

Inclusive policy-shaping – an excellent example

A case study on the development of the children and family policy at the Ministry of Social Affairs

Peculiarity of the inclusive case

The process of shaping the children and family policy in the Ministry of Social Affairs (MSA) took place over a longer period of time (2007–2010). Thus, the changes in different forms of inclusion and adjusting them to the expectations and needs of the parties could be monitored. In the context of Estonia, the inclusive way in which associations and the ministry cooperated in the shaping of a policy can be regarded as novel. The case study covers a long-term process that began with wording the area of family policy and ended with preparing a development plan for the well-being of children and families.

Carrying out the analysis

John Kingdon's policy process model is used as the theoretical background guiding the analysis (Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies by John Kingdon, 1984). In his now classic approach, Kingdon describes policy-shaping as a process, where social issues first become prominent as problems and are then tackled on the policy agenda. According to him (and other political scientists), policies are to be viewed not as mechanisms in which problems seek solutions, but on the contrary – where solutions seek problems.

The analysis focuses on the policy-shaping process as the analysis of inclusion forms (the latter mainly in the context of the Parent Education Roundtable) on the basis of the interviews (12 in total) conducted in May and June of 2010 with the officials of MSA, the former Minister of Social Affairs and the members of the Parent Education Roundtable, but also on observations of the Parent Education Roundtable meetings and the minutes from these meetings. The analysis was conducted by Maiu Uus (Praxis analyst in the Governance and Civil Society Programme) and Peeter Vihma (lecturer at the Tallinn University Institute of International and Social Studies). A longer version of the study is available at www.ngo.ee/tof.


A short description of the inclusion process

From the point of view of the policy-shaping process, three stages can be discerned in the family policy case:

- * The first includes the preparation of the Family Life Quality Development Plan (FLQDP) by the Ministry. At the same time, the Parent Education Roundtable is formed to function as a body that provides advice and information. The goal is to raise the issue regarding the situation that the family policy is in and offer solutions to problems, or as Kingdon would say, open the window of influencing the state family policy. This stage ends when the FLQDP is rejected at the beginning of 2009.
- * In the second stage, a closer and more practical cooperation is established between the area's target and interest groups and the ministry. First, the initial document for parent education is prepared in collaboration between the members of the roundtable and the ministry. Later, a new development plan for children and families is approved.
- * The third stage grows out of the Parent Education Roundtable and the cooperation initiated by the ministry with the area's target and interest groups. Having clarified common attitudes in the first stage and having similar goals, the associations and the ministry act as mutually supportive forces in the third stage. Their aim is to open a new window by virtue of the improved children and family development plan. They succeed and as a result, the children and family development plan for 2011–2020 is prepared.

The influential factors within the process

- * **Very broad area and weak cooperation between ministries.** In addition to structural changes within the ministry, the wording of the family policy was influenced by the mutual cooperation practices of ministries. Each draft for preparing a development plan and each development plan draft must be approved by ministries and the Government Office. The plan of preparing a Family Life Quality Development Plan received critical



feedback from the ministries in late 2008 and early 2009. The Strategy Unit of the Government Office and the Ministry of Finance were especially critical of the proposal to draw up an extensive development plan. They disapproved of both the ambition to unite different areas under a single umbrella (was very horizontal) and the overly long time period. Such a feedback delayed preparing the development plan and submitting it to a government session.

- * **The emergence of parent education as a central issue in inclusion.** On 22 April 2008, the Ministry of Social Affairs called a meeting of the Parent Education Roundtable by which, an attempt was made to unite the so far single practices and strategically develop the broader area of family policy at the Ministry of Social Affairs. The more general goal was to spark a wide-ranging discussion on the content of parent education and the need for it, whilst the more specific aim was to introduce the initial ideas of drawing up the development plan to partners and get their feedback. The associations that emerged at the first meetings of the Parent Education Roundtable were added to the list of bodies included in the approval list. Here, the influence that the call for the first meetings of the Roundtable and the launch of closer cooperation with interest groups had on the process should be highlighted. As there were no restrictions to joining the roundtable, it seemed that the more active (outside the roundtable as well) participants were included in the list of approving associations as a result of that work.
- * **The cementing of a joint message with the help of events external to the process – a conference and a trade fair.** Two events that played a significant role in the emergence of parent education as a part of family policy (independent of the Ministry, but organised with its participation) were the trade fair Child and Family and the conference You are a Role Model. In addition, the events helped tie together the parties and their action plans, as the need for addressing parent education had become apparent to different associations through their own activities.
- * **Submitting the proposal for preparing the family life quality development plan to a broader circle of people.** At the end of October 2008, the MSA submitted the Proposal for Preparing the Family Life Quality Development Plan for the years 2010–2015 to ministries, the Government Office and 17 organisations for approval. The authors of the proposal were the Deputy Secretary General on Social Policy and the head of the area. The officials who had come into contact with approval on their previous positions admitted that the circle of the approving associations and bodies was wide compared to the practice prevalent in other ministries, where a document is typically approved only by a few agencies and associations.
- * **The political and structural prerequisites for developing family policy.** The proposal for preparing a Family Life Quality Development Plan was not successful due to the concurrency of different so-called political streams. The window of opportunity to prepare a novel and horizontal state development plan remained closed for the Ministry, when the Government of the Republic rejected the FLQDP proposal (formally and legally speaking, however, it was the MSA itself that withdrew the proposal). The rejection of the document was a disappointment for both the participating officials and associations, as they had worked for over a year on developing and changing the area. Yet, expectations were still high. After analysing the new situation, the Secretary General of the ministry decided to create a separate structural unit to handle the area in autumn 2009. Thus, it can be said that the structural changes at the ministry created a prerequisite for opening a new window in the political stream – problems and solutions found each other.
- * **The positive influence of plan revision.** In spring 2009, as a result of the feedback received from other bodies and ministries, the authors themselves initially began to question the necessity of the directions and activities written into the development plan. Looking back at the period, the officials say that the rejection forced them to “sober up” and word the goals of family policy more clearly later on.
- * **Information confusion among interest groups.** After the FLQDP proposal was rejected, not all of the associations were informed of the glitches in launching the preparation of the development plan, but voiced their wish to influence the policy in a way that would be more effective and practical than before. The associations whose cooperation with the ministry was more close-knit or who had established personal contacts with officials were better informed of the stoppage in the process of the whole development plan and its background.
- * **Additional outputs from interest groups.** From the October of the same year to January 2010, the Families and Children Advice Centre led the establishment of the Chamber of the Children’s Hobby Centre. The latter brought together 16 associations, of which most were also included in the roundtable and preparing the proposal for the development plan. As a direct result of both events, the associations’ cooperation opportunities and potential for cooperation increased. It became more and more clear to the officials of MSA that the associations were credible partners and in cooperation, political processes could be influenced more thoroughly. In addition to the direct influence of the associations, inclusion increases the likelihood that a problem is given due attention in the media. For politicians, the latter is especially significant.

Good practices in inclusive policy-shaping

- * **The roundtable increased the motivation of interest groups to collaborate**, even if earlier cooperation experience and the contribution to the roundtable's work had varied.
- * **The clear aim of the roundtable allowed wording new issues.** For example, the associations were responsible for raising the issue regarding the importance of fathers in family policy, which had so far been rather mother-centred in Estonia.
- * **Referring to strategy documents.** In addition to the initiation of officials and politicians, an issue is successfully pointed to when previously concluded contracts or accepted development plans are referred to. The lack or expiry of such documents is just as telling. Take, for example, the action programme of the Government of the Republic for 2007–2011, which included the task given to the MSA to prepare a family life quality development plan in 2009.
- * **Tasks were delegated upon preparing the development plan.** Having agreed on the development plan documents, the people present were divided into teams responsible for writing chapters. Certain people were assigned to bear the bulk of the responsibility and a schedule was drawn up. The members of the roundtable collaborated with each other, analysed and wrote chapters and sent them to the ministry. The officials of the ministry were to formalise the chapter and submit it to politicians. Unfortunately, the people contributing were at a loss as to what became of the input they had sent out.
- * **The competence and previous inclusion experiences of the officials play a great role in submitting a development plan.** Upon submitting the new version, previous experiences were used successfully to harmonise aims and explain them to officials and politicians. The nature of the issue had already been clarified to politicians (e.g. via the Strategy Unit) while preparing the documents preceding the Children and Family Development Plan. Compared to the FLQDP proposal, the Children and Family Development Plan was bulkier, more thoroughly planned and approved by a large number of ministries and the more important associations during bilateral meetings. In addition, the description of the necessity for the development plan was different, so that it did not contradict the policy in force directly, but supplemented it instead. Also, the fact that the officials at the Ministry of Social Affairs have greater experience in inclusion than the average officials should not be underestimated.
- * **The need for a state development plan was affirmed consistently.** Officials and associations recognised their role in explaining the issue to politicians and getting it on the political agenda. It was jointly admitted that without a political decision, the possibility that an extensive change in the situation of families was achieved was a slim one.
- * **Supporting the development of partners.** In spring 2009, the Ministry of Social Affairs started to purposefully educate the members participating in the Parent Education Roundtable. Presentations were made on gender sensitivity in education, on the evaluation of the programmes supporting parenthood on the example of England etc. It must be stressed that planning these presentations and providing them to associations is not a difficult or time-consuming task for officials, who often attend information days, training sessions, presentations of study results or the like. From time to time, it must simply be considered if some of the partners in the same area might be interested in the presentations attended. Such dissemination of information helps partners homogenise information and understanding about the situation and prepare them for cooperation.
- * **Officials were determined in their actions.** The officials leading the inclusion process were convinced they were right in their idea, had a favourable attitude and previous inclusion experiences and were creative. If the circumstances mentioned before (previous documents, structural changes, influence of interest groups and public presentations) help word the issue, then the (self-)analysis of officials and by that, determining the readiness of the whole office, has a significant impact on to what extent the issue is raised and how much of the needed attention it is given.

Recommendations

- * **To people to be included: one method does not have to cover everything.** If partners think that they are unable to fulfil their goals in the form of collaboration prevalent thus far (e.g. in a roundtable), then it would be wise to take an active role and find more suitable participation opportunities (direct communication with officials, articles in the media, public addressing, debates with political parties, conferences, carrying out joint projects with other associations, establishing coalitions and new organisations etc). At the same time, it is important to consider whether and how these new ways of participation influence the already functioning

cooperation with the ministry; to inform and talk plans through – such an approach helps to form mutual partnerships in the long run.

- * **To people including: a wider discussion in the society might be of help in policy-shaping.** Opinion articles, conferences, TV shows, debates etc allow drawing more attention to the issue and initiating a debate in the society.
- * **To people including: interest groups can also be turned to for support.** Support can be asked for in policy-shaping to influence politicians and decision-makers, but also in the discussion for a specific document. For example, the ministry failed to use the potential of the roundtable to the fullest during the fast-paced times when the development plan proposal was being prepared. The ministry did consult some representatives of associations in some issues, but the circle of approval was considerably wider than that. In retrospect, it can be seen that in this situation, the information list of the roundtable could have been used to distribute the draft of the development plan proposal and get written feedback from the members of the roundtable to the plan in full or to some chapters of it.

The future role of the Parent Education Roundtable

Now that an important aim has been achieved, the justified question about the future of the Parent Education Roundtable is bound to arise. The participants say that activities should be continued in the form of permanent inclusion, but its role, the goal of its activities should be clarified – even if just for each consecutive year (monitoring the development plan, developing services, a stronger advisory body and a clearly defined influence in the policy-shaping process). Thus, it may come to fill the position of an advisory body. Read more about it in the analysis Permanent Advisory Bodies as a Form of Inclusion, www.ngo.ee/tof.

It is also possible to divide the goals into three groups and perform them by three different forms of inclusion:

1. **Wide discussion and raising awareness about the importance of parent education.** Among others, this includes an event-oriented approach, organising partnership days for a wider circle of participants, communicating with the media, organising trainings, carrying out joint projects with partners.
2. **Informing interest groups.** Developing the roundtable information list into a systemic information channel so that the interested parties could keep up with the latest news. It would also be possible to add electronic options to get feedback.
3. **Influencing policies.** This includes monitoring and giving advice in implementing policies. A more closed circle would probably be suitable – why not carry on under the name of a roundtable?

The continued activities of the roundtable as an advisory body present two challenges:

- * Although the ministry might wish to cooperate only with the more professional associations, it must be ensured that this did not come to restrict others' access or dialogue opportunities. In order to fulfil its aim, the roundtable must allow weaker voices to be heard (i.e. smaller associations or associations located far from Tallinn, less professional associations and associations with fewer presentation experiences). In ensuring the aforementioned, it is important to monitor the organisational side of the roundtable and the actual possibilities (resources) of the associations to participate in the roundtable.
- * So that the roundtable could function better, it would be wise to choose a coordinator for the roundtable from the associations whose task it is to lay down the strategy and goals, discuss them and organise work. However, the cooperation between the ministry and the coordinator must be clarified, and compensating certain costs must be thought through.

Connection with the good practices of inclusion

The generally recognised inclusion principles of Estonia have been described in the good inclusion practices: <http://www.ngo.ee/node/278>. In shaping the children and family policy, we bring out some examples characterising the compliance with good inclusion practices and add some practical recommendations.

Principle – clarity in the aim of inclusion

It becomes apparent in this case that it is important to word the aim of inclusion and clarify the expectations to cooperation with the included target and interest groups.

- * It would be beneficial to repeat the aims of inclusion constantly and remind the participants why they have come together and what they expect the results of the cooperation to be.

- * On the way towards partnership, the expectations of the ministry and the persons included in cooperation must be taken into consideration. If these expectations are the same, cooperation is more successful for both parties.
- * If the expectations of the parties do not align or change after some time, the forms of inclusion and participation which could help fulfil the yet unfulfilled expectations must be reconsidered.

Principle – participants to be included

Considering the relative novelty of such a large-scale inclusion practice and the different backgrounds of officials, it was admitted that at first, the people to be included were selected quite randomly. Pursuant to good practice, this is not model behaviour. However, it must be admitted that at the time, doing so was in concordance with the then knowledge of the officials and the then aims of inclusion.

Principle – inclusion in early stages

The officials claimed that the two weeks given for seeking approval was sufficient. The associations, on the other hand, claimed that it was impossible to carry out work requiring thorough examination in such a short timeframe. The clash probably stems from the fact that the initiator of the approval is well informed of the contents of the document and is unable to determine the time it would take someone else to examine the document. According to good practices, the consultations are to last for at least four weeks.

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