4. Arenas of policy making

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The key informant interviews aimed at gathering additional information about the relevant policies at hand in national contexts. The key informants are themselves strategic actors in the field and their views and attitudes are not necessarily objective or close to the truth. Experts’ interviews are thus understood as both adding presumably „objective“ data to our contextual knowledge, which includes previously assembled statistical and other data, as well as providing „contested knowledge“, where the expert knowledge of the key informants has to be weighed against the life experiences of the self-employed.

What do we mean when we talk of expert knowledge? In anthropology, key informants have been used for the initiation of an outsider into a particular, more or less exotic cultural system or subculture. In fact the only way to gain access to a meaning-system, which originally must seem mysterious to an outsider, is to be helped by an insider who can inform the outsider about what is actually going on. Anyone can serve as a key informant, as long as he/she has the status of an insider. In journalism, the choice of key informants is much more selective. Journalists seek out the renowned authorities in a given field and ask for their instruction and point of view. The main idea is still initiation, but it is assumed that different persons have different levels of knowledge. It is thus the task of the journalist to find and persuade the right expert to talk to him or her, also because of time constraints in the news media.

In sociology, experts are looked at more critically because of their claim to authoritative knowledge and exercise of power. Although they might be authorities in their own, relatively narrow field, they do not necessarily know anything of value outside that particular field of knowledge, however important that might be. Moreover, as experts they are representatives of institutions and/or professions. They are therefore usually committed to talk on behalf of collective interests and views, which might not necessarily coincide with their own, personal views, neither with critical observations on these institutions. Finally, they also have a personal need to present themselves as experts in an interview and develop strategies in order to avoid questions that might threaten their self-image as sought-out authorities.
In our research, we were particularly interested in information about the organizations involved in implementing different aspects of the relevant self-employment policies, the objectives of different programs, which groups were targeted and why. In particular, we wanted to know more about the experiences of the key informants in implementing different programs and working with the groups under consideration, the clients. What problems do the key informants identify, which policies seem to work or not work, what are their views of the clients they serve directly or indirectly, what kind of advice do they tend to give to these clients, if they give advice at all?

Interviews with key informants also help us to gain access to informal information within a given field. In evaluating the information we collected from the key informants, we were aware of the fact that the knowledge of the experts tends to be fragmented and moreover will most often be contested either by other experts or by clients. The fragmentation of knowledge is a necessary result of the very possibly narrow focus of expert knowledge. Such a narrow focus can be related to the type of organization and the position of the expert within the organization. The contested nature of the expert knowledge does not appear within the interviews themselves but becomes visible when we compare different expert interviews. A narrow focus can then appear as one-sidedness towards critical issues, in representing a certain position or task. The full extent of the contested nature of the knowledge in the field, however, becomes apparent in comparing the expert interviews with the biographical interviews.

The analysis of the key informant interviews revealed valuable insights into the structure of policy implementation from the standpoint of the administrators and policy makers. We summarized these insights in the following dimensions:

- Universal versus targeted policies
- The fragmentation of policies
- Views of key informants on the categories of excluded women and ethnic minorities
- Ethnic organizations
- The role of administrators and other actors as gatekeepers.