

Social Consequences of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Europe – How to reduce new risks of poverty and social exclusion

HALVORSEN Rune and HE Biao, Oslo Metropolitan University¹

Introduction

In 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic has escalated to cause more deaths than any other registered global diseases (Global Burden of Disease Study, John Hopkins University 2020). In addition to the health consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have reasons to be concerned about the social consequences. In this paper, we will occupy ourselves with the later.

In the spring 2020 European countries have seen mass layoffs and rapid increase in unemployment due to the forced close down of services, prohibition of public events, closed schools and kindergartens, travel restrictions, quarantines, requests to work from home or even curfews. As a consequence, more people are at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

As a matter of paradox, in some European countries, such as Norway, the social consequences seem to be more dramatic than the health consequences in itself. While Norway has only registered 250 deaths caused by the Covid-19 virus, more than 400.000 workers have become unemployed or experienced temporary lay-off. In Norway, the registered unemployment has increased from 2.3 percent of the workforce to more than 10 percent – the highest since the 1930s (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration 2020). The largest groups of new applicants for unemployment benefit have been shopworkers, waiters, hairdressers, chefs, cleaners, receptionists and drivers.

It is difficult to estimate the long-term social consequences, but historical experience from economic recessions suggest that we are likely to see accumulations in negative effects on the national economy over time, such as higher unemployment rates, debt problems, and bankruptcies over some time. The recession we may expect in the aftermaths of the Covid-19 crisis is likely to make it more difficult youth to enter the labour market. In general youth with low education are more at risk of unemployment, have more problems to achieve work that allow them to qualify for adequate social protection coverage

¹ The authors acknowledge the receipt of funding from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under grant agreement CHN-19/004, and the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870698. The opinions published in this paper reflects only the author's view. Corresponding author: Professor R. Halvorsen, Oslo Metropolitan University, Department of social work, child welfare and social policy, Oslo. rune.halvorsen@oslomet.no,

and avoid in-work poverty. This is even more the case for young adults with disabilities (Halvorsen and Hvinden 2018).

New risks and vulnerabilities

So far, we have addressed the vulnerabilities or risks associated with unemployment and economic recession. But there also other risks associated with the confinement, mobility restrictions and social distancing.

- People in institutions are even more at risk of isolation from family and friends during the pandemic. They are at risk of not having any influence on their own life situation, and their representative organizations not being consulted about the care provision.
- People with mental health problems are more likely to struggle if they are self-isolating or in quarantine, and do not have access to their regular health services or self-help groups due to social distancing.
- Persons with disabilities who need assistance may experience more isolation and difficulties in managing their household with the social distancing requirements and curfew.
- Due to confinement and social distancing domestic violence against family members and partners has become more difficult to uncover.
- Children for which the school provides a safe haven and essential break from tensions, abuse and violence at home, are even more vulnerable while schools are closed.
- Finally, more families have experienced difficulties in achieving a satisfactory work-life balance during the lock-down period. Women have probably experienced this more than men.

What can governments do to mitigate these situations? When addressing these and other risk situations, there are some guiding principles we may want to have in mind. Based on our earlier writing about guiding principles in social protection policies and inspired by Marta Nussbaum's and Amartya Sen's capability approach (Halvorsen and Hvinden 2018), we will point to two principles:

- First, social services need to be accommodated to the diversity of needs and aspirations among the claimants and beneficiaries of those services.

- Second, persons claiming and receiving social services in cash and kind must have the possibility to voice their concerns and make them count. The individual service users and their representative organisations must have real opportunities for exercising influence on the services they receive through more symmetric relations with representatives of public authorities.

The way forward

The Covid-19 crisis reminds us about the importance of having a sustainable and well-functioning social protection system to avoid poverty and promote social cohesion within and across European countries. To achieve this, we will need more creativity, policy learning and innovation across countries and across continents.

However, a one-sided focus on people's entitlement to social protection will not be enough. We are in need of forward-looking social protection strategies that enable people to sustain and advance their well-being in face of challenges to it. Society needs active citizens who are not only able to participate in the labour market and living a decent life in accordance with the prevailing standards in society. For society to function and be able to face future crisis, people must have the opportunities to participate in all realms of public and societal life, to pursue the life-goals they have reasons to value and want for themselves and to be involved in decision making processes of importance to the themselves, the community and society as a whole.

These forms of economic, social and political participation cannot be achieved only by providing more resources and better services, they also require that the specific circumstances of individual citizens and citizens' groups and their freedom of choice be taken into account. In other words, we need to address not only people's sense of security but also people's sense of autonomy and influence on their own life situation.

When responding to the Covid-19 crisis European governments have had to balance different considerations; not only the health risks but also the economic and social consequences. The overall aim has been to ensure that the disease burden remains low, that the health services are not overburdened, and that the costs of the infectious disease control remain as low as possible. European governments have chosen different strategies, depending on their national and local conditions. It will probably take a couple of years before we are able to evaluate the effectiveness and the costs of the different approaches. In the

meanwhile, we need an open and fact-based dialogue to facilitate international cooperation and policy learning.

Reference

Halvorsen, R. and Hvinden, B. (Eds) (2018) Youth, Diversity and Employment, Edward Elgar Publisher

新冠疫情对欧洲的社会影响及如何减少贫困与社会排斥风险

鲁尼·哈佛森，何彪¹

导言

2020 年以来，新冠疫情愈演愈烈，导致了比其他任何疾病都更多的致死人数。我们有理由担忧，疫情除了直接影响健康，还导致了深远的社会影响。这次危机有可能加剧社会中的不平等，因此要求更多、更好的社会干预。然而，突如其来的经济衰退和正在累积的巨量债务，可能意味着社会开支方面的黯淡前景。新冠疫情让我们意识到综合性的社会保护体系的重要性，这种体系可以防止贫困及社会排斥。

2020 年春季，由于服务停止、公共活动禁令、学校与幼儿园关闭、交通限制、检疫隔离、居家工作令乃至宵禁等措施，欧洲各国均可见大规模的裁员和迅速上升的失业率。由此导致，更多人面临贫困和社会排斥的风险。

面对这个困境，欧洲一些国家，比如挪威，遭受的剧烈社会影响还要甚于健康影响。挪威只有 250 例新冠病毒致死记录，同时有超过 40 万人失业或被暂时解雇。据挪威劳工福利局数据，挪威社会的失业率从 2.3% 剧增到 10%，这是该国自 1930 年代以来的最高失业记录。新增申领失业补助的人群中，大都是店铺职员、服务生、理发技工、厨师、清洁工、前台接待员和司机。

目前还难以估计新冠疫情造成的长远社会影响，但是历史上的经济衰退相关经验表明，国家经济层面累积的负面效应将会随着时间而显现，包括高失业率、债务问题以及一段时间之后的破产问题。在新冠疫情之后，我们预计，经济衰退将使得年轻人更难进入就业市场。一般而言，受教育程度较低的年轻人面临更高失业风险，以及在挣得适足社会保障、避免在业贫困方面遇到更多问题。对于残障青年人而言，这个挑战愈加重大。²

新的风险与脆弱性

行文至此，我们还只是将脆弱性或风险与失业率、经济衰退联系起来。然而，拘束在身、行动受限和社交距离还带来了其他的风险。

第一，疫情之下，在托养机构中的人遭受更大的与家人、朋友隔绝的风险。他们无法对自己的生活处境施加影响，他们的代表机构也未就其照料服务而参与提供咨询。

第二，有精神障碍的人，由于与世隔绝、检疫隔离，更有可能陷入挣扎困境，却囿于社交距离，无法获得常规的精神健康服务或其他自主组织的协助。

第三，需要协助的残障人，由于社交距离乃至宵禁的限制，在处理日常家务生活方面，可能遭受更多的隔离及困境。

第四，由于拘束在家和社交距离，家庭成员或亲密关系伴侣遭受家庭暴力，更难以去投诉揭发。其中，对于儿童来说，学校提供了一个重要的安全的避风港，令其脱离紧张的家庭对峙、虐待或暴力；如今学校关停，儿童面临更加脆弱的处境。

¹ 作者感谢挪威外交部项目（CHN-19/004）以及“欧盟远见 2020”项目（No 870698）对研究的支持。本文观点仅代表作者观点。通讯作者，鲁尼·哈佛森教授，奥斯陆城市大学社会工作、儿童福利及社会政策系，rune.halvorsen@oslomet.no。

² Halvorsen, R. and Hvinden, B. (Eds) (2018) Youth, Diversity and Employment, Edward Elgar Publisher

第五，由于全部封闭在家，更多家庭难以平衡工作-生活之间的关系。女性作为家庭照顾者、劳动收入者可能会经历比男性更多的挑战。

对此，政府能够采取何种缓解措施？政府处理这些风险及困难处境，应该注意到以下基本原则：首先，社会服务应该加以调整，以符合不同收益人群的多样需求。其次，主张及接受社会服务的人应当有机会表达自己的担忧、诉求，并对政策产生影响。在公共部门制定相关政策的过程中，接受服务的个人及其代表组织应当享有真切的机会，通过均衡对等的关系表达诉求、产生影响。

未来的路

新冠疫情危机提醒我们，建立可持续的、运转顺畅的社会保护体系，对于在欧洲和世界各地消除贫困、促进社会凝聚力，至关重要。为此，我们需要更多创造力，以及跨越国家、洲陆界限的政策借鉴和创新。

然而，只关注人们享有获得社会保护的權利，还不足够。我们需要展望社会保护的策略，令其可以赋能于人民，在面临危机的时候持续提升自己的福祉。社会要发挥功能、应对危机，离不开积极的公民成员。他们不仅进入劳动力市场，依据社会的主流规则过上体面生活；还要有机会参与所有公共领域及社会生活，参与对个人、社区及整个社会影响重大的决策过程，去追寻自己有理由认定的生活目标。

只有提供更多的资源和社会服务，残障人等处于不利地位的社群参与前述经济、社会、政治层面的决策才可能实现。这也意味着认真对待个体或群体社会成员的特定处境，及其选择生活方式的实质自由。易言之，我们不仅需要考虑到人们的安全感，还要考虑到他们寻求自主、掌控自己生活的感受。

欧洲各国政府在应对新冠疫情危机时，需要平衡各方面的考虑：不只是健康风险，还包括经济、社会方面受到的影响。政府决策的总体目标是确保疾病导致的负担保持在低水平，健康服务不会陷入过载状态，以及尽可能降低控制疾病传染的成本。为此，各国政府基于本国情况而有不同选择方案，本文概括了以下三种：

第一种是从节俭方面来考虑政策，降低工资水平、节省开支、减少相关社会服务，只提供最基本的社会保障。但这个选择的问题在于会增强社会的不平等，对于穷人来说会更艰难。第二种是社会投资方案，欧盟想要在欧盟区域内推进这个社会投资方案，运用社会政策来增强对教育、劳工、生育等领域的投入。第三种是能力建设方案，投入资源让一般人有更多的选择自己生活方式的自由。既注重一般社会保障，也注重个人的自由选择。

评估这些不同决策的有效性及其代价，可能还需要数年时间。与此同时，我们应当保持开放心态，开展基于事实的对话，以促进国际合作和政策借鉴。