordinator the main purpose is nowadays

'to activate as much clients as possible to work. Whether this is through training trajectories or directly does not make a big difference to us. As long as people can get a job and are no longer dependent on PCSW support.' (I: PCSW team coordinator)

The social department's purpose is framed by the 2002 RMI-law (right to societal integration-law).

'This was clearly an activation legislation instructed by the Vandenbroucke⁵ doctrine on social inclusion, which basically says: give people work and the rest will follow.' (I: Director Social Department)

Local differences amongst PCSW's notwithstanding it is widely recognized that the RMI-legislation facilitates a more labour market activation oriented role (cf. Debast et al. 2008).⁶ From an international perspective this represents a comparatively late functional recalibration towards a more 'Active Welfare State' in Belgium (Debast et al. 2008; Vandenbroucke 2012; Hemerijck 2013). Presented as necessary to prevent long-term unemployment, persisting social exclusion of target groups and loss of human capital, the RMI-law is an important framework that encourages more 'pro-market employment oriented' ALMPs following a 'making work pay' logic since the late 1990s (Bonoli 2010; Schepers and Nicaise 2013). This functional recalibration of the Belgian welfare regime is informed by macro-level policy learning by influential policy middlemen that has spread through international networks (Hemerijck 2013) including the ESF (Sabato, Vanhercke, and Verschraegen 2017).

Importantly, the Social Department was not forced or asked directly to use the ESF resources to materialize this 'paradigm' on the local level. They were themselves strategically looking for new schemes that would overcome the deficiencies of the existing instruments and practices to realize their objectives. The RMI-legislation provided the normative and legal-institutional framework and ESF provide the institutional space and resources to do so. Consequently, TFC incorporated some of their key elements, such as screening possible participants more intensively on motivations and support needs in order to tailor and monitor human capital investment and support (I: Spit vzw Coordinator A).

Besides this functional recalibration, TFC also recalibrates habitual PCSW practice in redistributive and institutional terms that cannot be directly related to federal or EU policy guidelines. Nonetheless, they do reflect some general trends of socially innovative services for social inclusion in European cities (see Evers and Brandsen 2016). The 'redistributive calibration' pertains to a strong focus on foreign language newcomers and avoiding stigmatization. This focus builds upon two insights (I: Director Social department). The first is that the share of foreign language newcomers amongst PCSW 'clients' is growing while Belgian public services have made little effort to tailored services to them, despite or maybe because Belgium is amongst the worst European countries in labour market integration of foreign language newcomers (Coene 2013). The second is that previous on the ground experiences showed that thresholds like language problems and negative preconceptions can be overcome with the right support, motivation and opportunities. The unusual choice to focus on this group was thus

not informed by any of the aforementioned policy frameworks. On the contrary, PCSW rules require services to be open for everybody. This is still the case, but project management uses their selection criteria in ways that prioritize foreign language newcomers in order to build expertise and success stories with this particular group (I: Director Social Department, focus group).

The institutional recalibration of the local welfare regime initiated by TfC relates to the involvement of external experts in a more networked type of project governance (cf. Evers and Brandsen 2016).

'For a project like this, it is not a good strategy to keep the centre of gravity within your own organization. We do not have the competencies, the history and the culture to do these things[...] We cannot give a chef's hat to a social worker, that would not work.' (I: Director Social Department)

Distributing key roles to a consortium of non-profit and for-profit actors diverges from the PWSC habit to provide most support services themselves. To this end, the director creatively applied entrepreneurial concepts and insights from his previous job in the commercial food sector. He describes the TfC governance model as 'chain management' i.e.: to provide a chain of tailored support services from screening to labour market entry in order to increase effectiveness. To forge this alliance of expertise and chain of services, the PCSW creatively re-combined pre-existing (contract and reciprocal) relationships with actors like the educational institutes and the catering company. The legitimacy of the social department as a coordinating actor is crucial here, as some actors would otherwise not engage in such collaborations (I: Cook-instructor). The catering sector fund was invited for both its network and its resources for activating PCSW 'clients' to shortage occupations in the catering sector.

This on the ground institutional recalibration is not a local implementation of supralocal policy frameworks, but clearly driven by a creative actor and embedded in local networks. However, on closer inspection it appears particularly hard to disentangle the various influences that informed this social learning and subsequent changes in professional habits. While the aforementioned policy frameworks do not directly prescribe this institutional configuration, they do generally encourage experimenting with multi-stakeholder collaborations and drawing from insights of the business world (cf. Jenson 2015). Furthermore, from an international perspective TfC is certainly not the first to experiment with involving employers in training to work trajectories (Van der Aa and Berkel 2014). It appears that in this instance our top-down and bottom-up distinction falls short to explain how these different stimuli and learning dynamics interact. Following the theory of creative syncretism (Berk and Galvan 2009) it is likely that the ideas of a 'chain approach' and 'involving employers' have come to TfC initiators in a more horizontal way, for instance through discussions with (former) colleagues or reading reports. This is consistent with the observation that the diffusion and emergence of social innovation initiatives happen in various ways that are particularly difficult to trace (Evers and Brandsen 2016).

In short, this section analysed how different dynamics of social learning (in)formed the TfC to recalibrate habitual PCSW practice. It appears that the functional recalibration is most directly informed by macro-level welfare reform, whereas the distributive recalibration appears to build more directly on local learning and discretion in this case. The institutional recalibration cannot be easily attributed to the one or the other direction of policy learning as our data do not allow fully disentangling the various sources, experiences and frameworks that informed the project management in this regard. These different 'recalibrations' of professional habits also have normative implications, the focus of the next section.

4.2. Normative implications of the changing habits

According to the focus group participants, a crucial innovative feature of their project is that it is implemented by a diverse set of actors that are actively involved in deliberating and co-designing this project. The TfC steering committee brings together different, potentially conflicting interests. There is, for instance, some occasional tension between the employers' interest in motivated, well-prepared employees and the PCSW's mission to secure the right to social integration of all 'clients'. This shows in discussions about screening and selecting participants. Employer representatives, like the Horeca Fund and the catering company cook-instructor, want to be involved in the selection to maximize their investment by optimizing 'transition to labour market' results. TfC coordinators refuse because they want to avoid 'cherry-picking' of 'stronger' candidates and safeguard opportunities for foreign-language newcomers (I: PCSW team coordinator; Spit vzw Coordinator A). They claim to select on the basis of applicants' motivation and argue that TfC is a 'preparatory trajectory' to defend their approach. From the perspective of the project manager, managing stakeholder interests appears as a matter of 'puzzling' and 'powering'.

'The interest of the project has to transcend the interest of the individual organizations. Of course, you have to take into consideration who is involved, because they want to invest. But if a partner gets the opportunity to select good employees from our project, I can ask of him to give them a decent contract.' (I: Director Social Department)

Project coordinators take on an ambiguous role of being both spokeswomen of participants and matchmakers who want to convince employers. They now approach their mission of guaranteeing their clients' wellbeing through a focus on linking demand- and supply side concerns of the local catering labour market. They use employers' expectations to refine their strategies in training and disciplining participants, while negotiating extra efforts of employers in individual cases.

TfC challenges the skills and habits of its social professionals and urges them to implement a 'more entrepreneurial culture' (I: Director Social Department). This is most explicit in the directors' credo that 'he needs entrepreneurs rather than social workers' (I: PWCS team coordinator). TfC coordinators described their experiences as 'entering that other world...the hard world' and needing to change their 'cumbersome way of working and be flexible'. Working with employers they experienced their caretaking background and habitual PCSW bureaucratic procedures as inadequate. Describing themselves as 'saleswomen' (I: TfC coordinator A) they embrace a more entrepreneurial mindset to realize the shifted policy priorities. Forging relationships with for-profit actors became an important part of their job and they use their knowledge about subsidies and flexibly apply bureaucratic procedures – like bypassing formal sequences in processing dossiers and medical examinations – to convince employers and respond more swiftly to opportunities. These changed habits include a calibration in the normative orientations that underpin their professional practice.

In this case, a more entrepreneurial approach implies a blurring of the formal-informal boundaries in the interaction with participants. This new way of addressing users by 'bridging the gap between professional services and real peoples lives' (Evers and Brandsen, 165) is characteristic to many SI's in local social services. Here it appears as profoundly ambiguous. Coordinators argue that the programme demands more sensitivity to participants' particular situation and concerns, but also being more intrusive and controlling towards clients. They describe new habits like 'coming from behind your desk', 'going the extra mile to support participants in other matters' or even 'getting them out of bed, literally' (I: Spit vzw coordinator A, B). This more flexible, hands-on way approach and the aforementioned creative use of institutional rules and procedures to forge matches has led to surprisingly positive results in engaging employers. After some positive experiences, coordinators were surprised:

'We have sold them people they have never seen in real life. They tell us: 'you will know best'. It goes very far in my opinion.' (I: SPIT vzw coordinator A)

The rather unusual use of market metaphors by the social workers to describe their job ('saleswoman'), beneficiaries ('products') and objectives ('selling people'), reflect a normative recalibration within PCSW services brought about by TfC and its more entrepreneurial culture. It is described by its proponents as a shift from 'entitlements to motivation and opportunity' and from 'dreaming to doing' (focus group) that derives support from international macro-level welfare reform discourses.

It is well documented that the functional welfare recalibrations implied by the social investment paradigm are 'supported by new normative discourses on the centrality of paid work and how employment contributes to self-respect and social participation' (Hemerijck 2013, 107). While this helps to explain the increased market-orientation in general, the self-description as saleswoman is not a direct effect of this discourse. Instead we propose it results from a more interactive process in which policy actors, practitioners and their partners search for practical alternatives to what they perceive as ineffective policy instruments and professional habits. Throughout this process project management and coordinators creatively adapt elements from macro level frameworks and funding opportunities that enable and legitimate their new initiative and the earlier discussed context-specific elements. These are internalized by social professionals through experiences of implementation and reflected in their new self-description.

In this case, functionalist and normative arguments of doing 'what works' to enable labour market participation are glued together in practice by a focus on individual 'client' motivations and a future horizon of return on social investment. This has implications on the position of service beneficiaries in the local welfare mix (cf. Jenson 2015). TfC stakeholders (focus group) describe their approach as more 'directive' and offering participants 'less freedom of choice' from earlier habitual PCWS practice. They also argue that they take target groups 'serious' and recognize them as 'people for whom regular labour participation is attainable', which was often not the case before. Stakeholders generally subscribe to the project's narrative that this more directive, approach is in the participants' best interest and can only work if participants are motivated enough to grasp the opportunity. At the same time they acknowledge that even when the project has the most desirable outcome, participants are still in a rather precarious position. They argue the project should be an important stepping-stone for them and their family (focus group).

It is relevant to point out that project participants sign individual 'engagement contracts' in which they confirm their engagement and subscribe to behavioural guidelines. In combination with some of the aforementioned project features – selection through screening, focussing on training rather than rights building for motivated groups and the flexible application of bureaucratic procedures – it appears that TfC materializes a less universal approach to the social rights of their beneficiaries (Evers and Guillemard 2013; Evers and Ewert 2015). TfC management argues that this allows for a more flexible and effective approach to enabling labour market participation, which is the preferred gateway to social inclusion.

Our empirical analysis started with a focus on how TfC emerged and evolved through interactive processes of social learning and the adoption of new professional habits by reflexive actors that act within institutional space that is structured by the broader, multilevel welfare-institutional context (Kazepov 2010). We then zoomed in on how the changing habits and self-description of social professionals and project partners reveal a 'normative recalibration' of habitual PCSW practice. These parts showed how macro-level welfare reform and on the ground experiences come together at the local level. Still, our perspective on local experiences and macro level reform as mutually implicated

begs for the question: who learns what from this SI initiative beyond this local experience? The following and last empirical section briefly address this question.

4.3. Who learns from Ten for Cooking?

At the local level Tfc experiences generated valuable insights for the Social Department: how to design a project as chain of services that includes various stakeholders in its steering committee; on how to engage employers of shortage occupations in target group employment schemes and on how to support foreign language newcomers into the regular labour market.

Our analysis showed the different ways in which macro-level policies and other impulses shaped this innovative practice. It is however less evident to show if and how it in turn informs policy learning beyond its local context (see Evers and Brandsen on the methodological difficulties of analysing SI diffusion). Who learns the experiences and 'messages' of this SI initiative? Do the initiators invest in the diffusion of their experience? Does the supra-local institutional infrastructure PCSW's enable learning from such initiatives? The Social Department communicates about their experiences at various occasions (website, meetings exchanges with other PCSW's), but a strong, diffusion or direct effect to macro-level welfare recalibration is not visible and highly unlikely for at least two reasons.

Firstly, the focus of Tfc initiators is on the projects' effectiveness and sustainability, not on transferring it to other municipalities. They consider the mission to implement their idea elsewhere far beyond their task or responsibility as civil servants and perceive the possibilities to expand this particular project to other localities to be difficult because of the importance of local embeddedness and key factors such as a large catering sector and the mix of engaged partners. Furthermore, strategies to mainstream Tfc experience at larger policy levels would require political lobby strategies and providing quantified evidence on 'return on investment', which exceed current abilities and interests (I: Director Social Department).

Secondly and relatedly, there is no designated learning infrastructure (Sabel 2012; Evers and Ewert 2015). The Flemish ESF agency is known for extensive administrative control but it did not control content (which Tfc management regards as 'freedom'). Neither did it facilitate significant communication and dissemination resources to Tfc management (I: Social Department funding expert). At the Belgian and Flemish PCSW level there are some platforms of exchange in which such experiences can be presented and contribute to an incremental collective learning process and development of policy recommendations. There is for instance a growing consensus within the Flemish PCSW sector that the quantitative use of Art. 60 should no longer be considered as the main indicator to compare how 'activating' PCSW's are (I: Director Social Department). Building on experiences like Tfc, sector representatives emphasize individualized work-learning trajectories and more cooperation with for-profit organizations (cf. Cousseart 2015). In this regard Tfc does, although indirectly and modestly, inform the recalibration of macrolevel policy instruments. In this regard, our analysis supports the observation in earlier research on local social service innovations that

'There seems to be wide gaps in between prevailing modes of policies, politics and organization on the one hand and social innovation on the other. Bringing both sides together can demand an long learning process [...] Arguably, the cumulative effect of small initiatives is of far greater importance than the few examples that achieve wider and more visible impact.' (Evers and Brandsen, 177-178)

5. Conclusion

The growing attention and resources that are being invested in local SI to address the complex challenges of EU welfare regimes reflect that the European models have been pushed into a new phase of development

'whose main challenge is not only a reconfiguration of the boundaries between State, market, civil society and individual responsibilities in social protection, but also the redefinition of the role played by social policy as such. [...] bottom up innovative experiments are already on going on both fronts. [...] we want to align our established insights about social protection to the new reality which surrounds us and offer the light of knowledge not only to the greater debate over the welfare state and the challenges with which it is now faced, but also to social actors and policy makers that in their daily practice craft our collective future.' (Ferrera and Maino 2014, 23)

The purpose of our case study was not an empirical generalization in the statistical sense but to provide a thick description of how local actors developed and implemented a socially innovative service in a changing welfare context (Flyvbjerg 2006; Tsang 2014). These experiences have relevance to a broader audience since TFC fits a broader trend of local social service innovation in Europe (see Evers and Ewert 2015; Evers and Brandsen 2016) while also carrying characteristics of the dominant EU discourse on SI and social service reform (Hemerijck 2013; Sabato, Vanhercke, and Verschraegen 2017).

In this particular case a public institution played a crucial role in the social innovation process. This involved redefining its role from an implementer of various interrelated services to a coordinator and facilitator of a chain of services. Doing so it combines various resources, interests and previously fragmented expertise from different (non-public) stakeholders to better address unmet needs and new policy objectives. Operating within the generic frameworks of 'social investment' and 'active welfare state' paradigms our case study showed that realizing 'tailored opportunities' through 'matchmaking' between labour supply and demand in the catering sector was perceived to require a change professional habits towards a more entrepreneurial culture drawing from the business sphere (cf. Jensen 2015). This also granted a more flexible personalized use of social rights as well as blurring the lines of formality between social professionals and beneficiaries (see Evers and Guillemard 2013).

Our analysis shows that different aspects and dimensions of innovative practices are shaped to varying degrees by funding streams and macro-level policies. Our framework helps to illuminate and distinguish these different relationships while stressing that various context-specific relationships and impulses of social learning are crucial to understand how such an initiative takes shape. Drawing attention towards the reflexive and interactive dynamics between SI and welfare policies our research also calls to look beyond a stark bottom-up and top-down distinction, but opt more rather for a 'bottom-linked' perspective (García 2006). However, in the present research, it remained difficult to grasp the diffusion of this initiative and its effects on the broader welfare context (cf. Evers and Brandsen 2016). Based on this one case study it remains unclear whether this should be attributed to the limited attempts of its initiators, the broader institutional infrastructure to do so in this particular case, or with the limits of our analysis. Another weakness of the present study is that we focussed our data collection on the local initiative and only gathered secondary data on higher-up policy levels, which might have limited our ability to find direct relations between policy levels. We propose that the connection with the literature on social and organizational learning and democratic experimentalism (Sabel 2012) could be strengthened in the future and that comparative case study designs would be welcome to further refine the analytical framework.

On a theoretical level, this paper contributed to of the growing literature on the relation between local SI and welfare reform by developing a conceptually grounded framework for analysing how welfare

reform local SI and are mutually implicated through processes of social learning. We conclude from our analysis that the four dimensions of welfare recalibration as identified by Hemerijck and colleagues – functional, redistributive, institutional and normative – help to usefully distinguish ‘changing habits’ at the local level as well. These dimensions of social learning and policy reform are in a sense ‘cutting through’ different levels of policymaking, which allows us to meaningfully connect these different levels of analysis. Combining the heuristic of welfare recalibration with the perspective of ‘habits in motion’ enables us to include the microdynamics of SI through the experiences of reflexive, situated actors. We propose that grasping the creative agency of these local actors requires a conceptualization of institutions as syncretic rather than monolithic and institutional rules as skills rather than a script (Berk and Galvan 2009). Doing so it emerged from our case study that the relations between macro-level policy prescriptions and local, creative action is not necessarily the same in the different dimensions of welfare recalibration. Relatedly, the explicit focus to the normative dimension of SI and welfare reform and discussing the normative ambiguity of innovative projects can be regarded a contribution to the SI literature, as explicit attention to this normative dimension was often missing in earlier research (European Commission 2013).

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Notes

1. The PCSW staff used this term consistently during the interviews. In this paper we will use ‘clients’ for PCSW beneficiaries in general and ‘participants’ for those involved in TfC. Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research 15
2. These trajectories, which were developed as a reacting against ‘cherry picking’, are meant to capacitate the weakest groups to engage in various possible activation to work trajectories. For a detailed description see online: http://ec.europa.eu/social/esf_projects_117/project.cfm?id=88andproject_lang=en (Accessed 12/02/2017).
3. Partnership of employer- and employee representatives that organises training and support for catering companies. Online: <http://www.fanvanhoreca.be/opleidingen/horeca-vormingvlaanderen> (Accessed 12/02/2017)
4. Article 60§7 in the federal OCMW-law (June 8th 1976).
5. Referring to Frank Vandembroucke, who was, among others, federal minister of Social Affairs (1999-2003), of Pensions (1999-2004), of Work (2003-2004) and Flemish minister of Education (2004-2009). He is one of the main promoters of the ActiveWelfare State and Social Investment

in Belgium and Europe.

6. The formal mission of Belgian PCSW's is to guarantee 'every person the right to social assistance. This should enable everybody to lead a life conform to human dignity' (Art. 1 of the OCMW-law of July 8 1976, own translation).

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