

The need for more holistic and multi-dimensional welfare policies

Dr Ingun Borg, *Department of Geography, University of Sheffield*

This blog focuses on austerity as a context for, and a relational experience of, welfare policymaking since 2010. It draws on in-depth qualitative research with policymakers, frontline workers and low-income families before, during and immediately after the Covid-19 pandemic.

The past two decades have seen major changes to welfare policies which previously consisted of several separate means-tested benefits, alongside specific disability and health benefits and a near universal child benefit to name a few. In 2010 the coalition government set about to radically reform the benefit system by merging Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Housing Benefit and Child and Working Age Tax Credits into one Universal Credit. Universal Credit was aimed at simplifying a complex welfare landscape, but the administrative simplification continues to hide a complex web of support for people with very diverse needs. People receiving Universal Credit can thus be out of work or in-work; healthy or less so; younger or older; live with or without dependent children; or a combination thereof.

Universal Credit was developed at the same time as the 2010-15 Coalition Government introduced austerity policies in the form of reduction in welfare benefits and cuts to Local Authority funding. The latter led to closure or reduction in local services in many parts of the country. Before delving into the social and spatial implications of these reforms, it is worth noting that they coincided with significant austerity measures affecting the civil service which shrank by nearly a fifth due to austerity cuts and in 2016 was at its smallest since 1945ⁱ. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), who are in charge of developing Universal Credit, lost 39,000 jobs or 32% of the total between March 2010 and March 2015ⁱⁱ. This included closing almost 100 Jobcentresⁱⁱⁱ at the same time as the remaining staff were tasked with developing and implementing some of the largest welfare changes in decades.

One such welfare change was the introduction of Universal Credit in-work progression. This policy is aimed at reducing in-work poverty, an aim few would argue against. However, the way it does this is through a very narrow goal of 'increased earnings' leading to what has been called a 'work first then work more' policy^{iv}. The policy demands that people who are already doing some work increase their earnings by finding more work. For most people on Universal Credit this means navigating insecure and precarious local job opportunities, fewer childcare places, few if any baby, toddler and youth clubs, libraries that can't stay open more than a few hours a week, lack of local services overall, and reduced benefit generosity.

The in-work progression policy furthermore adds conditionality rules to people previously insulated from sanctions or threat of sanctions. Now people may lose benefits for simply failing to earn above a specific monetary threshold^v. This policy has been singled out for disproportionately affecting women and children^{vi} and in my research these policy requirements felt particularly unfair by parents who thought they were already 'doing the right thing' by combining paid work with unpaid care and other everyday activities.

"They know I'm in work but they are still saying I need to be looking for more work. One minute they're saying you don't need to look for work because you have two children then when I start working they say I have to look for more work!" (Quote from participant interview).

The policy places little, if any, attention on how people are supposed to fit (more) work into lives enveloped by austerity for over a decade. Austerity has shaped the local economic and social context in which Universal Credit was introduced and has led to uneven geographical landscapes of inequality and poverty^{vii}; the everyday experiences of the policy bring to the surface tensions between an abstract and narrow policy and a relational and holistic everyday life.

So, what if we took a holistic and multi-dimensional approach to welfare policies? One that is based in broader information bases, that contain multi-dimensional goals, and outcome measures that reflect people's ambitions and broader well-being. Such policies could acknowledge and 'count' activities that have value in people's lives, but which are typically excluded from the policy process. The policymakers I interviewed as part of my research shared the same fundamental values as those receiving Universal Credit; both valued combining paid work with other meaningful activities like care and community activities and working and living locally. But when it came to designing policies according to these values, policymakers felt constrained by institutional cultures and practices based on narrow economic beliefs dominated by an austerity ethos of reducing the welfare budget.

My research shows how this narrow welfare policy outlook has inhibited a multi-dimensional approach to information and measures in the policy process^{viii}. Instead, the policy focus has been on implementation and delivery with less attention to what is being delivered or how it affects everyday lives on the ground. Taking a broader human development perspective might allow Universal Credit to include, but not be restricted to, economic development, whilst also bringing wider views on what constitutes progression into the policy^{ix}. A place-based (welfare and work) quality of life index is perhaps an ambitious target but would account for what matters to different people in different places and thereby could have the power to reduce the current policy mismatch.

Notes:

This blog is based on the author's PhD thesis *Universal Credit In-work Progression: Using the capability approach to explore shared values and constrained choices among policymakers, frontline workers and low-income families*. Available at the White Rose e-thesis archive and upon request.

ⁱ Sasse, T and Norris, E (2019) *Moving on: The costs of high staff turnover in the civil service*. Institute for Government Briefing paper. Retrieved from [Moving On: The cost of high staff turnover in the civil service | Institute for Government](#)

ⁱⁱ Timmins, N. (2016) *Universal Credit: from disaster to recovery?*, Institute of Government, Retrieved from [5064 IFG - Universal Credit Publication WEB AW.pdf \(instituteforgovernment.org.uk\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ House of Commons Library (2017), *Jobcentre Plus Office Closure*, Debate Pack CDP-2017-0089, Retrieved via <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2017-0089/>

^{iv} Jones, K. (2022), *Heads in the Sand: the Absence of Employers in New Developments in UK Active Labour Market Policy*. *The Political Quarterly*, 93(2), 253-260.

^v DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) (2024) [Universal Credit and earnings - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

^{vi} Wright, S. (2023) *Women and Welfare Conditionality: Lived Experiences of Benefit Sanctions*, *Work and Welfare*. Bristol: Policy Press.

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^{vii} Hall, S. M., Ackerley, E., Briggs, A., Fenton, L., and del Rio, S. L. (2023) Geographies of, in and with austerity. *Working with voluntary and community groups. Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Guide*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.55203/ZNQA8346>

^{viii} My thesis uses the capability approach as a theoretical framework for multi-dimensional policy development. See for example Sen, A. (1999), *Development as Freedom*. New York, NY: Anchor Book.

^{ix} Orton, M. (2011) 'Flourishing lives: the capabilities approach as a framework for new thinking about employment, work and welfare in the 21st century', *Work, employment and society*, 25(2), pp. 352–360. doi: 10.1177/0950017011403848.