

Family policy and social justice – How responsibility and effectively invest in human capital?

Introduction

In our times, when economic approach seems to be popular and widely used to analyze and discuss different phenomena of social life it may be useful to engage the category of human capital, to support the discussion on the role of family policy. The article analyses family policy as one of the areas where the idea of social justice should be implemented. This – somewhat marginalized and not as popular as social equality concept – still may serve as useful framework for discussing important socio-economic and demographic issues. Therefore, the purpose of the article is to revisit the category of social justice and show the potential and necessity of this perspective for designing, implementing and evaluating social policy. This is accomplished by reviewing the definition and scope of meaning of social policy (with distinction into social assistance and family policy) and social justice, with exploring and explaining the role of family for human capital development, which is a basic and fundamental goal of social policy. From the family policy perspective, the article is illustrated with some examples from Poland from the period 2015-2021.

In the light of the current demographic crisis, one should ask if they are - at least to some extent - a consequence of the way that previous social policies were designed, which resulted in an uneven contribution to social wealth and an unfair distribution of duties, responsibilities and resources. In this context, the article argues that families formed by parents raising children, being the main source of human capital, are the group whose contribution to societal functioning and socio-economic development is proportionally greater. Therefore, one of the biggest problems of our demographically unsustainable times is that this unique and fundamental role of parenthood has not always been and still often is not adequately recognized and compensated. In case of Poland, this started to change in 2016, when the “Family 500+” program was introduced, followed by subsequent tools of family policy implemented over the last few years. In this domain, the article explains and describes how on a very basic level the functioning of families is linked to socio-economic development, and argues why family policy should be designed and analyzed in the scope of social justice. In this context, the concepts of the “tragedy of the commons” and the “free-rider problem” are engaged, since they may serve as useful concept for explaining essential interactions and interdependencies within social policy and socio-economic development. The paper presents useful perspective for those engaged in designing, developing, implementing and evaluating not only family policy, but social policy as a whole.

The article concludes that the process of designing and evaluating family policies should include three principles and criteria at the same time: (1) human capital maintenance and creation, (2) responsibility and (3) social justice.

Keywords: family policy, social policy, social justice, human capital, responsibility.

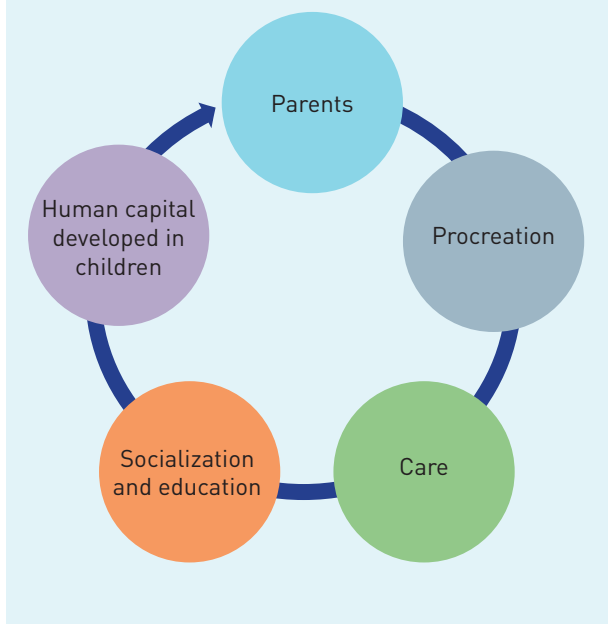
Human capital – the goal of social policy

Family policy¹ seems to be quite hot topic in public discourse – at least in Poland - as well as more and more popular one . In the context of Poland, these discussions mostly refer to the “Family 500+” program, which has been the first remarkable and long-term oriented tool dedicated to supporting all families, not only those in need in terms of material welfare. The disputes around it – often engaging economists - quite well show that the interest is too often focused on short-term effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, and almost never concentrated on social justice. The latter seems to be, not only forgotten perspective, but also not understood clearly enough. This problem is addressed by Dariusz Pieńkowski, who writes that ‘(...) the very concept of justice is not popular among economists and is often relegated to “non-economic” areas of consideration’ (Pieńkowski 2013, p. 9, cf. Wilkin, 1997, p. 23).

That is why it seems necessary to revisit this concept, as it may indeed improve the understanding of interdependence of various elements of social system and help design effective tools for tackling the demographic decline, which in economic terms, leads to human capital crisis.

Social policy is defined as ‘(...) activities of public institutions aimed directly at people’s well-being. In a broader sense, it includes such areas as education, health care, the labour market or housing conditions, while in a narrower sense it covers income and – less frequently – consumption’ (Panek 2020, p. 437). It means, that the basic goal of social policy is to guarantee human capital creation. Since we already know, e.g. thanks to the fundamental contribution of Gary S. Becker (Becker 1993, p. 21) who confirmed that it is the family that is the main source of this capital, it can be assumed that the main task of social policy is to ensure optimal conditions for parents to breed, care for, raise, educate and socialize kids which results in human capital development. This process is presented below in the Graph 1.

Graph 1: Family and Parenthood as the source of human capital



Here it is also worth pointing at responsibility that parents accept, which should be noticed and respected by social policy institutions, and at the same time justifying potential support in terms of family policy.

In the concept of social policy one can quite easily discover the link to social justice, because ‘ (...) the assessment of the rationality of social policy revolves around the answer to the question: who are benefits directed to, and how does their receipt affect the position of the recipient? In particular, it is necessary to answer the question whether benefits are received by those who need them most and whether the amount of benefits allows recipients to achieve a noticeable improvement in their material situation’ (Panek 2020, p. 437).

This leads to the conclusion that - besides human capital creation - social policy should ensure that justice is achieved in a wide array of social relations. This makes social justice a useful perspective and a desired framework for designing and evaluating social policy, including family policy.

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¹In public discourse, the term also appears in the form of ‘family-friendly policies’ - we will consider the two terms as synonymous.

Social justice as a vision for social policy

The fact that social justice can be seen as desired state of managing social affairs is confirmed by Stein Ringen, who – on the basis of analysis of the broad context of family presence in society – said that ‘in the broad perspective of the social sciences, where I feel at home, justice becomes the vision’ (Ringen 2009, p. 175). It must be stressed of course, that due to different concepts of social organization on the one hand, and the complexity of the concept of justice on the other, and their socio-cultural mediation – the solution is not obvious. This problem is well addressed by David Miller, who writes that:

‘each basic conception [of justice] is linked to a different model of society, and no model of society is so widely accepted that disputes about justice can be resolved. To shed further light on the concept of justice, it would first be necessary to investigate in greater detail what factors influence people to adopt one model of society rather than another; and second to consider whether any of the models offered can be given a rational justification’ (Miller 1974, p. 399).

One of the important conclusions of this statement is that justice is not an easy goal to achieve. That is probably why quite often social justice, is often replaced by equality as a priority idea or value in recent years. Even though equality may seem somewhat similar to justice, one should not mistake these two concepts – they are not identical, yet are somehow connected. In order to see this, it is useful to refer to the work of John Rawls, one of the most recognized scholars on the subject. This author of well-known two principles of justice, stated that: ‘(...) The first: every person is to have an equal right to the widest possible system of equal fundamental freedoms reconcilable with a similar system of freedoms for others. The second: social and economic inequalities are to be so arranged that they are both (a) reasonably expected to benefit everyone and (b) associated with positions and services open to all’

(Rawls 2009, p. 107). On the basis of these two principles Rawls creates a more general conception of justice: ‘All social values - liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the social basis of self-respect - are to be equally distributed, unless an unequal distribution of any (or all) of these values benefits everyone’ (Rawls 2009, p. 109).

Similarly the core of justice is described by Chaim Perelman, who proposes to understand the essence of the principle of justice as the situation of treating similar cases alike. He writes: ‘We can thus define formal or abstract justice as a principle of action according to which entities in the same essential category must be treated in the same way’ (Perelman 1963, p. 16; quoted in Perlikowski 2020, p. 23).

Reminding these both definitions by Rawls and Perelman is especially important nowadays, when equality is so often promoted as a political panacea. Unfortunately, at the same time long-term perspective of interactions and interdependencies between generations, so evident in the family life, are often ignored. Analogically, this question is also addressed by Rawls, who writes that ‘(...) generations follow one another in time’ (Rawls 2009, p. 419), and that the transmission of actual material benefits takes place in just one direction. This does not seem true for pension systems based on intergenerational solidarity. Rawls seems to embrace this possibility in other fragment where he writes that ‘this situation can change, and in view of this the question of justice does not arise here. What is just or unjust is how institutions deal with natural constraints, and the way in which they are constructed to take advantage of historical possibilities’ (Rawls 2009, p. 419). On the basis of above analysis one can admit that justice should be seen as a necessary criterion for the designing and evaluation of social policy, to which we will return later.

The family and social policy – what is just and what is not?

If we want to illustrate the dilemmas of justice and equality and their different ways of understanding, as well as the role of responsibility as an important,

yet somehow ignored category, it is worth looking what attitudes towards families were present within social policy. The picture presented

here somehow may correspond to the situation in Europe in general, but primarily refers to the Polish context of the last three decades. So far we come to two conclusions: first of all, social policy should be referred to justice and responsibility. What's more, the demographic decline currently troubling many societies may be seen as the result of decades of social injustice. It will be described and explained in the following paragraphs.

When we go back to the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the era when the so-called solidarity (pay-as-you-go) pension systems and institutionalization of social assistance developed and progressed, we see that the world looked a lot different than it does now in terms of demographic trends. One issue is especially important here: in those times one fundamental assumption was in force and seemed obvious and solid, that people would always marry, form marriages, and have enough children to achieve the replacement fertility rate. Today it is more than clear that this assumption is no longer valid. In general, it is the consequence of profound transformations of Western civilization and culture that occurred in the 20th century. To list most important elements of this processes one can mention such trends and phenomena as modernization, secularization, individualization, commercialization of social life, counterculture, or late postmodernism (see: Lesthaeghe 2000, Michalski 2021).

What's interesting, is that the social policy, especially in terms of social assistance systems did not react to this change which – one must admit – had rather evolutionary, than revolutionary character. Probably that is why it was not that easy to notice that the marital and procreative attitudes within society have undergone this profound change. This resulted in ongoing marginalization of the family as the essential contributor to the social stability, welfare and development. In this way, the criterion of social justice has been less and less important, and was more and more often replaced by the principle of equality implemented in individual perspective, which is not sufficient for understanding the nature and unique construction of marriage and family. Therefore marital bond, which for centuries has been confirmed as special kind of institution

in the West (Berger & Kellner 1964) began to lose its unique status and began to be treated as one of many different relationships that the free individual may be involved in the context of society. Here again the principle of equality has been implemented which resulted in the approach within social policy, that none of the relationships should be given special treatment or position. That is why for instance, for decades pension systems did not differentiate support for those retired, without taking into account the fact of being parent and raising kids (Esping-Andersen 2010). As a result of such approach, parenthood has been treated in an unjust way, since those who decided to have and raise children were in fact deciding for lower allowances when retired – due to necessity to limit their professional activity, or abandon it completely.

In case of family policy in Poland, in this aspect, there has been important change introduced to address this problem. On the 1st March 2019 “Mama 4+” (“Mother 4+”) programme was launched, which offers a minimum pension for those parents who have raised four or more children. This solution is a small, but important step to compensate and also promote the work of parenting and childcare, which are rarely understood and perceived as long-term investments that make the human capital creation possible.

When it comes to pension system arrangements, it must be clearly said, that not taking into account the indirect contribution of parents who bring up children whose future economic activity influences possibilities of pension benefits is not only unjust, but shortsighted at the same time. Perhaps, and this seems to be very interesting and important question, such myopia influenced and fostered individualistic approach, as well as more and more numerous abandonment of marriage and parenthood as attractive lifestyle. In other words, it seems as though social policy – and pension systems in particular – have sterilized the soil on which they depend. It means that in the process of designing social policy – whether social assistance or family policies – those responsible have forgotten, that it is the family which makes socio-economic reproduction possible (Michalski 2014). To help to see this problem, it is reasonable to engage the concepts of the free-rider problem

(Grossman, Oliver 1980) and the tragedy of the commons (Hardin 1968), which turn out to be useful tools for evaluating and discussing the dilemmas of social policy design. In this perspective, it is much easier to notice the imperfections of pension systems and social policy mechanisms in general. It becomes also much more clearer, that in many aspects they offered “bonuses” for those who preferred to invest in their own individual welfare and well-being, instead of sharing their time, means and skills in the process of raising kids. In terms of social and economic benefits this kind of life strategy can be compared to riding without a ticket. In the light of the concept of the tragedy of the commons, it seems evident that not all members of society contribute in the proportionate quantity to the sum of the welfare that they benefit from, and it does happen that those who did not contribute as much as others receive higher benefits.

In this regard it is also important to point at this “socializing” or “educating” aspect of a given legal and institutional design of social policy which shapes and influences the attitudes and choices

of citizens who perform different “calculations” when making their decisions. In other words, if system does offer some benefits without paying the cost, it certainly will become the choice of many people. This means that the final responsibility of the demographic situation we are in cannot be simply ascribed to the particular decisions that the members of society make.

On the basis of the aforementioned concepts of the tragedy of the commons and the free-rider problem – it should be easier to see that it is the family that has been this exploited and underrated asset. This means that to large extent social policy is distorted by social injustice, which has become often legalized, institutionalized and culturally perpetuated.

That is why - especially in the context of unfavourable demographic trends we face today - it should be thoroughly examined and explained why family policy should be understood as an essential practice of accomplishing and advancing social justice. Accordingly, social justice should be naturally engaged as the useful criterion for designing and evaluating social policy.

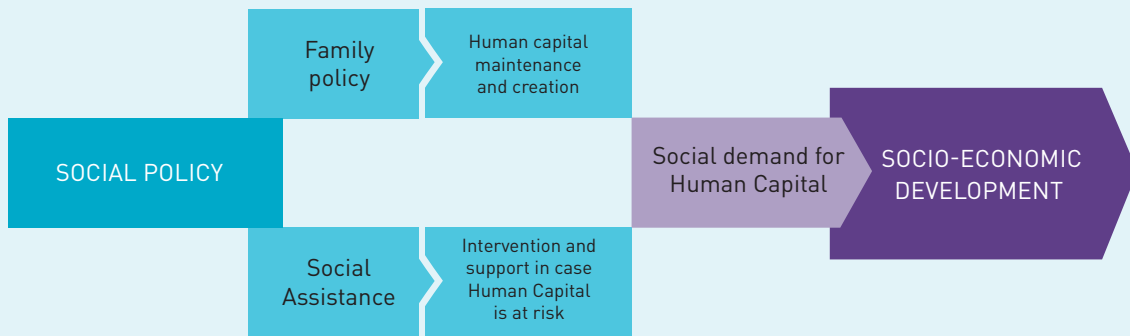
Towards just family policy and effective human capital creation

One of the problems that we face is that family policy is not always carefully distinguished from social assistance, which should serve other goals. Indeed, there is some confusion of concepts in this regard, which does not make discussing family policy easier and more effective (Fandrejewska-Tomczyk 2019). That is why, it is useful here to recall its definition – in the book „Ekonomia polityki rodzinnej” [The Economics of Family Policy] we read that, ‘family policy focuses on the nuclear family and its needs, especially those related to procreation and bringing up children, and in view of the persistence of low level of fertility that does not guarantee simple reproduction in developed countries, relatively much attention is paid primarily to solutions favouring procreative decisions’ (Kotowska 2021, p. 18). This distinction is also helpful in seeing how family policy should be seen not as a cost or burden, but rather an investment in human capital and socio-economic development in the wider perspective. Especially category of human capital is useful here in

understanding the crucial role of family policies in the light of social policy in general.

To make it more comprehensive, this difference between social assistance and family policy can be better understood on the basis of human capital as the final outcome of social policy, which is shown on the Graph 2. Whereas social assistance means intervention in crisis situations in order to solve specific problems, family policy should aim at creating and optimizing conditions for families to perform their functions properly. Human capital category may also be useful in terms of finding the border between these two areas of social policy – when it comes to social assistance, the goal is to provide help and support in situations when the creation of human capital is at risk or has been stopped, whereas in the case of family policy, it aims at providing and guaranteeing, if necessary strengthening the process of human capital formation. Similarly, the case is with social capital (Michalski 2014, pp. 72-5), which is not discussed here.

Graph 2. Family Policy and Social Assistance – two elements of Social Policy oriented towards Human Capital for Socio-Economic Development



If we accept the notion that family policy should not replace family in its functions and rather facilitate their accomplishment in natural way the category of responsibility comes to the fore. It can serve here as another useful benchmark for analysis of effectiveness of family policy. If families do take responsibilities in those areas which belong to them, than the goal of family policy is not to overtake this responsibility or make performing this responsibility difficult. Finally, the useful measure in this aspect would also be to look if the quantity and quality of human capital creation in the families is growing or not. Regarding responsibility, it is worth looking at the contribution of David Schmidtz, who points out the impact of the so-called externalisation of responsibility, which is a risk and threat connected with inadequately designed social policy, especially in terms of social assistance. He writes that ‘many people from both sides of the political barricade note that when social assistance programmes were set up to provide support for the poor, the latter’s overall quality of life began to decline, even though the quality of life for the rest of society was constantly increasing. Why? The decline in quality, if it ever occurred, coincided with the successes of these programmes in externalising responsibility for the welfare of the non-working poor’ (Schmidtz 2019, pp. 129-130). If we agree, that the creation and sustaining of human capital is the main objective of social

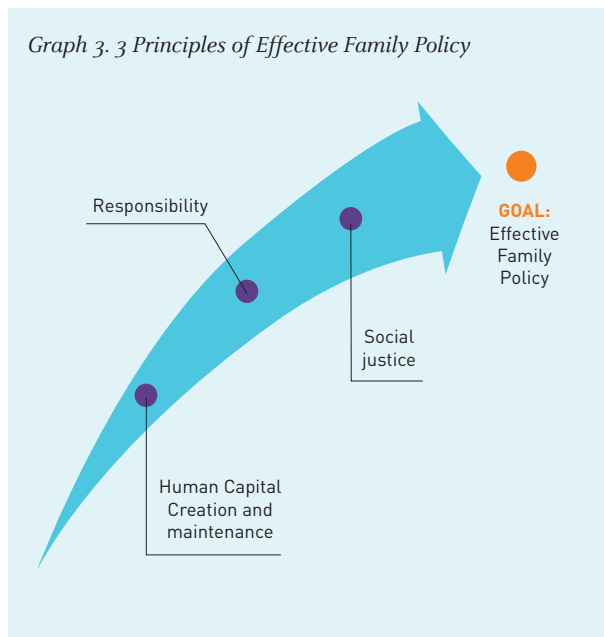
policy, therefore – as it is suggested here – this category can serve as practical tool for evaluating the adequacy and effectiveness of the family policy. This also can serve as argument for those criticizing family policy referring to effectiveness of the resources spent. This would mean that indeed – if the criterion of human capital quantity and quality would be engaged – one could argue more objectively if the resources have been misspent or not. At the same time this approach would refer to the notion of social justice, because it would allow for evaluating if the means or efforts were properly addressed, and allocated in a just way between different social groups or members.

For the purpose of illustrating this issue we can recall the ‘Family 500+’ programme, which symbolizes a breakthrough in the family policies in Poland. Until its introduction in 2016 there have never before been such large financial transfers made from the state to families. Besides, there were social assistance programs functioning on a regular basis. The introduction of ‘Family 500+’ programme has been criticized from the very beginning and mainly attacked for unsatisfactory pronatalist effects, without paying attention to its influence in terms of human capital investments. (cf. Gromada 2018; Brzezinski, Najsztub 2017; Kucharska 2020; Panek 2020; Paradysz 2021; Bartnicki, Alimowski 2022). Indeed, the data for Poland confirmed, that i.e. the programme resulted

in huge decline in poverty among children which has been one of the biggest social problems before the 'Family 500+' (Szarfenberg 2019). That is why in the light this family policy tool it is worth to see it not as a social assistance but precisely as compensation of parental work and investment in future human capital which will be source of wealth for the whole society. It means that the benefits produced – e.g in the form of taxes – by this young generation will be supporting also the retired generation. At the same time this programme fulfils the aforementioned criterium of responsibility, because it supports everyday activity carried out by parents, who are most adequate and best equipped persons to perform the process and take responsibility for it. It is also necessary to add that this financial support dedicated to families raising children does not cover full cost that parents and families bear in order to prepare child for independent life in the society. It is also necessary to mention, that e.g. in the labour market (Letablier et al. 2009) and pension system there is still much to be done

to ensure that social justice is achieved, e.g. removing obstacles that make parenthood a factor which reduces the chances of fair pay and adequate social security in the future.

Graph 3. 3 Principles of Effective Family Policy



Conclusions and recommendations

The main conclusion of the article is that in case of designing and evaluating family policies one should include three principles, which may serve as criteria at the same time: (1) human capital maintenance and creation, (2) responsibility and (3) social justice. It is shown on a graph below.

It may seem obvious, but still we should never forget that the complexity and dynamic character of society makes that discovering of its regularities – although is important and useful - never has been an easy task. The same case is with finding the answer to the question about the causes of current demographic crisis, which seems to be a symptom of a wider existential crisis in the West. This article offers some additional proposal in this aspect, and therefore underlines the perspective of social justice, and responsibility as those which should be included in the process of designing and evaluating family policy, as well as social policy in general. Once again here it is worth recalling this important recommendation that for the purpose of designing effective family policies they should be clearly divided from social assistance, even though in fact they are interdependent.

When it comes to family, it may seem clear that, after Gary S. Becker, there are no doubts that this basic social institution should be included among other important entities in economics and social policy. Unfortunately, quite often conflicts and discussions around family policy still show the lack of this knowledge. It is sometimes revealed in the oversimplified way when family policy is only understood as the matter of inputs and costs. The shortsightedness of this approach is well addressed in the following fragment: 'the family supplies the market with people: it is the sole and most important producer of human capital' (Giza-Poleszczuk 2005, p. 200), and that '(...) the economic role of the family in reproducing human capital has long been pointed out; not only in the sense of bringing to life and 'investing' in the education, skills or 'taste' (cultural capital) of children, but in the everyday sense of leisure, regenerating or even enhancing individual motivation in the external sphere (work, public activities, etc.)' (Giza-Poleszczuk 2005, p. 18). If we already have no doubts about the influence of the family' functioning on creation of human

capital, therefore, family policy should be regarded as a unique area of social policy. In this perspective, its task is mainly to protect and preserve the optimal conditions for families to “produce” this economically fundamental capital (cf. Michalski 2020).

The protection mentioned above seems to link directly social policy to the principle of justice as necessary criterium for evaluating its effectiveness. This proves that the results of parental effort in the form of socializing and educating young generation are to some extent treated as a “common pasture”, which is excessively and unequally exploited by the members of society. It is mostly evident in the case of pension systems based on intergenerational solidarity. Rawls offers interesting hint in this context, when he writes that ‘obviously, if all generations are to gain (except perhaps the earliest ones), the parties must agree to a principle of saving that ensures that each generation

receives what is due from its predecessors and passes on its fair contribution to those who come later’ (Rawls 2009, p. 419).

Therefore, social justice, which is introduced without cancelling the requirements of internalized responsibility, should be engaged as necessary and appropriate framework and benchmark for designing and monitoring not only family policy, but social policy in general (Schmidtz 2019, p. 33).

Accordingly, we should hope that if this change would take place and the socio-economic order would become fairer, it would be followed by the reaction of young generations in terms of forming marriages, starting families and having children. This is the most desired scenario at the moment if we really want to avoid the shortage of human capital which would be just one of the symptoms of demographic winter that is coming soon. In case it does not happen, we should prepare for the future that has nothing to do with the dreams

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