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**CONTROVERSIES AND PARADOXES  
OF SOCIAL POLICY: THEORETICAL APPROACH**

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**KONTROWERSJE I PARADOKSY POLITYKI  
SPOŁECZNEJ: PODEJŚCIE TEORETYCZNE**

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**Summary:** Welfare reforms are carried out by government to solve problems of citizens and to improve their quality of life. However, social interventions also generate various consequences, that are unintended and unanticipated. The aim of the article is to investigate and to systemize such controversial and paradoxical outcomes. Basing on the historical facts, they were divided into three groups: (1) expanding the problem that was to be solved (2) expanding the opposite problem to the solved one, (3) expanding other problem. These outcomes are arguments against welfare programs, that were formulated already by classical researchers (T.R. Malthus, G. Bentham, D. Ricardo, H. Spencer), and currently are being maintained and developed by modern scholars. They focus mainly on: moral hazard, free-riding, incentive traps, and crowding-out individual engagement.

**Keywords:** paradoxes, controversies, welfare programs, unintended outcomes.

**Streszczenie:** Celami reform socjalnych są rozwiązywanie problemów społecznych oraz poprawa warunków bytu ludności. Jednakże interwencje socjalne generują również inne konsekwencje, które są niezamierzone i nieprzewidziane. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie i usystematyzowanie takich kontrowersyjnych i paradoksalnych efektów działań polityki społecznej. Na podstawie faktów historycznych efekty te zostały podzielone na takie kategorie, jak: (1) eskalacja problemu, który miał zostać rozwiązany, (2) eskalacja problemu przeciwnego do rozwiązywanego, (3) eskalacja całkiem innego problemu. Tego typu niezamierzone konsekwencje stanowią argument przeciwko polityce społecznej, które były już podnoszone przez klasycznych myślicieli, a obecnie są rozwijane przez współczesnych badaczy. Krytyka skupia się w głównej mierze na: pokusie nadużyć, jeździe na gapę, pułapkach motywacyjnych oraz na wypychaniu oddolnych inicjatyw i prywatnego zaangażowania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** paradoksy, kontrowersje, programy socjalne, niezamierzone konsekwencje.

## 1. Introduction

During the last century western countries developed social policy in order to overcome crucial civilization problems and to make a progress in the modernization process. It contributed to reduction of extreme poverty, mitigation of social tensions, improvement in living and working conditions, development of human and social capital. Nowadays necessity of (more or less) government activity in that field is practically indisputable. In long run the effort devoted to solving social problems is easier to bear than the harm resulting from them, so overall costs of abandoning welfare programs exceed overall costs of those programs [Szarfenberg 2014; Błędowski, Kubicki 2014].

Despite a wide range of merits and advantages, social policy struggles with hard criticism. Negative remarks apply to its efficiency, adequacy and sensibility [Seidman, Rappaport 1986]. Beyond intended outcomes, welfare programs cause also other consequences, that are unintended and unanticipated. Those consequences are called: side effects, externalities, second- or third-order consequences. All of them lead to paradoxical and controversial results. They may, for example, generate regressive reactions and give effects contrary to intentions, so that action worsen situation that was to be improved. They may also cause some complications in third parties, which initially were not in the sphere of interest, so that in the end solving one problem give raise new ones in the other fields. Situations like that are illustrated by proverbs: “the road to hell is paved with good intentions”, “the cure is worse than the illness”, “the solution is the problem” or “the enemy is us”.

In the article we focus on such controversial and paradoxical outcomes of social policy. We try to investigate and to systematize them, no matter if they are direct results of welfare programs, that initially have not been taken into account, or indirect results, that are not exclusively outcome of welfare program, but contributed somehow to rising such paradoxical outcomes.

## 2. Unintended outcomes of social policy

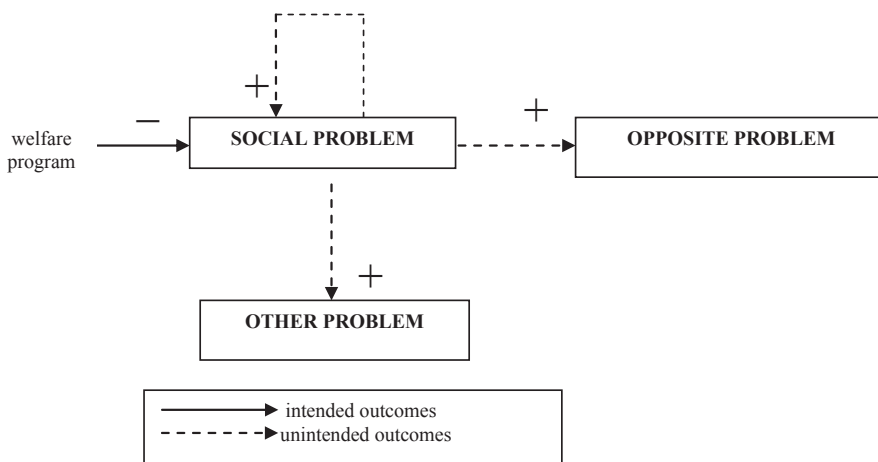
Unintended outcomes of purposeful social actions are subject of interest to various research fields, such as: political science, economics, management, applied sociology [Mica 2014]. The roots of that interest reach up to classical social theory presented by K. Marx, M. Weber and A. Smith [Sieber 1981; Aydinonat 2008]. K. Marx stated that revolution of the working class is the unexpected result of the growing power of capitalism. Weber presented his “essential paradox” that ascetic character of the Protestants led to accumulation of wealth, and thus contributed to its rise, despite being initially against it. A. Smith argued that individuals intend only their own gain, and hereby promote public interest that originally was not a part of their interest.

Theory of unintended consequences was popularized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by R. Merton. He tried to apply a systematic analysis of unintended outcomes to the

process of deliberate social change. In his classic work titled *The unanticipated consequences of purposive social action* [Merton 1936] drew attention to the inherent complexity of the world and argued that problem with anticipation of consequences has roots mainly in limited knowledge about interdependence of its particular parts. Moreover, he listed five possible causes of unanticipated consequences: (1) ignorance, making it impossible to anticipate everything in world’s complexity; (2) errors in analysis of the problem or following habits that worked in the past, but may not apply to the current situation; (3) immediate interests overriding long-term interests; (4) basic values which may require or prohibit certain actions even if the long-term result may be unfavorable; (5) self-defeating prophecy or fear of some consequence, which drives people to find solutions before the problem occurs.

More recently has been coined so-called *The law of unintended consequences* – an idiomatic warning, that interfering with a complex system tends to create unanticipated and unintended outcomes (both: positive and negative) [Norton 2008]. It refers especially to government-provided activity. A flagship example is imposing quotas or taxes on imported goods, in order to protect domestic producers from lower-price competition. As a result, the price of those goods are higher than could be, if there was no intervention. It makes harm to all other producers, that use protected good as an intermediates, because their products, in turn, are less competitive in price on the global market.

Social policy seems to have a strong tendency to generate unintended outcomes. That is because it uncontrollably affects human behavior and mentality. As a reaction to government-provided support, people change their attitudes, values, preferences and lifestyles. Both the type and direction of these changes are difficult to predict. So welfare programs, which are supposed to limit social problem (intended outcome),



**Figure 1.** Intended and unintended outcomes of welfare programs

Source: own work.

generate also some behavioral responses, that cause various complications (unintended outcomes). Basing on a historical facts, these unintended outcomes are divided into three categories (see Figure 1):

- 1) expanding the problem that was to be solved,
- 2) expanding the opposite problem to the solved one,
- 3) expanding other problem.

First category of unintended outcomes is expanding the problem that was supposed to be limited or solved. Such regressive effect gives results contrary to the intentions, because of setting up a perverse incentives. A flagship example is so-called “cobra effect”. It refers to situation that took place in India at the time it was a British colony. One of the southern provinces was hit by a cobra plague. The state authorities intervened by paying a head fee for each dead cobra. C. Schwartz described result of that action: “At first, the situation changed according to expectations. The citizen’s organized »cobra hunts« and the number of cobras dropped markedly. There was even a new profession that developed-professional cobra hunters [...]. Yet after the initial decline of the cobra population, the authorities were shocked to learn that cobras could again be found everywhere. After investigating this phenomenon they found that many snake hunters become snake breeders, thus securing their head premiums” (cited by L. Brickman [2002, pp. 326, 327]). Similar situation occurred in Hanoi (Vietnam), under French rule. During a rat plague, local authorities paid a reward for killing a rat and producing severed tail as the evidence. Official soon began noticing rats without tail. It turned out that rat-catchers after capturing rats, cut off their tails and released them back so that they could reproduce freely and give income also in the future [Ghost 2017].

As for social policy, a prime example of regressive effect is consumption of alcohol during the prohibition in the USA (1920–1933). The Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution forbade, among others, production and sale of alcoholic beverage, in order to reduce various social problems like: alcoholism, family violence, and crime. Of course consumption at that time is hard to assess, because illegal sales were not officially reported, however, basing on indirect data, such as incidence of alcohol-related diseases (i.e. cirrhosis), it had been estimated that the amount not only did not decreased, but even increased and also caused adverse change in the pattern of consumption, that led to escalation of alcohol-related problems [Thornton 1991]. Such reverse reaction is a typical respond to all bans and is caused by a psychological factor called reactance. According to R. Cialdini [2008, p. 257]: “whenever free choice is limited or threatened, the need to retain our freedoms makes us desire them (as well as the goods and services associated with them) significantly more than previously”. So, the conviction of public authorities that the social problem can be solved by banning practices that are the source of this problem is naive, as the effects of such bans are usually counter-productive.

Reverse effect of social interventions is also caused by disincentives, abuses, and frauds. For example, anti-poverty programs in some cases may expand, rather than alleviate, poverty. This is well visible in the aspect of financing social services in

the USA [Moses 1999]. There is a government program called Medicaid. Although it is addressed exclusively to the poor, recently became the main source of financing long-term care. First of all, the program crowds-out private security, so in long run makes it necessary to use public funds. Secondly, there is a widespread use of legal advices that help to meet criteria of the program in unethical or unfair way (co-called: *Medicaid planning techniques*), e.g. by getting a fake divorce.

Reverse effect of welfare programs is also caused by a government-provided over-intervention. It occurs for example in the field of employment protection legislation (EPL). Such legislation takes a form of protection periods or anti-discrimination law. It is created to support vulnerable workers, but usually brings counter-productive effect and worsen their situation [Becker, Becker 2006]. It is because employees unwillingly tie with people strongly protected by law. They treat them as “hot potatoes”: may not wish to employ them at all, or may release them before the protection period starts [Vodopivec, Dolenc 2008].

Second category of unintended outcomes is expanding opposite problem to the solved one. In some cases reduction of one problem automatically triggers opposite problem. For example, improving diets among food insecure families increases the risk of overweight. Nowadays in developed countries cheap food became available for almost everyone, however, this food is low-quality, full of sugar and fat. So overcoming “traditional” problem of hunger brings “modern” problem of obesity. It is estimated that during last three decades percentage of people suffering hunger decreased almost by half, while percentage of obese people doubled [Guillén, Ontiveros 2012]. All over the world there are already more obese people (about 1 billion) than people chronically undernourished (about 800 million).

Third category of unintended outcomes is expanding some other problem than the solved one. In this case reducing one problem causes complications in third parties which initially were not in the sphere of interest. For example, public pensions help to alleviate poverty among elderlies, but also discourage adults to save for an old age. Working-age population expects to receive welfare benefits, and thus the aggregate savings are reduced [Feldstein 1974]. In long run it results in reduction in investment and, consequently, in economic growth. Besides, social security system discourages adults not only to secure themselves through financial assets, but also in the other forms. Traditionally, the prime form of private security were children. In economic terms, the basic benefit of offspring is material, functional and emotional support in old age [Becker 1990]. Welfare programs, such as public pensions, limit those benefits, and thus change the attitudes towards procreation. In the long run it results in the decrease in fertility.

### **3. Problems with welfare benefits and social solidarity**

From the very beginning social policy aroused various controversies. At the turn of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when social reforms were carried out in England, critical

remarks were expressed by, among others, J. Bentham, H. Spencer, T.R. Malthus, and D. Ricardo. All of them stressed some certain negative outcomes of social interventions.

J. Bentham warned against the risk of demoralization. Although he supported social interventions (as an utilitarian claimed, that redistribution of wealth maximizes aggregate happiness), was also able to see their negative consequences. Basing on his own theory of psychological hedonism, argued that “self-regarding interest is predominant over social interest” (cited by J. Troyer [2003, p. 265]). Therefore, if public aid does not cause discredit or any other harm, then beneficiaries naturally prefer living in idleness at the expense of others (so-called “rational pauper”) [Bartlett 1999]. In his opinion, the thoughtless help is addictive, ensnares, and promotes irresponsible behavior, that manifests by for example limited willingness to work or reduced self-reliance.

H. Spencer applied the idea of regressive effects to a variety of government programs. In his view beneficence is very important, but should be a private, rather than public concern. Basing on the doctrine of social evolution Spencer claimed that government-provided support violate natural evolutionary processes, with rewarding the unadapted and punishing the adapted [Offer 2000]. Welfare programs (such as public health, redistribution of wealth) interrupt natural selection and thus weakens the race and leads to its degeneracy. H. Spencer believed that society should reward effort and punish laziness, meanwhile supporting poor “not only takes away the punishment, but it also destroys the most powerful incentive to reformation. Adversity is, in many cases, the only efficient school for transgressor” (cited by A. Mingardi [2013, p. 39]). Poor relief does not remove improvidence, but rather prolongs it, and through it discourages real benevolence. Besides, he claimed that misery plays an important educational function: “misfortunes of one are lessons for thousands [...], the world generally learns more by its mistakes than by its successes” (cited by A. Mingardi [2013, p. 45]).

T.R. Malthus, basing on his own “Principle of Population”, claimed that reproduction greatly exceeds food production. When unchecked, population grows very fast (in a geometric ratio), while means of subsistence can be increased far slower (only in an arithmetic ratio). In long-run it inevitably leads to overpopulation, when the size of population is too big in relation to subsistence. In such a case checks are launched, that are both “positive” (hunger, disease, war) and “preventive” (abortion, postponement of marriage, celibacy). So T.R. Malthus believed that misery – from a general perspective – may be desirable and may play a useful role as a population-reducer. Because of that he was definitely skeptical about social interventions. First of all, he claimed that they encourage irresponsible procreation. Besides, welfare benefits increase demand for food, but do nothing to increase its amount, therefore cause inflation which in the end is depressing rather than improving the condition of poor people [Gilbert 1993].

D. Ricardo, in turn, claimed that social interventions have a harmful effect on the labor market. Basing on his own “Iron Law of Wages” claimed that supporting poor workers inevitably leads to undermining wages of all others workers [Levine, Rizvi 2005]. Supplements to wages, on the one hand, discourage effective work among well-paid workers who do not get such aid, and, on the other hand, reduce their wages because of taxes imposed in order to support low-paid workers.

These arguments presented by classic scholars initiated a long history of dispute between liberals and democrats about whether social problems are the causes or the effects of welfare programs. More recently many influential researchers have explored unintended negative consequences of welfare programs. They started to blame welfare state for both expanding and perpetuating social problems [O’Connor 2004].

Nowadays, one of the main controversies related to social policy concerns the problem of welfare dependency. This problem is defined as “the length of individual welfare spells, with longer spells taken as representing greater dependence” [Gottschalk, Moffit 1994, p. 38]. Of course some groups, such as elderly or disabled people, because of physical or mental disorders, are naturally in need of permanent assistance. They represent category of recipients that used to be called “impotent poor” or “deserving poor”. The necessity of helping them was never questioned. According to R. Gooding [1998, p. 119]: “wrath is focused instead on the ‘able-bodied poor’, who being ‘able bodied’ could well earn their own living if only they tried. What is objectionable about their dependency is precisely that they depend on others when they do not have to do so. Their dependency is voluntary”.

Problem of the welfare dependency refers to situation, when people betray social trust and overuse their welfare entitlements. They reduce efforts to work, marriage, education, training, self-secure, etc. In colloquial meaning: become more lazy. Although recently there have been developed a new paradigm of the welfare state (called “workfare state” or “active social policy”), emphasizing activation for labor and other forms of participation, there is still a very strong belief that welfare benefits promote laziness. This belief is exceptionally strong in Poland. According to European Social Survey Data<sup>1</sup>, as much as 61% of Poles agree with the statement: *Social benefits/services make people lazy* (average for European countries: 41.9%), and only 20.1% disagree with it (average for European countries: 34.3%). Similarly with the statement: *Most unemployed people do not really try to find a job*, as much as 67.6% of Poles agree with it (average for European countries: 37.1%), and disagree only 15.5% (average for European countries: 38.8%). It can be paraphrased by the statement that safety net, created to protect from social risks, started to serve as a hammock.

There are different reasons of long-term welfare benefiting that may result from: rational choice, psychological conditions or cultural background [Szarfenberg 2010]. Conservative thinkers (scholars and politicians) usually stigmatize all of them.

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<sup>1</sup> ESS8-2016, [www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org).

Regardless of the reason, they perceive dependency as a pathology. According to D. Moynihan, “it is an incomplete state in life: normal in child, abnormal in the adult. In the world where completed men and women stand on their own feet, persons who are dependent – as the buried imagery of the word denotes – hang” (cited by N. Fraser and L. Gordon [2002, p. 14]). On the other hand, thinkers from the opposite ideological side argue that term “dependency” is used to discredit people in difficult life situation, or to justify the cuts in social expenses, or to overshadow problems with e.g. wage decline, labor market failures, rising inequalities [O’Connor 2001].

Without getting into this ideological discourse, it is worth considering the source of welfare dependency. Whether it is an immoral behavior of beneficiaries, or rather an addictive character of benefits? It can be assumed that people are honest, hard-working, and use welfare only as a last resort. However, according to principles of classic economy, human beings (*homo oeconomicus*) are inherently rational and self-interested. They respond to various incentives and disincentives in order to maximize their own (subjectively defined) profits. So, if it is beneficiary for them to be lazy or irresponsible, they are simply like that. Such situation takes place, when recipients of welfare are discouraged from entering low-paid jobs because it does not produce a significant increase of their income<sup>2</sup>. Although it seems to be selfish and unfair, they just behave according to their nature. This is not the result of – using M. Pauly’s [1968] term – “moral perfidy”, but a rational economic choice. So blaming dependent people is like blaming victims; victims of defective system that traps them in a non-productive lifestyle.

Welfare state is a concept of the nation as a large community, where people – through the public institutions – protect each other and support those in need. Redistribution of wealth is based on social solidarity. Such mechanism works properly under two fundamental conditions [Kymlicka 2001]. First: there must be some sense of common identity and common membership uniting donor and recipient (i.e. feeling that sacrifice is being made for “one of us”). Secondly, there must be a high level of trust that sacrifices will be reciprocated (i.e. belief that if one makes sacrifices today, his or her own needs will be taken care of in the future). Nowadays both of those conditions are not fully met. On the one hand, immigration and ethnic diversity increase the cultural distance between members of society and divide it into outgroups. Use of welfare benefits by immigrant communities causes a growing conviction that support is not going to “ours” but to “some others”. On the other hand, under welfare programs some people exclude themselves from the labor market and start living on benefits. In the long run such people adopt specific norms and values. They become passive and demanding. A kind of subculture arises – culture of poverty, that is concentrated in certain communities and transferred to the next generations [Lewis 1971]. Permanent and unfounded benefiting from welfare programs, without contributing to common

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<sup>2</sup> Such welfare-disincentive hypothesis was promoted mainly by C. Murray in his influential book *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (1984).



resources, arouses a feeling of injustice among the rest of society, discourages them to sacrifice, and spreads anti-solidarity attitudes [Vandenbroucke, Barnard, De Beare (eds.) 2017]. Welfare programs may be considered as a form of common good. Effective use of them requires collective rationality. It is a classic example of social trap – a situation, where everyone wins, if everyone supports common purpose. Efficient cooperation can come about only if people trust that everyone will cooperate [Rothstein 2005]. Obtaining individual gains, that is beneficial in short term, in long run inexorably leads to a loss for a group as a whole [Hardin 1968]. Thus unfounded use of welfare benefits undermine trust and in the end cause collapse of solidarity mechanism.

#### **4. General paradox of redistribution social solidarity**

Historical, economic, and cultural factors shaped the welfare state in different ways. Various methods of reducing poverty in particular “regimes” are used. It has not yet been determined which method brings the best results. One of the most questioned issue is the scope of welfare recipients: whether benefits should be targeted at the poor or should be distributed universally to all citizens. Those two concepts competed with each other for a long time. Targeting is rooted in the tradition of poor laws, and consists in selective distribution of welfare on the basis of some particular criterion. Most frequently benefits are means-tested, so entitlement depends on financial resources (income or assets), but the criterion can be as well: age, psychophysical status, occupational situation, marital status, family size. In contrast, universalism consists in equal access to benefits for all citizens, regardless income, occupation, social position, or any other criterion.

There is a strong conviction, based on intuition, that welfare benefits should be targeted, so available only to people-in-need who are unable to overcome their problems using own resources and possibilities. Universalism is perceived as unnecessary, or even harmful, because it generates escalation of public expenditures and, consequently, tax rates, causes distortions in the labor market, and in the end makes problems with economic efficiency and growth. If the goal of social policy is to reduce poverty, benefiting the non-poor seems to be nothing more than waste of resources. Besides, if the goal is also reducing inequalities, then it is even counterproductive, because benefiting all citizens limits the flattening effect of social transfers. In this vein targeting appears to be definitely more effective (in terms of reducing poverty and inequalities) and more efficient (in terms of costs).

Contrary to these intuitive opinions W. Korpi and J. Palme [1998, pp. 681, 682], basing on the empirical research, formed paradox of redistribution: “The more we target benefits at the poor only and the more concerned we are with creating equality via equal public transfers to all, the less likely we are to reduce poverty and inequality”. This is because targeting contains many structural defects. First of all, means-testing is responsible for creating a dependency traps. If entitlement to welfare is based on

financial resources and goes only to people below official poverty line, then recipients are discouraged to increase registered income, because it could reduce or withdraw their welfare benefits. In case of universalism such disincentives are much more limited, because increase in income does not reduce the level of welfare benefits. Secondly, targeted model is less socially accepted, because creates a conflict of interest between poor (recipients) and all others who must pay for benefits, while universalism puts all citizens (poor and better-off) into the same institutional structure. Thirdly, targeting involves higher administrative costs: establishing entitlements monitoring, whereas universal benefits allow for less complex eligibility procedures. Fourthly, targeting has immanent errors in the distribution of benefits [Van Oorschot 1999].

G. Cornia and F. Stewart [1993] presented two types of errors in targeting: (1) errors of omission of the poor from the scheme (exclusion errors), and (2) errors of inclusion of the non-poor (inclusion errors). Exclusion errors are caused by: lack of information about benefits and/or lack of ability to get through formal procedures among targeted group, cost of acquiring entitlements (e.g. travel expenses related to reaching the administration office), and social stigma. In turn, including errors are caused by welfare fraud, that is unethical and unfair use of benefits.

## 5. Conclusions

Social reality is greatly complex. Every public intervention interrupts natural order and generates various consequences, intended and unintended. Some government-provided actions may lead to paradoxical or controversial situation, that final result is different or contrary to intentions. By the way it should be noted that in some cases the “real” intentions of government are unknown. According to S. Sieber [1981, p. 12]: “one’s original intentions is not always transparently clear [...]. Goals are often left vague, either consciously or unconsciously, so as to afford leeway in action or to gain consensus among key participants and supporters”. He presented inspiring example of deinstitutionalization of long-term care. Dependent people were transferred from residential facilities (hospitals, nursing homes) back to communities. It was argued for by a concern about wellbeing of dependent population, but in fact the real intention was to reduce public spending on care facilities.

Welfare programs from the very beginning aroused controversies that referred to both the range of government activities and the degree of involvement. Improperly organized social policy generate undesirable and unwelcome outcomes, that is: create incentive traps, crowd-out individual engagement, increase moral hazard, and promote free-riding. Of course these problems should not mobilize against social policy. They should rather stress the necessity of better (that is: broader and multidimensional) anticipating. Policy-makers, when reforming welfare state, need to take into account not only direct, but also indirect consequences of their actions.

Despite the fact that outcomes of social policy are more and more recognized, they have not still become a subject of systematic research. Contemporary knowledge does

not provide the possibility of predicting and controlling them. On the other hand, even knowing potential outcomes of welfare reforms does not protect from irresponsible or even in some cases harmful political actions. Such situations, when decisions do not refer to research, symbolize triumph of ideology over knowledge.

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