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Good practices in social policy: their essence and role

Summary

The article presents with thoughts on the ontological status of good practices, their criteria and the role they play in social policy. The authors describe good practices in three dimensions: as an action aiming at solving a particular problem; as an element of knowledge produced by the organisation; as communication produced by the organisation; The authors review definitions of good practices and their criteria on the basis of secondary sources. They propose to select general and specific criteria of good practices. Specific criteria of good practices are discussed using the example of actions towards social cohesion, taken within the framework of local and regional public policies towards the elderly people. Conceptualizing social cohesion is done with reference to the concept of society for all ages. The authors also propose their own scheme for describing good practices that is meant to ensure their dissemination. The article is concluded with thoughts on the role of good practices in social policy on the micro- and macro-scale.

Key words: good practices, best practices, social policy, criteria for good practices, elderly people

Introduction

“Good practices” is a term widely used thanks to the European Union and which became extremely popular thanks to the EU bureaucracy. It can be found in legislative acts, in the policy papers of various organisations (including international ones), in the documents of applications for state resources, in contest tag-lines, in scientific papers. Everybody talks about good practices, some take pride in creating them, but they do not always have the same thing in mind. Most of all, the difference should be considered between:

- the term “good practices”, relating to actions aimed at solving a particular problem, and a set of deontological principles that ought to be adhered to in particular institutions or professions;¹
- between *good practices* and *best practices*;
- between the business and non-business approach to good and best practices.

In our judgement, despite a high number of publications on examples of good practices, Polish papers tend not to conceptualize the term, while some authors even fail to provide their selection criteria for good practices. In the present paper, we are thus attempting to answer the following question: what are good practices and what is their ontological status? We can distinguish three possible approaches to this category:

- 1/ good practice is an actual action, aimed at solving a particular problem;
- 2/ good practice is an element of knowledge produced by an organisation;
- 3/ good practice is communication.

The next question tackles the criteria an action should fulfil to be considered good practice, the conditions to be met by a description and a means to select good practices to diffuse them further.

When looking for criteria to be met by a good practice in social policy, as a starting point, we have adopted the notion that diversified social needs, particularities in the characteristics of various social groups and complicated conditioning of social problems cause the need for double criteria: a set of criteria useful when assessing different actions in the scope of social policy and specific criteria, which take into account the particularities of groups and problems tackled by the actions which are (or are not) to become a good practice. Whilst trying to establish a definition of good practice in social policy, we will propose general and specific criteria (relating to a particular area). The article concludes with thoughts on the role played by good practices in social policy.

¹ The example sets based on such understanding of this notions are “Good Practices in Polish Stock Exchange Companies”, the European “Code of Good Administrative Behaviour”, “A Code. Good Practices in Higher Education”.

Good practice as action

Performing a simple analysis of the term good practices on the basis of the basic meanings of the words it contains, we can generally notice that it concerns something that is a practical action (that brings particular effects, causes a change on the individual, collective or institutional level) and is judged positively (although it is not clear according to which values and criteria).² The action, thus understood, comprises both different types of actions taken by people, methods of operation, tools used and organisational solutions. Furthermore, the term “good practice” is used in two meanings. In its broader meaning, good practice is simply “something that works”, something that has proven successful. In the more narrow meaning, good practice is only that which matches very particular criteria. These criteria refer to numerous and varied values, while the objective scope of good practices (that is, the discipline within which the deliberate action is taken) is very broad. When reviewing descriptions of good practices in social policy, one may conclude that the narrower sense of the term is generally used.

For example, the website of the “Structural Funds for Development” project features the following definition: good practices are *innovative projects that were successfully implemented in communes and regions. They constitute practical solutions to particular problems and bring definite, positive results.* (www.dobrepraktyki). Innovativeness is also the key feature of good practices for Dobroniega Trawkowska, who, when looking to answer the question on what good practices in social security are, proposed the following definition: “(...) good practice is (...) a process of creatively adopting normative innovation in different social systems, its key determinant being the presence of empowerment processes of different groups and social circles. The two features of good practice are: reactivity and creativity (grassroots activities, sensitivity to context and particular needs, the ability to define problems and hidden needs, creative action strategies).” (Trawkowska 2012: 30). Other definitions stress productivity and not innovativeness: “Generally speaking, good practices could be defined as processes or methods that result in increased productivity when applied successfully. Good practices are not new solutions; they are actions verified in practice, previously applied in other organisations. (...) Good practices for an organisation are solutions and actions that lead to better results when implemented.” (Matusiak 2008). A similar approach is shown in the UNDP definition: “good practices are all cyclical or singular actions that aim to perform tasks effectively and achieve goals, and also fulfilling the following conditions: their use of resources is effective; they may be employed in many organisations. Therefore, good practices need to be efficient, effective and universal”. (UNDP). A corresponding view is presented by Anna

² Here, it would be advisable to quote the notion of D. Trawkowska, who observes that abandoning the actions that are routine, unsuccessful or dysfunctional towards the system may also constitute good practice. (Trawkowska 2012: 29)

Karwińska and Dobrosława Wiktor: «[good practices are] regulations and projects that result in good or very good results for the organisation” (Karwińska, Wiktor 2008:8).

As the quality of actions and solutions needs to be assessed with regards to varied assumptions and the conditions in which they are implemented, a single, universal “recipe” for a good practice does not exist. Description and analyses of good practices, as well as administrative documents, often contain a varied set of their desired qualities and criteria of different length. Below is the synthesis of the features cited most often³:

- good practice leads to fulfilling the planned goals;
- good practice can be transferred to a different area and applied by a different entity;
- good practice is not a result of habits, but of prior reflection; it is subject to formalization and as such, is transparent and may be evaluated so as to its methods and effects;
- good practice is innovative;
- good practice involves optimum use of resources;
- good practice can be subject to external evaluation (its aims, process, products and effects are quantifiable) and has been assessed positively in accordance with the principles of evaluation;
- good practice ought to be a source of knowledge for others, should be expressible in the formula of a model;
- good practice should be a solution to a current problem and simultaneously, should be applied over a longer period of time (although it is also suggested that one-off projects also be included);
- good practice should be transparent;
- good practice should be based on cooperation of different entities;
- good practice should fulfil legal requirements;
- good practice should be economically realistic, that is, implementing it should not require above-average investment,
- good practice should bring social advantages to the beneficiaries of particular actions and larger communities;
- good practice should be accepted by the professional community working in a particular field of public policies.

Actions of different entities might be considered both *good practices* and *best practices*. Neither science, nor practice offer a set means of telling these two notions apart. However, it appears undoubted that unlike good practice, best practice is a relative concept, for good practice only becomes best when compared to other practices.

³ Cf. i. e. : IGAS (2006); Karwińska A., Wiktor D.(2008); *Poradnik...*(2008); *Zbiór dobrych praktyk...*(2012); www.dobrepraktyki.decdujmyrazem.pl (2013); *Kryteria...* (2013); www.umbrella.org.pl (2013); *Model ewaluacji...* (2010); Trawkowska D. (2012); Anne A. (2003); DuPasquier A.(2006); www.fao.org/knowledge/goodpractices/gp-definitionsandcriteria/criteriaforgoodpractice/fr/;

Good practice and best practice as elements of organisational knowledge

It also appears that the term “best practice” is more applicable to economic activity (technology, organisation of production and management) than the world of politics, administration or the functioning of non-governmental organisations. Best practice should, after all, be understood as one that has proven to lead to best results. Therefore, to be identified, best practice requires comparisons, measurements and use of precise indicators (more often quantitative than qualitative). Therefore, as indicated by Krzysztof Rutkowski, best practice in business activity “leads to results giving competitive advantage in a given time, and guarantees success in business over a period of time. With time, it is analysed, overtaken and applied by other companies as a role model, and unless it undergoes major changes, it becomes good practice (...).) However, if the company that implemented good practice shares the belief in constant improvement (...)) best practice may evolve and remain a paragon for its competitors for a longer time by “escaping forward”” (Rutkowski 2006: 2)

The examples of good practices in databases analysed by us demonstrates that in the scope of non-business actions that may be included in public policies (including social policy).good practice should mainly lead to the “expected” (positive) result. It does not have to be the best. Therefore, a status of good practice may be enjoyed by more than one solution to a given social problem, provided that each of them leads to similar results judged as positive.

Nevertheless, best practices also have an important place in social policy whenever learning from the best is concerned, i.e. when applying the open method of coordination and *benchmarking* (cf. SIRMA 2007). “The OMC has provided a framework for exchange and learning and has promoted openness, transparency and the involvement of stakeholders, European and national, as a means to better policy-making” (OMK (2005) 706). *Benchmark*, on the other hand, is a standard or reference point for comparisons or evaluation. Best practices are examples of such “reference points” for planning or assessing actions in social policy or in other public policies. Dissemination of knowledge on best solutions is done by an exchange of information between various entities. At the same time, it is underlined that the aim of *benchmarking* in public policies (including social policy) is not only imitating best initiatives and solutions, but also creating a framework “against which success and failure of different policy or management approaches can be understood” (SIRMA 2007:8). Such are the guidelines of *benchmarking* in public policies, which does not mean that in this method raises no doubts in practice, both in terms of concept and its realization.⁴ In the following part of the article, in accordance with the distinction made above, we will only take good practices into consideration.

⁴ Cf. i.e. Bruno 2008.

According to Andrzej K. Koźmiński and Dariusz Jemielniak, the knowledge embodied in good practices is an intangible asset of each organisation. It is the most decisive factor in competitive advantage. This advantage “results from the uniqueness of a knowledge asset in possession of a given organisation, and from particular abilities to use that asset.” (Koźmiński, Jemielniak 2008: 260). In view of organisational and management theories, when transmitting a part of knowledge as information on good practices, the organisation loses its uniqueness, and as long as the entities in its environment are able to learn and apply changes, the organisation loses its competitive advantage (ibid.) Therefore, why do organisations decide to describe and disseminate good practices?

The stake of all entities that disseminate a part of knowledge on their activity as good practices is building their positive image. Thus, good practices are part of *public relations*.

In the case of institutions and organisations operating in the field of social policy, the “competitive advantage” is the ability to obtain resources (most of all, from public sources), partners, clients and employees which may contribute to their leading position on the “market” of good practices. Good practices are a kind of “good” that do not reward their producer with payment from the purchaser (an entity imitating the good practice), but contribute to a better “market position” when disseminated. Social policy institutions are, after all, not only oriented towards solving social problems, but also have their own stake in the continuance and development of the organisation and in enabling professional careers for the personnel it employs. The organisation that endorses good practices may legitimize its actions towards the donors, securing them in the belief that their resources have been well-allocated. Besides, being the leader in good practices facilitates partnerships with “strong” entities, which facilitates achieving success.

It is worth underlining that focusing on the image-related function of good practices may lead to misunderstanding them. It is stressed by D. Trawkowska, who describes the search for “image-enhancing”, newsworthy initiatives, which are subsequently granted the status of good practice for that very reason, and encoded in the organisational culture of some social policy institutions (Trawkowska 2012: 22).

Generally speaking, the “trade” in good practices leads to social policy institutions better meeting the needs of their clients. After all, the more institutions doing something equally well, the better. Nobody loses in the process, on the contrary - mistakes are avoided, and therefore, the cost of meeting social needs diminishes.

Good practice as communication

When talking about good practice as communication, we deal with three types of actors: providers, promoters and receivers. Receivers are entities that implement and describe a given practice. Promoters may be providers themselves, yet also other entities that contribute to the dissemination of a good practice, e.g. competition organizers and sponsors, journalists. Receivers are stakeholder organisations.

Descriptions of good practices often have a loose, unstandardised structure (i.e. during presentations at conferences). These descriptions may also be made in accordance with a set scheme, for example, in the Internet good practice databases or in descriptions for good practice competitions. They are generally spoken accounts, often enhanced with graphics, photos or films. Below is a list of topics and questions that appear in good practice description forms and are also suggested in handbooks⁵:

- describing the situation before implementation;
- establishing a problem that led to creating the solution and taking action;
- describing the context of the action, e.g. their spatial dimension, legal and cultural environment;
- characteristics of the target group;
- aims of actions (of institutions), described as good practice
- description of actions (of institutions, procedures), including presentation of implementing parties, time and place of actions, distribution of task, management type, use of information and promotion tools;
- analysis of investments (costs);
- description of results obtained, including evaluation of their sustainability;
- a balance of profits (advantages) and disadvantages (inconveniences);
- plans for future actions within the described good practice;
- Recommendations for entities interested in replicating the practice, e. g. How to start?;
- actions taken vs. the principle of gender equality;
- Cooperating with civil society on implementing the action described.
- In our opinion, the description standard for good practices in the scope of social policy should contain the following elements:
 - name, summary and aim of the project;
 - the results obtained;
 - description of the project's stages (with their execution time);
 - employed tools and means of action;
 - actors (beneficiaries, organisational units, partners of self-governments);
 - investments made (money, personnel, working time, space used, devices, etc.)
 - evaluation and self-evaluation (strengths/advantages; weaknesses/possible difficulties;)
 - initial conditions (e.g. resources required, competencies);
 - experience of implementing a good practice in a different time and place, if applicable.

⁵ They dealt with methods and procedures of indicating social emergency among children (IGAS 2006), cooperation between public administration and the third sector (Mocek 2011), projects financed by the ESF), subjects of social economy (Karwińska, Wiktor 2008); good practices in age management (Liwinski 2010), good practices in clusters ([www. pi.gov.pl/parp/](http://www.pi.gov.pl/parp/) 2013), good practices in EQual Community initiative (Katalog... 2008).

The practice for activities that lead to the acknowledgement of an initiative, institution or procedure as good practice and promote it as such is very varied. Competition judges, expert panels, and even the creators of actions evaluated as such, decide on what is presented as good practice. The channels of disseminating the message on good practice includes, most of all, the Internet, yet also book publications, articles in periodicals, speeches at conferences and seminars. The communication providers are usually institutions, and the “target group” are other organized entities. These communications usually appeared in specialized media (the websites of specialist institutions, professional periodicals). On the other hand, they are rarely present in the media outside the social policy implementer circle. This is one of the reasons for the low level of knowledge of new and valuable findings offered by social policy institutions among citizens.

From the point of view of communication receivers, communication may have two meanings. Firstly, it can be viewed as a description of a role model. Secondly, receivers may take this description as an inspiration to seek their own, original solutions.

Good practices in social policy: suggested criteria

The analysis of reference books and example databases of good practices demonstrates that the criteria they mention repeats to some extent, while in the remaining part, these criteria strongly refer to the characteristics of the subject of the analysis. Therefore, we assume that it is justified to divide the good practice criteria into general criteria, suitable for evaluating actions in each area of social policy, and criteria specific to a particular area. For example, the area for which we propose specific criteria are actions encouraging social cohesion within the framework of local and regional public policies towards elderly people.

General criteria

We suggest the following general criteria for good practices in social policy:

- proven (and not potential) effectiveness in solving a particular problem, obtaining results that coincide with the assumed aims of the project;
- methodicalness - describable methods, forms, stages and results of actions;
- repeatability: the ability to implement a given solution in another place and time;
- adaptability: proneness to adaptive changes in different conditions, with no loss in quality;
- transparency: overt actions,
- ethicalness: ethical action;
- rule of law: lawful activities;
- economic effectiveness: a profitable relation of investments to effects.

We stand for the notion that this is a complete set of criteria to consider a particular action good practice in social policy. It is therefore necessary for an action

to fulfil each of these criteria. On the other hand, in our opinion, it is not necessary for them to fulfil other criteria, such as sustainability of the result, planned character or innovativeness (although they are often cited), as in exclusion prevention programmes, for example, establishing new bonds, gaining new abilities and developing positive habits often prove more important than sustainable results (e. g. maintaining employment) What is more, some inclusive actions are social emergency actions (i.e. providing shelter for the homeless, providing meals for dependent persons) and they are not, in their essence, meant to bear long-time effects. Also, good practices are not always the effect of planned actions, they might be created spontaneously, like in the case of local forms of cooperation between sectors. Moreover, it does not seem justified to expect innovativeness from every good practice, most of all because innovativeness is a relative concept. What one entity considers innovative (original and new) might be treated as a modification of already known solutions. Moreover, if one is to assume that social innovation is supposed to lead to a change in social relations and stimulate sustainable development, actions that serve social stability could not be considered good practices. The aim of these actions (although not exclusively) would therefore decide on whether they could be evaluated as good practices or not.

On the other hand, it is relevant to distinguish a separate category of innovative good practices, in which the actors do not only opt for effectiveness and sure results, but also for solutions that are new and original in different aspects and contribute to social change. The aim of social innovation is to find new answers to new social needs, or to those which are unsatisfactorily met by current social policy in current market conditions by including the participation and cooperation of actors they involve, with particular focus on receivers, the addressees of these actions. Innovations cause considerable qualitative changes. Their character is intentional and planned. Innovations apply both to products and services and means of organisation, distribution. (*L'innovations sociales...* 2012; Anne 2003). Social innovations may, yet do not have to be, good practices. Good practices may, but do not have to be, innovative.

Specific criteria as found in social cohesion policy towards elderly people

Establishing specific criteria for good practices requires conceptualization of the terms used to describe the subject of analysis. The subjective scope of actions towards social cohesion taken towards the elderly, who we set as an example, may be defined in different ways. For example, referring to the priorities defined in the National Strategy Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2008-2010 and taking this document as an example of operationalisation of the concept of “social inclusion” for practical reasons, it can be assumed that the areas of social inclusion for elderly people are: their material standing (limiting poverty), activation and enabling access to high-quality social services. Other examples of describing and evaluating inclusive actions towards elderly people (in local environments) have been established within

the international World Health Organisation “Age-Friendly Cities” programme. This programme assumes that actions including the elderly in their local environments comprise the following areas: outdoor spaces and buildings; transportation; housing; social participation; respect and social inclusion; civic participation and employment; communication and information; community support and health services. (Guide... 2007). International and Polish documents on social participation of elderly people and including them in social life contain yet another approach to this matter. Very often, they refer to the concept of society *for all ages* (Szatur-Jaworska 2003).

We suggest that the subjective scope of policy for social cohesion of the elderly be defined with reference to the latter concept, as it stresses the importance of inclusive measures and promotes participation of elderly people in various areas of social life. These areas were placed in the first column of Table 1, whereas specific evaluation criteria of action taken, ascribed to each of the areas, are shown in the second column.

Table 1. Specific criteria for good practices in the cohesion policy towards elderly people

area	Criteria	comment
life-long learning	availability and adequacy	using different forms and techniques of knowledge transmission and practising abilities; adaptation to specific characteristics of recipients
maintaining social capital resources and prolonging working life (working with employers towards implementing an age management strategy)	optimal use of the elderly people's potential	preventing the waste of resources, purposeful use of particular qualities (experience, wisdom, empathy, time...)
integrating generations in education, culture, political activity and voluntary work experience; preventing self-exclusion and isolation of elderly generations	multi-generationalism	activating representatives of all generations in the same activity
creating an old age-friendly public space (transport and places of general interest)	– versatility – placement of facilities is adequate to the area's spatial structure	old-age friendly space is also friendly to younger people
enhancing physical well-being, fitness, physical and social activity of older generations	the offer corresponds with physical ability of participants, based on a fair diagnosis	elderly people suffer from different conditions and experience physical barriers; the activation offer must be „tailored”

supporting services enabling the needs of persons reliant on care to be met in their homes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – working with families of the elderly – multi-sector collaboration – better use of already existing resources of local social infrastructure 	it is common in geriatric care to call for keeping elderly people in their homes as long as possible, and build support networks based on the potential of local environment and families
using information technology for social inclusion (communication and education platforms) and better social services (long-distance medical care, telephone applications, etc.)	giving elderly persons a sense of security in the world of new technologies	giving a sense of security in learning and using new technologies in e-services and e-government; giving a sense of security thanks to new technologies

Source: own work

The role of good practices in social policy

The meaning of good practices in social policy may be determined by macro-level analysis, taking into account the goals and operational means of social policy, as well as in micro-level analysis from the point of view of the social policy institutions that develop good practices and those which use them (in particular, local government units and their partners in implementing public policies).

On the macro level, the role of good practices in social policy (as actions and communications) is most of all their application as instruments that facilitate converging social policies in different EU member states. They may also be a useful instrument when coordinating collective actions within the framework of public policies does not only refer to hierarchy and/or market, but also to coordination networks.⁶ It is also worth underlining that the exchange of good practices is useful for perfecting the social policy system, however, on the condition that the message is holistic and does not only concern the “practice” itself, but also its connections within and outside the system.

Communication on good practices may have an explanatory function for ambiguous and vague terms that describe the aims and objectives of social policy. The example of such terms include: activation, social cohesion or intergenerational solidarity. Descriptions of good practices add empirical substance to these terms and contribute to disseminating their more precise definitions, even if these definitions are not formulated directly, but are interpreted each time from actions undertaken to achieve a particular aim. For example, putting an impact on promoting educational and recreational initiatives as good practices activating retired persons narrows the defini-

⁶ Types of collective action coordination in: Kozuch (2004: 35).

tion of activating retired persons to encouraging their educational and recreational activity and sociability.

When good practices concerns social services, the question arises of their relation to service standardisation, as dissemination of good practices and service standardisation have a common goal: to improve the quality of work of social policy institutions. It appears that the analysis of good practices (of course, not singular ones, yet a larger set thereof) may constitute a basis for building standards and choose what is necessary to obtain good service quality. At the same time, analysing good practices should also demonstrate the necessary degree of freedom that social service providers should have the right to, as it sometimes happens that when involving excessive, detailed regulation, standardisation can become a barrier for solutions that might have become good practices.

Other than being a part of *public relations* that can be exchanged for a better position in competing for funds and partners, good practices are an important part of the process of learning in organisations for the organisations that “yield” them. It means getting to a higher level of organisational self-reflection than the observing particular behaviour and describing it.

On the other hand, from the point of view of an organisation that receives good practices, they may contribute to their development, however, on condition that these organisations have the ability to learn. Foreclosing good practices may also endorse proper functioning of organisations, most of all, in short term, that is, facilitating adaptive changes. Moreover, for an organisation using good practices, they are one of the important sources of knowledge on the steps of their competitors, helping them to “get to know the market”. They are also an instrument of quality management in the organisation.

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that “bad practices” also occur in the process of implementing social policy. Identifying, classifying and disclosing them appear just as important as promoting the practices evaluated as good, and also requires conceptualising evaluation criteria, methods of identification and description. An action that does not comply with good practice criteria cannot be evaluated as bad practice solely for that reason.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł zawiera rozważania na temat ontologicznego statusu dobrych praktyk, ich kryteriów oraz roli w polityce społecznej. Autorki charakteryzują dobre praktyki w trzech wymiarach: jako działanie służące rozwiązaniu jakiegoś problemu; jako element wiedzy wytwarzanej przez organizację; jako komunikat wytwarzany przez organizację. Na podstawie zastanych źródeł autorki dokonują przeglądu definicji dobrych praktyk i ich kryteriów. Proponują wyodrębnienie ogólnych i specyficznych kryteriów dobrych praktyk. Specyficzne kryteria dobrych praktyk omawiane są na przykładzie działań na rzecz spójności społecznej podejmowanych w ramach lokalnych i regionalnych polityk publicznych wobec ludzi starszych. Konceptualizacja spójności społecznej jest przeprowadzona poprzez odwołanie się do koncepcji społeczeństwa dla wszystkich grup wieku. Autorki przedstawiają także własną propozycję schematu opisu dobrych praktyk, który ma zapewnić ich upowszechnienie. Artykuł zamykają rozważania dotyczące roli dobrych praktyk w polityce społecznej – w mikro- i makroskali.

Słowa kluczowe: dobre praktyki, najlepsze praktyki, polityka społeczna, kryteria dobrych praktyk, osoby starsze