Chapter 6
Action Programs of Socio-political Actors

A Cross-national Comparison, Taking Account of Contextual Factors and the Opinion of the Populace

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Abstract Interaction between political actors and their environment is the subject of this study. Firstly, future action programs of experts in social policy covering the areas ageing and family are outlined and compared. Secondly, the focus given by those experts is placed in the context and the populace’s opinion. A cross-national, quantitative approach is followed whereby 14 DIALOG countries are studied. There is evidence to suggest that the panellists react to contextual factors: On the one hand, they react to demographic changes, which create needs, whilst on the other they try to intervene actively in a social situation. Furthermore, the study shows that the people react differently. Experts and the populace do not base their appreciation on the same assumptions. Divergence between the two groups is discernible.

Keywords: Social policy · Action programs · Advocates · Cross-national comparison · Comparative method

6.1 Introduction

The formulation of political issues is the beginning of the policy process. Social problems do not exist “per se”. They are taken up by social actors and brought into politics, where they are framed and measured and, if a consensus is reached, implemented. The Delphi study aimed to shape the future by defining relevant policy objectives (for more details see Chapter 5 by Rossella Palomba and Piero Dell’Anno in this volume). Political actors in every country (a highly diverse set of experts) were chosen to define them. Round one functioned as a selection of a possible future reality. In round two, this reality was rated. What does this future reality look like? Are there differences or similarities between the countries studied? These are the
first questions asked in this article: a cross-national comparison that tries to figure out the shape of the future. A second question is, if those advocates react to the changing environment, is there interplay between societal change and policies, and are political actors aware of opinions within the populace?

6.2 The Theoretical Framework

Policy analysis understands public policy as a set of interconnected policy decisions and actions in the sense of an action program (Binder, Kübler 2003, 6). This program is goal-oriented, which entails an intention to change social facts (Durkheim) that are perceived as problems. Policy programs contain normative directions, as well as concrete strategies to achieve the desired situation. The individual is seen as a rational actor whose actions are motivated through (a) a system of beliefs and (b) an assessment of the situation. In contradistinction to classical political action models, which reduce the action of actors to goal, situation and measure, our action concept is more complex. It is reconstructed as an actor who acts on the basis of (a) a specific intention and (b) a specific assumption about the effect of his behaviour, and who intervenes with (c) certain measures in (d) a defined situation (Kaufmann 2005, 109). Underlining this concept is a definition of social policy as an intensifying process of state intervention in societal circumstances (Kaufmann 2005, 27). It stabilises society and transforms production and reproduction circumstances (2005, 74).

6.2.1 The Advocacy Coalition Framework Theory (ACF)

A theory which aims to explain the policy process and policy change over time is the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) theory, formulated around 1990 by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993, 1999). The theory incorporates and broadens the broadly-accepted stage model of the policy process: “We argue that conceptions of policy subsystems should be broadened from traditional notions of ‘iron triangles’ [state/market/society] – (...) – to include actors at various levels of government active in policy formulation and implementation as well as journalists, researchers, and policy analysts who play important roles in the generation, dissemination, and evaluation of policy ideas” (1993, 17). They point to the role of changing social and economic conditions and “the interaction of specialists within a specific policy area as they gradually learned more about various aspects of the problem over time” (1993, 15).

According to their system-theoretic perspective, a basic distinction between system and environment is introduced. The environment is conceptualised as (a) contextual factors: socio-economic conditions and social structure and (b) fundamental cultural values, which build up a system of beliefs. The policy subsystem is constituted by political actors who can be aggregated into advocacy coalitions composed of various people from governmental and private organisations “who share a set of normative and causal beliefs” (1993, 18), who have certain resources, and who act