

RFAS

Revue française des affaires sociales

Call for multidisciplinary contributions on:
“Social minima in Europe — current tendencies and new challenges”
For the July–September 2017 issue

This call for contributions is addressed to researchers in philosophy, political science, history, geography, law, economics, and sociology, as well as to actors in the social protection field.

Articles are due prior to **1 February 2017**.

Social minima ensuring a minimum income for individuals or families in precarious situations exist to varying degrees in all European countries. Such benefits payments are made without corresponding social contributions and they are intended to fight against exclusion and extreme poverty. They concern diverse populations such as the long-term unemployed, the disabled, the elderly, young adults, and other socially vulnerable groups.

The situation has changed markedly since the economic and financial crisis of 2008, both from the standpoint of the number of people receiving minimum social benefits as well as that of the reforms undertaken to ensure their funding.

Due to the rapid rise to over 4 million social minimum beneficiaries in France, (all minima combined) in 2014,¹ the RFAS is re-evaluating these services, comparing them to those in neighbouring countries. To what degree has their performance in poverty reduction improved — or deteriorated — given the growth in precarious jobs, the housing crisis, and the decline in living standards of the poorest levels of the population in recent years?

We have noted that European countries facing similar situations of social vulnerability have adopted very different methods in ensuring a decent life for people in precarious situations. Such situations are defined in a variety of different ways, benefit levels vary greatly, and the definition of populations eligible to receive welfare benefits does not correspond from one European country to another. Minimum social benefits were introduced in European countries in different ways and at different periods, resulting in systems with similar aims, but whose methods of functioning often vary considerably.

¹ Some 4.13 million beneficiaries received one of the nine existing social minima in France, 31 December 2014, up 2.7% year on year (Mathieu Calvo (DREES), 2016, “Minima sociaux : la croissance soutenue du nombre d’allocataires s’atténue en 2014” [Social minima: the sustained growth of the number of beneficiaries eases in 2014], *Études et Résultats*, No. 964, DREES, June [online] <http://drees.social-sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/er964.pdf>).

The RFAS wants to bring together studies on the organization of social minima in other European countries to facilitate our understanding of our neighbours systems and to learn from their successes and failures in terms of their objectives.

Most European countries have readjusted their programmes in the wake of the economic and financial crisis. What have been the results of these reforms in the light of the objectives adopted, taking the changes in the economic situation into account? For example, have the beneficiaries of active solidarity income (RSA) [*revenu de solidarité active*] in France — whose numbers increased by 12.9% between 2012 and 2014, but only by 2.6% in 2015 — found increasing difficulties in entering the labour market in a context of high unemployment?

The many criticisms of social minima² (excessive complexity, lack of transparency for eligible people, the degree to which beneficiaries rights are not employed, threshold effects, the risk of social stigma, etc.) have contributed to the development of an extensive debate in the media of all European countries on the advantages and disadvantages of a “universal or base income”. In turn, this debate has renewed the controversy over these programmes. It is appropriate in this context to make a new assessment of all these benefit programmes, not only for France but for all European countries, to discover the best practices and the most effective reforms.

To answer the many questions this subject has raised, this issue of the RFAS will:

- Review what is known of the various topics presented in this call.
- Publish articles on particular research topics. Below are some suggestions for research areas grouped into broad themes on which the RFAS wants to bring together *original and innovative contributions*.

TOPIC 1: Multidisciplinary aspects of benefits and beneficiary profiles

The profile of social minima beneficiaries raises multiple questions. What factors determine the amount of benefits: personal wealth, family context, etc.? How are beneficiaries’ needs taken into account? Is income, including that from personal wealth, fully taken into consideration or only partially? What about assistance from family and friends? Is the amount of personal wealth taken into account, as is the case in France with the Solidarity Allowance for the Elderly which makes deductions from the beneficiary’s estate?

Beneficiaries’ socioeconomic profile has changed in almost all European countries since the start of the economic crisis. What changes have taken place in this field over the last ten years? Have the reforms undertaken in European countries redefined the definition of beneficiaries, for example by age or family composition, especially given the growing number of single parents? In particular, has the specific issue of the fight against child poverty in some countries served as a guide in adjusting welfare benefits?

France is an exception within the European Union by virtue of its large number of programmes (ten programmes in France and only one in Finland, for example) and the complexity of the criteria of eligibility governing access to rights. Have other European countries made significant changes in this area so as to better target the most disadvantaged or

² See the report [in French] of Christophe Sirugue, parliamentary deputy, to the Prime Minister, “Rethinking social minima. Towards a common base coverage”, April 2016 (<http://www.gouvernement.fr/partage/6952-remise-du-rapport-de-christophe-sirugue-repenser-les-minima-sociaux-vers-une-couverture-socle>).

simply to restrict public spending? Since 2008, income of the poorest 10% of the population has declined by 1% per year on average, according to the OECD.³ How have European countries responded to this increasing poverty? Have geographical disparities (departments, regions, and overseas communities for France; northern Germany; or southern Italy, for example) become more pronounced than prior to the economic crisis, opening the possibility of increased spatial polarization of beneficiaries of social minima?

Furthermore, the number of refugees has increased considerably in some European countries since 2015. Have there been changes reflecting a trend towards increased discrimination of foreigners and new immigrants in access procedures and eligibility criteria for social minimum benefits? In France, for example, does the multiplicity of steps necessary for access to rights lead to the exclusion of several categories of people who are potentially eligible for the Allowance for Asylum Seekers [*Allocation pour demandeur d'asile* – ADA]?

Inclusion of the gender dimension would be welcome: are women and single parent families in all countries over-represented among beneficiaries?

TOPIC 2: Unemployment and insecurity in the labour market

Job insecurity is often linked to unemployment. This has posed many questions concerning the interaction between welfare benefits and access to employment, and of how to strike a balance between beneficiaries' rights and their obligations. These are concepts which European countries have applied in very different ways. Have longitudinal studies of cohorts identified new beneficiaries with more chaotic careers than those of previous generations, in a context of increased job insecurity (frequency of temporary contracts [CDD] and very short-term contracts)?

What are the threshold effects on benefits and related rights? What is the procedure for encouraging the return to employment? If recipients are subject to obligations, how effective are the penalties imposed on those who do not respect them? What are the job training offers and support designed to facilitate the return to work? What have been the results? To what degree have welfare benefits for the long-term unemployed constituted inactivity traps?

The situation of disabled people, who make up between 7% and 10% of the European population, also raises many questions. What are the differences in treatment between those handicapped who are unable to work and those who are not? In these countries, many handicapped persons are in fact unable to work. What studies can be done of their situation to enable them to receive welfare benefits? What criteria are taken into account in calculating their benefits? What are the specific integration measures applied to improve their situation? What is the potential loss of income when returning to work? Why is there such reluctance in many countries, including France, in creating specific protection measures against dependence?

TOPIC 3: The elderly and minimum old-age pensions

Over 500,000 people in France⁴ receive solidarity old-age pensions, which exist in various forms in most European countries. What systems are applied in different countries ensuring

³ Database of distribution of OECD income, June 2014. (<https://www.oecd.org/fr/els/soc/OCDE2014-Le-point-sur-les-inegalites-de-revenu.pdf>).

⁴ 554,200 beneficiaries of the additional retirement allowance (*allocation de solidarité vieillesse* – ASV) or the solidarity allowance for the elderly (*allocation de solidarité aux personnes âgées* – ASPA) on 31 December 2014 (Mathieu Calvo (DREES), 2016, “Minima sociaux : la croissance soutenue du nombre d’allocataires s’atténue en

that every pensioner is entitled to the necessary minimum resources? Aspects that could be studied in developing such comparisons, might cover the definition of eligible persons: to what degree do different systems take into account questions of age, health status, and the number of quarterly contributions necessary for full or partial benefits, to name a few examples? Are personal resources taken into consideration? What are the conditions for increasing benefits? Under what conditions can the surviving spouse benefit in turn from the minimum survivor's pension? How is the amount calculated?

TOPIC 4: Young Adults

The fight against poverty and the disaffiliation of young adults is a major subject of attention by the French authorities which may also facilitate a review of existing programmes elsewhere in Europe.

What are the benefits for which they are eligible? What are the conditions of age, resources, training, and integration? Are these recognised under common law? If not, what makes them different?

Is parents' income taken into account? Is there any parental obligation of child support?

TOPIC 5: Related Legal Rights

In most European countries, the right to welfare benefits — whether for long-term unemployment, age, or disability — opens up rights to other benefits and occasionally to multiple benefits, an aspect often neglected in the study of social systems. What are the consequences in terms of access to social housing and housing assistance? What is the possible impact on the beneficiary's fiscal situation? How are his medical expenses paid? How are family benefits effected for beneficiaries with children?

Another aspect of related rights concerns specific advantages recognized by some countries for social minima recipients: what about exceptional measures, such as a Christmas bonus or vacation assistance? What is the impact on the payment of telephone, electricity, gas, or water bills? Do beneficiaries have priority access to anti-exclusion programmes? Local social transfers could also lead to studies of their effectiveness in the context of centralized public policy.

TOPIC 6: Social minima management institutions: employee living and working conditions

This topic is divided into two questions.

First: what is the governance of social minima in the countries studied? Who manages such institutions? Who finances them? Is this the responsibility of municipalities, regions, the state, social security funds, or other actors? What are the relationships between benefits agencies and professional counselling organizations? Are they fused into one agency? If not, how do they coordinate their work (by contracts, bid solicitation, etc.)?

Secondly, the increasing case load in the family allowance funds (*caisses d'allocations familiales* – CAF) has at times forced some offices to temporarily close, so as to deal with the flood of requests or complaints, resulting in a deterioration in the quality of reception of beneficiaries.

2014” [Social minima: the sustained growth of the number of beneficiaries eases in 2014], *Études et Résultats*, No. 964, DREES, June [online] <http://drees.social-sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/er964.pdf>).

As a result, CAF employees have increasingly been victims of antisocial behaviour and sometimes of verbal or physical abuse. The exasperation of some recipients, due to late payments of benefits or their misunderstanding of the procedures leading to the termination of their rights, confronts the CAF employees with unmanageable situations. Their working conditions have been effected by this.

What role have social workers been able to play in this context of social tensions?

Studies of issues that have arisen more recently could be added to these topics, such as that concerning the possible establishment of a universal pension paid to all regardless of age and resources. This question is currently being discussed in France and has already received an initial response in some European countries. It would be of interest to examine such actions.

More information on the content of this call for contributions can be obtained from **Jeanne Fagnani** or **Brigitte Lestrade** who will be coordinating this issue at the following addresses:

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Authors who want to propose an article to the revue on this theme should send it along with a summary and a presentation of the author (see “advice to authors” of RFAS [online] at <http://drees.social-sante.gouv.fr/etudes-et-statistiques/publications/revue-francaise-des-affaires-sociales/>)

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prior to 1 February 2017