Article

A Matter of Politics:
The Effects of the Political Context on Social Work in Norway and Bolivia

by

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Abstract

To which extent do dysfunctional political systems lead to everyday challenges for social workers? Moreover, how do social workers benefit from working in well-ordered democracies? The purpose of this paper is to gain insights into how the interplay between the political context and social work actually operates. Our main question is: How do accountability and state capacity levels affect daily social work? This interplay frequently becomes associated with levels of democracy and redistribution. We also draw attention to how social workers' are dependent on the capacity of the state to implement policies.

We compare social work and the political and legal contexts in two widely different polities – Norway and Bolivia.

Our primary findings indicate that the effects of generally unfavourable political conditions permeate the possibilities for effective social work in previously unforeseen ways. Coordination problems, clientelism and political rivalry lead to everyday challenges on the ground, as many problems seem to reflect the overall institutional system and political culture. In well-ordered political systems, these problems are hardly an issue.

In our concluding discussion, we address how the nature of the institutional system and political culture apparently might call for a differentiated approach towards reform strategies. For instance, progressive politicians, citizens and social workers advocating a policy transfer could face severe hindrances in polities, thus comprising weak state capacities.

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Social justice and social change belong to the fundamental principles of social work (Fellesorganisasjonen, 2015). According to the International Federation of Social Workers, to promote these values is a part of what constitutes being a social worker (IFSW, 2012, 2014). There seems to be a widespread understanding that the political and legal context defines what social workers can do (Collin-Hansen, 2003, p.121; Hutchinson & Oltedal, 2003, p. 14; Healy, 2005, p. 1, pp.4–5; Zahl, 2003, p. 12). However, for social workers and other welfare professionals, the political and legal context does not merely consist of social policies. The wider institutional order, as well as the general political culture may be decisive for the working conditions of the professional worker. What possibly matters even more than levels of democracy and redistribution could be the capacity of the state to implement policies (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Fukuyama, 2012, 2014).

In this study, we combine political science and comparative social work to study the effects of the wider political context on social work. Obtaining insights into how the interplay between the wider political context and social work on the ground actually operates can be crucial to honouring the principles of the IFSW. For instance, research in this area can make it easier to identify pitfalls in order to avoid a policy transfer based on faltering foundations (Rothstein, 1994). Just copying one set of institutions or policies, without analysing the context in which they are supposed to fit in, risks doing more harm than good (cf. Gough & Therborn, 2010).

We ask in our research question how the political context affects opportunities of successful social work in the field of child welfare in two different polities. In our research design, we interview social workers and examine secondary data to study and compare the interplay between the political context and social work in the two polities of Norway and Bolivia.

Regarding the specific policy area under comparison, the choice of children's welfare as our study object is pragmatic. What we concentrate on is the interplay between the political and social contexts and the daily work of the child welfare workers, not going too much in-depth into the particular content in their work with children and families.

The article consists of three main parts, in addition to the account of methods. In the first part, we review literature describing the specific social policy regimes of Bolivia and Norway. Moreover, we combine secondary data to give a specific overview over the social and political contexts of the two countries in our study.

In our second part, we present our empirical primary data, based on interviews with experts and field workers. In our third and primary part, the findings indicate that the effects of generally unfavourable political conditions permeate the possibilities of effective social work in previously unforeseen ways. We discuss the implications these findings might suggest in the subsequent section.

Policy descriptions and previous research

The combination of political studies of the state capacity on the one hand, and comparative social work on the other, represents an unconventional approach. Hence, we have not identified specific research programmes covering the same combination. What we do in this part is to review literature describing the social welfare contexts in the two polities of our study.

In the overall picture, we may look at the current situation in Bolivia as a transitory moment in which the outcome is still open. Consequently, Bolivia may turn in an autocratic direction or become a well-functioning liberal democracy (De Sandoval, 2013).

Differences between welfare state types are massively larger internally between emerging states than between countries in which the conventional welfare state typologies were developed (Cerami & Wagué, 2013; Gal & Jawad, 2013; Huber & Bogliaccini, 2010; Peng & Wong, 2010). According to Aspalter (2013), the Latin American Anti-Welfare Conservative Welfare Regime represents the ideal type model of the Latin American region.

The uneven pace of industrialization in the Latin American countries resulted in different sorts of social security schemes (Huber & Bogliaccini, 2010). Half a century ago, countries like Argentina, Chile and Uruguay developed welfare systems not far behind those of Western countries (ibid.). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that one of the

main struggles of the Latin American countries has been the reproduction of traditional social inequalities up until to the 1980s, as social programmes have not been effective (Aspalter, 2013; Nullmeier & Kaufmann, 2010). One aspect of this syndrome is that indigenous populations such as the Aymaras and Quechuas, covering the area of what is now Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Chile, have been largely segregated and marginalized (Aroncena, 2008).

Due to a large informal sector, Latin American welfare systems suffer from an eroding tax base. Clientelism, corruption and dysfunctional public sectors have undermined state capacity, and consequently the legitimacy of the new democracies (Bull, 2015). Under these circumstances, trust declines. Moreover, high levels of social spending in Latin America widen social inequalities instead of reducing them (Lloyd-Sherlock, 2013, p. 239). Hence, even though there has been democratization in Latin America (Markoff & White, 2009, p. 159), historical circumstances and structural conditions are very different from their Scandinavian counterparts (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Fukuyama, 2014, p. 268; Oelsner & Bain, 2009).

While Bolivia has only recently started on the path to democratic, economic and social development, Norway has been among those countries with favourable conditions to evolve well-functioning democratic accountability systems. The literature on different social policy models in the OECD area, which covers the Norwegian case, is massive, with central contributions given by Castles (1993, 1998), Castles and Obinger (2008), Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999) and Titmuss (1974). There is a multitude of descriptions of the Norwegian welfare system, among which we reckon the most important and accurate descriptions to be Barth, Moene and Wallerstein (2003), Halvorsen (1991), Hatland, Kuhnle and Romøren (1994) and Kuhnle and Solheim (1985). We find recent critical examinations of the Norwegian labour- and welfare system in Dølvik (2013), Dølvik, Fløtten, Hernes and Hippe (2007) and Hippe and Berge (2013).

Institutional reform in the mid-1930s profoundly changed Norwegian labour relations, and consequently the welfare system, resulting in a centralized and coordinated collective bargaining and a universal welfare state. Over time, these arrangements provided trust and stability in the labour market and in the national community (Hernes

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& Hippe, 2007). The institutional framework creating the trust pool evolved from a cooperation between three core societal actors within the Norwegian polity: The labour movement, employers and politicians (Barth, Moene, & Wallerstein, 2003; Hernes & Hippe, 2007). Trust widens what is possible to achieve collectively (Fukuyama, 2014). Therefore, at least theoretically, the political conditions for a successful social work in Norway appear advantageous.

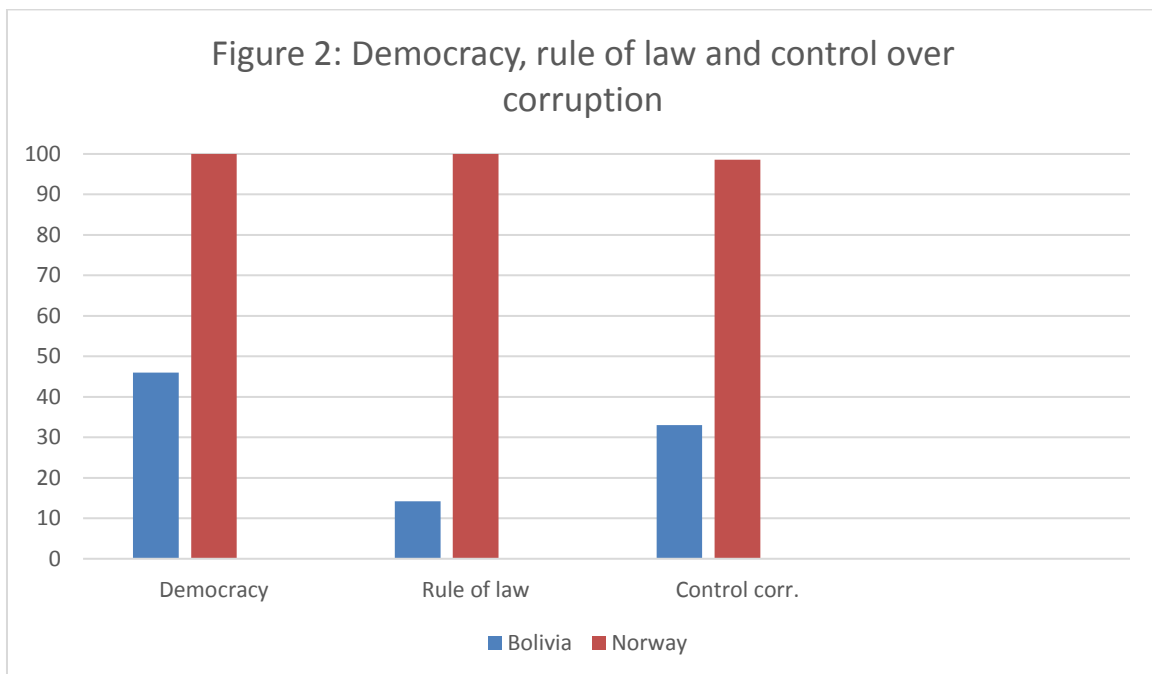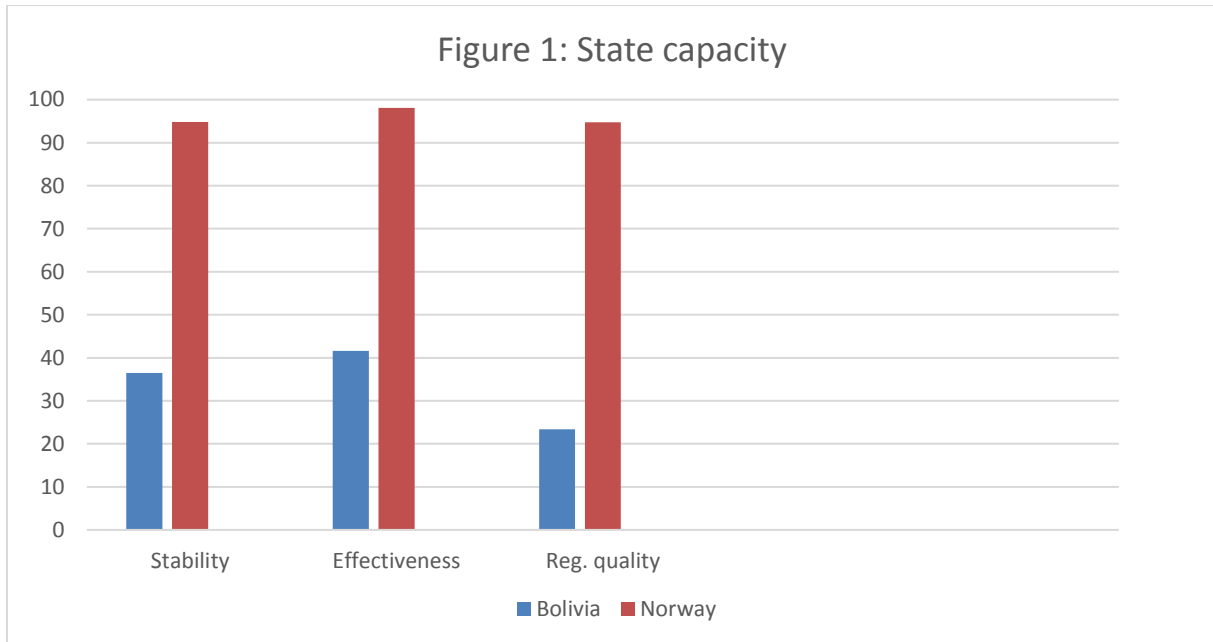**Specific country contexts: Norway and Bolivia**

Based on United Nations (UN) statistics, we characterize Norway as a high-income country and Bolivia, while among the poorest nations in Latin America, is a medium-income country in the UN statistics. In the total rank of the index, containing 187 countries, Norway ranks number one and Bolivia is number 113. The per capita income in Norway is approximately 12 times higher than in Bolivia. While hardly anyone in Norway is living below the international poverty line, 15.6% of the population in Bolivia do so (UNDP, 2015).

Statistics from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) demonstrate that the difference between Norway and Bolivia is also big when we look at inequality indicators; the Gini-index of Bolivia is as high as 56.3 (while it is 25.8 in Norway). In relative terms, Bolivia spends a higher percentage of its total gross domestic product (GDP) on education than it does on health. The differences in mortality rates for mothers and children under five are dramatic, and probably higher than expected based on the differences in GDP. Regarding the under-five mortality rate, the probability of dying between birth and the age of five is three per 100,000 in Norway and 41 in Bolivia. Additional statistics prove the probability of dying for the under-fives in Bolivia is twice as high even when, for instance, compared to a country like Vietnam, which has a lower per capita GDP than Bolivia. The same is the situation concerning maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. In Norway this ratio is three per 100,000. In Bolivia the ratio in 2010 was 190 per 100,000. This means that the latter ratio is more than three times higher than in Vietnam (59 per 100,000).[1]

Indicators of the core institutions

The preceding statistical examination gave evidence of huge material differences between Norway and Bolivia. However, the apparent challenges in Bolivia described

above do not only relate to the level in the absolute material average standard and degrees of equal distribution. Possibly even more important are the differences we see when we next compare not only accountability indicators, but also the state capacity functions in Norway and Bolivia, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: State capacity

Categories: Stability, Effectiveness, Reg. quality — comparing Bolivia and Norway.

Bolivia: Stability ~37, Effectiveness ~42, Reg. quality ~24
Norway: Stability ~95, Effectiveness ~98, Reg. quality ~95

Figure 2: Democracy, rule of law and control over corruption

Categories: Democracy, Rule of law, Control corr. — comparing Bolivia and Norway.

Bolivia: Democracy ~46, Rule of law ~14, Control corr. ~33
Norway: Democracy ~100, Rule of law ~100, Control corr. ~99

The Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) of the World Bank combine 32 separate data sources to construct six different indicators describing governance (World Bank,

2014). The latest data from 2013, which we sum up in Figures 1 and 2, are based on statistics from the WGI.

Political stability and the absence of violence, regulatory quality and government efficiency form the state capacity dimension. The democratic and legal accountability measurement consists of the aggregated indicator's voice and accountability for the rule of law, as well as control over corruption.

Figure 1 demonstrates that the differences in state capacity between Bolivia and Norway are huge for all indicators. In particular, the capacity of the state to effectively implement national policies is reportedly very weak compared to Norway. Furthermore, there is far less social and political stability in Bolivia, whereas state efficiency is comparatively considerably lower in the latter country.

Regarding the differences in democratic accountability, the rule of law and control over corruption, there are very big differences as well, especially on the rule of law, for which Bolivia has a particularly low score. On the dimension control of corruption, the differences are also huge. In contrast, democratic accountability represents the dimension where the differences between Bolivia and Norway are the least.

All indicators we have presented above display scores involving vast differences between the two polities. However, what these indicators do not inform us about is how the different accountability and state capacity levels affect daily social work. After first presenting our methods, this is what we look into in our next main section.

Methods

We would like to emphasize that we use the specific policy field–the child welfare service in Norway and Bolivia–to exemplify welfare policy in general within the two countries. Hence, our purpose is not to highlight specific traits, methods, similarities and differences in the professional work itself in the child protection systems in Norway and Bolivia. Our interest in this study is the interplay between the professional work and the institutional setting.

To help identify relevant data in the child welfare systems in Norway and Bolivia, we faced two very different situations regarding the quality of secondary data. Consequently, the role of our informants became different in Norway and in Bolivia. In Norway, a number of studies, white papers, books and articles evaluate the system critically. Supervising institutions generally work well, and the information from the reports is largely accessible. As a result, we can rely on these studies and reports in order to describe the system quite accurately, while naturally adopting a critical perspective. Against this background, the role of the Norwegian informants was primarily to describe and exemplify information widely known. Obviously, there are mistakes done, e.g. in Norwegian child protection, and there is regularly widespread criticism in the media of specific cases in the child protection system (e.g. Ergo & Aass, 2016). Moreover, supervision reports would occasionally involve a heavy criticism of child protection practices (Fylkesmannen, 2016); hence, keeping our attention on the interplay between policy contexts and professional work, we do not assert that everything is fine in this agency. However, communication lines, steering and institutional trust between the various levels are principally well-functioning (Johnsen, 2013, p. 137; Juhasz & Skivenes, 2016).

The situation regarding Bolivian child policies is different, as we cannot rely in the same way on secondary data. Documents, reviews and evaluative studies that researchers produce are often under the control of political authorities, and therefore subject to political and personal interests. Personal experiences from one of the authors of this article (Nogales) include witnessing practices of censorship and the forced omission of results in reports. Furthermore, political representatives regularly predefine understandings with consultant firms to take care of the interests of the parties. Consequently, as researchers our challenge was to gain access to data in a situation in which reliable information and reviews are scarce and questionable. To overcome this pitfall and to ensure reliable data, we strongly emphasized to the informants the need to leave out personal and political points of views.

We made use of semi-structured interviews with the experts and civil servants as the primary source of data, and selected eight informants, including five from Bolivia. The informants possessed professional experience and/or were experts. In Norway, where secondary data in the main is reliable, as argued above, we only conducted interviews

with experts recruited from the university sector. For Bolivia, we included both experts and field professionals. It was important in the Bolivian case to select academics not involved with either public service or political parties. Therefore, in this country we recruited respondents through NGOs.

We used a questioning technique in which the first phase of each interview consisted of general open questions, whereas case scenarios guided the second part of the interviews. The scenarios allowed us to reach a balance between flexibility and common categories, which is a necessary ingredient for comparative studies (Bryman, 2012).

Presenting different possible scenarios of cases to the social workers and experts allowed for revealing limitations in the everyday practice of social work in the Bolivian case. In the thematic analysis, we organized the informants' responses around three main thematic areas: under the headlines of clientelism, coordination problems and organizational structure.

We took care in ensuring that the civil servants we interviewed in Bolivia were part of the regional system, part of the community level, possessed middle-range authority and were low-range servants. This was important in order to avoid biased information due to engagements in political parties or social organizations. To strengthen the findings, we also assessed supplementary sources of data, mostly to verify what respondents had mentioned.

The circumstance that made the study possible was the EU-funded European Master in Social Work with Families and Children (the MEM programme) for social workers worldwide, in which children's welfare is a core issue (UiS, 2016). The MEM programme enabled us to have a test case in the welfare area to investigate policy context effects and policy transfer opportunities. The University of Stavanger is a partner in the MEM programme. One of the authors works at this university (Tuastad), while the other author collected the data used for this article from both Norway and her home country of Bolivia as part of her master's thesis (Nogales, 2015).

The division of labour between the authors was the following: Nogales contributed with data collection, parts of the methods section and the description of Latin America in the previous research section, as well as Model 3, which is based on Nogales (2015). The data was re-analysed by Tuastad, who has written the introduction, the specific country contexts and the final section. The new specific analysis and the overall analysis were built on the main points presented in Nogales (2015), and Nogales also read through all new parts of the manuscript, modified some comments and added other comments.

The impact of the political context

Presenting the findings from the interviews, we first describe coordination problems in Bolivia before relating them to the organizational structure. Thereafter, we look into the everyday effects of the resulting clientelism in the Bolivian case.

Lack of stability and coordination problems

According to the Bolivian experts and social workers, there are constant coordination problems, in addition to conflicts over competence. It even affects the police, as one reported, thereby illustrating the impact of basic state capacity weakness on professional work: 'The police are often short on gas for their vehicles, but also of paper to print their reports.'

Community-based units in Bolivia, as well as the more stable municipal units, regularly end up being subject to bureaucratic delays. In this way, social work programmes become a matter of politics instead of depending on professional assessment. One informant explains:

> Each time there is a change of director [politically appointed, our comment], there is also a change of professional staff. Thus, one of the factors leading to poor quality of these services is the lack of permanence of staff, beside the low budget and the lack of consistent national policies.

In Bolivia, basic services such as the community based child protection units work in time-limited projects. The time limits often make implementation dysfunctional. First, when the project time is over or when political changes appear, the initiated policies simply stop. As a rule, there is not any correspondence between need and success of a policy program and the time length of it. Second, professional accountability and

quality control of a service become more difficult. In time-limited projects, social workers largely remain free from ethical responsibility in their practice.

The contrast to the Norwegian system is big. In Norway, policy changes originate from new laws or directions. The local branch implement national policies; changes in government staff do not affect the local staff; they are permanent employees – to oppose directions from a new government would violate the law.

Coordination problems in Bolivia appears to be a fact even when we exclude the political element. For instance, in programs such as 'SAFSI' (a so-called Family Communitarian Intercultural Health Programme), national well-trained staff may stay in a region for a short period, but when they leave there is no continuance in the work they started. The reason why, is that there is no coordination. Thus, as local workers lack motivation, they may feel invaded by outsiders or they simply do not understand what the national staff think the locals should do.

The workings of supervising bodies in Norway and Bolivia neatly exemplify the contrast between the two systems and their effects on social workers. In Norway, a separate body at the regional level– Fylkesmannen–supervises the local child protection offices. Child protection workers are well aware of their supervision, and they document their work so that the supervision body can see if they work according to plans and regulations (cf. the 'Methods' section above). At the regional level in Bolivia, there is also a supervising responsibility attributed to the regional authorities. However, this role is underfinanced and subject to the political and personal interest of the authorities. According to our informants, whether it works in an independent way is doubtful. Consequently, there will often not exist any genuine supervision of work performance in the area of child protection.

Still, at times there are also examples of successful practices in Bolivian policies. For example, informants tell us of cases in which successful practices have been copied from one municipality to another. After the constitutional change in 2009, municipalities in Bolivia enjoy more freedom to develop local programmes and projects to fit local needs. At times, regional authorities have promoted learning processes, transferring programmes and projects from one municipality to another, and/or providing

professional assistance to help facilitate professionals in municipalities with stronger needs.

When social workers in Bolivia often face severe hindrances due to a lack of coordination, it is apparently a partial result of how the political structure is organized. This is what we look into next.

Dysfunctional organizational structure

If a political structure involving large degrees of local autonomy operates in combination with the political culture of clientelism, it will often result in coordination problems (Fukuyama, 2014), which seems to be the case for Bolivia.

Bolivia and Norway are both unitary states, although the regions in Bolivia have stronger autonomous powers than those in Norway (Federation forum, 2010). The Bolivian president appoints the members of the cabinet, who can then put their personal acquaintances and political contacts in charge of core bureaucratic positions at the national level. At the regional and local levels, there are also democratic elections that determine who will be governors and mayors. From these positions, governors and majors pick the heads of offices, e.g. in child protection, and these local bosses then recruit staff members, as described above (see previous sub-section).

The Bolivian national government spells out aims and plans. To carry out the policies of the national government, there are national service agents and offices. However, at the same time, in addition to the national service agents in child protection (as in other domains), there are regional and local staff personnel. This latter personnel group are dependent on the national office, and are supposed to implement the national policies. At the same time, this latter staff is subject to their regional or local heads, who may compete with the national heads. Because the three levels–the national, regional and local–may consist of different political camps, it adds political disagreement to the structural coordination problems. Consequently, child protection workers both at all these levels work in an environment where they exert little or no overall control.

Hence, due to the politicizing of bureaucratic functions in this political system in Bolivia, coordination problems grow. When basic steering functions do not work, it often affects the everyday professional life of the social worker.

Everyday effects of clientelism

The politically appointed regional and local leaders recruit professional personnel. As we have already touched upon, they will often base recruitment on personal and political interests and networks acquaintances, instead of on professional competence. According to our informants, this way of recruiting personnel is widespread, as illustrated by two of them:

> When it is time to hire, they can just appoint whomever. Sometimes they are good, but sometimes they are not. They are not ready, not capable. Like there was this [XX], she was enrolled with the party, she didn't have any studies.

Another informant addressed how authorities sometimes ignore formal demands for professional skills:

> The institutional positions are based on a direct invitation, and therefore depend on political connectedness. Although it is necessary to comply with a profile so that a psychologist must be a psychologist, it is easy for the authorities to escape such demands.

This form of recruitment process epitomizes a clientelistic political system (cf. Fukuyama, 2014). As it appears, one effect of this form of clientelistic recruitment might be a poorer professional competence among the professionals. Moreover, it also results in differences between regions and municipalities in relation to the availability of suitable professionals. For example, city municipalities possess more professionals and services – be it private, public or from NGOs. Municipalities located in the countryside are worst off in these terms. One effect is that, as one informant put it, people are generally not aware of the services that in fact are available.

Some of our informants, themselves working in NGOs, asserted that NGOs generally enjoy more trust from citizens. However, the way the Bolivian political systems works, it is not likely to build overall trust. When there is a lack of trust, there is less loyalty and a widened amount of room for corruption. As one informant said, even 'small sums assigned for children are subject to corruption'.

While forming a large part of the everyday professional life of Bolivian social workers, realities like these are unknown to social workers in Norway, who are part of a system containing transparent recruitment, strict documentation demands and tight supervision. Notwithstanding that within the Norwegian child protection sector there may be personal conflicts, whereas turnover is high compared to other sectors (Johansen, 2014), the Norwegian child protection system would still generally exemplify the Weberian bureaucracy. In this form of organization, civil servants and social workers must be loyal and independent of political majorities (Fukuyama, 2014; Skivenes, 2014). Public servants implement policies, but they are not themselves to take any political stand in accordance with what Weberian bureaucracy theory prescribes on the impersonal role of the bureaucrat (Weber, 1980).

Our Norwegian informants generally confirm statistical reviews and comparative research which indicate that there is accordance between theory and realities on this side of the Norwegian political system (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes 2011). Thus, the Norwegian situation is quite different from the Bolivian one.

Summing up

The comparison of Norway and Bolivia gives evidence that although formal political structures may be quite similar, the organizational realities in the two countries are very different. They add up to more than merely different material standards. National politics and the nature of the political culture result in different conditions for social work practice, though more than what the formal organizational structures would indicate.

The distinction between the two concepts of organization and institution implies that the latter contains values and cultural traits which affect social interaction (Rothstein, 1994, pp. 139–141). Given the formal organizational similarities between Norway and Bolivia as democracies with ambitious welfare aims, it may be worth stressing how deep the institutional differences between them really are. In Bolivia, the complicated administrative system, the parallel organizational structure and the mixture of politics and professionalism, all the way down to the front line of social policies, swell the bureaucracy. Bolivian policies often vary considerably from the one region to the other, and the coordination problems are vast. Furthermore, the politicized and clientelistic recruitment practices mean that many professionals will often not be professionals. When leaders recruit them, it can be based on political reasons or personal contact,

rather than professional competence. In Bolivia, what our informants indicate is how it corrupts institutional trust, and how it becomes harder to perform professional social work in a systematic way when basic steering functions do not work due to the clientelistic political system.

In Norway, our experts take it for granted that the channels from the political authorities, all the way down to the social worker intervening in families, are uncorrupt and legitimate. State capacity problems, corruption or clientelism are hardly an issue. In Figure 3, we sum up our findings in a model over the relationship between the institutional system and social work in Bolivia.

Figure 3: Model of the relationship between politics and social work in Bolivia
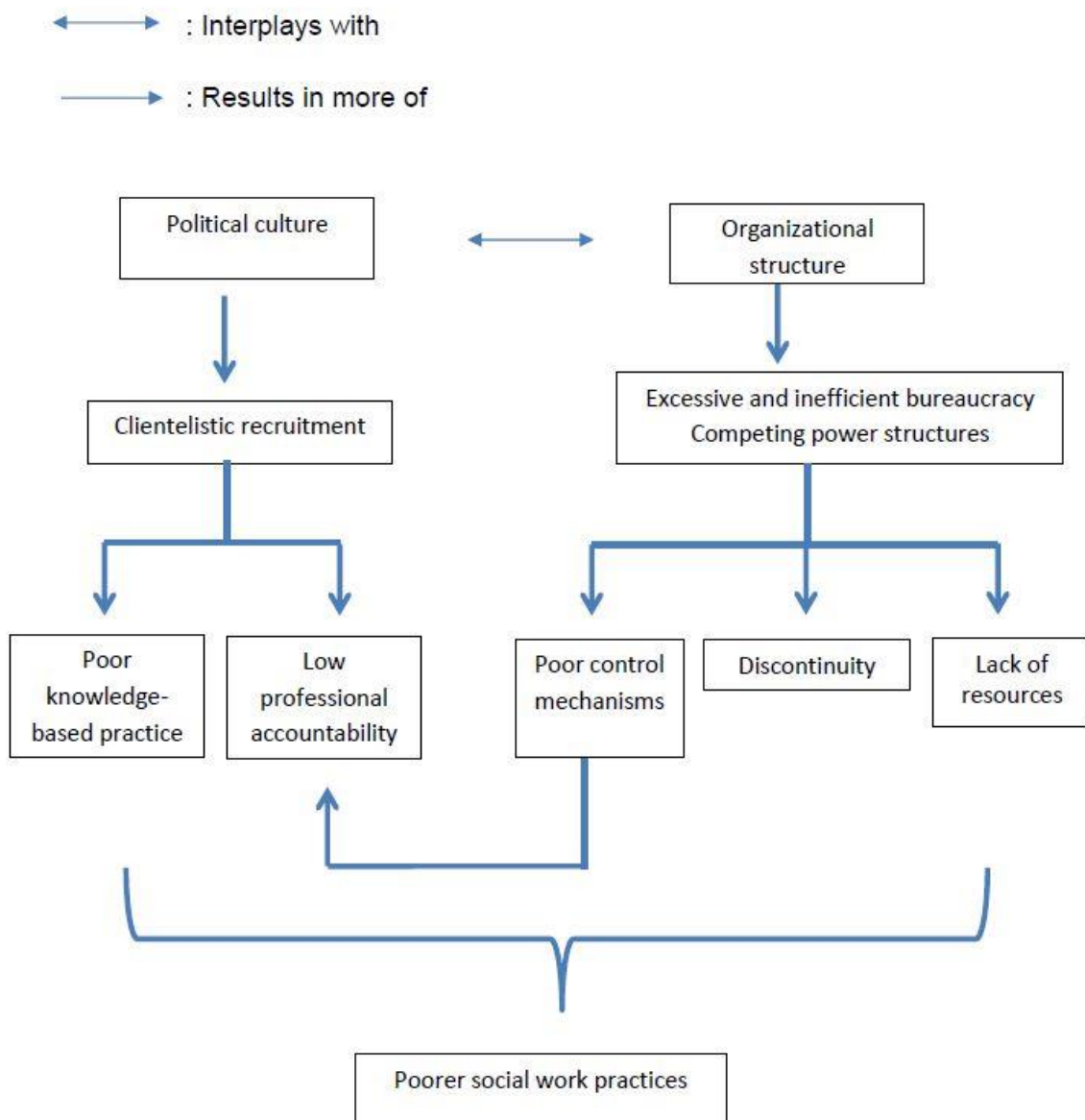
The model illustrates how the interplay in Bolivia between the political culture and the organizational structure–the institutional system–operates. The interplay leads to tensions between the various policy levels that comprise the political system. The bureaucracy also becomes excessive, thereby sustaining the clientelistic political culture. The effect is a discontinuity and disparity of services, a lack of resources and poor control mechanisms, which reinforce an environment of poor professional accountability. Because of this, professional social work in Bolivia suffers from unfavourable institutional surroundings.

Discussion: Implications

In his comprehensive and appraised study, Francis Fukuyama (2012, 2014) has described conditions for well-ordered political systems and how they work, which stands in contrast to systems of instability and decay. Following Fukuyama's analysis, a strong democracy and weak state capacity is no guarantee of welfare development, as we believe our own study also demonstrates. In fact, in our study we indirectly offered a test case for whether Fukuyama's rather grandiose design corresponds to empirical realities in the field of social work. According to Fukuyama, in Latin-America democratic reforms generally took place before a proper state capacity evolved. This sort of sequencing led to less beneficial conditions for political development and well-functioning welfare states. On the other hand, beneficial sequencing meant well-ordered democracies would appear under conditions where there already existed a strong rule of law tradition, as in the north of Europe, including Norway (ibid.). Supposedly, the impact from the political context on social work would vary accordingly. Nevertheless, we found in our two cases that our empirical data fit well with what theoretical expectations based on Fukuyama's theories would suggest.

Comparing cases from different polities provides opportunities for theoretical development, as well as policy learning (Andersen, 1997, p. 98). Ideally, best practices might serve as models. For instance, it would appear logical in the welfare area that emerging welfare states might copy models of successful welfare state regimes. In these final remarks, we draw attention to how the above way of reasoning might need qualifications, in two ways: First, the interplay between the political and professional context suggests differentiated attitudes to overall reform strategies contra to individual

learning strategies. Second, the impact of the political context on professional work indicates that policy transfer is easier said than done.

For the sake of this discussion, we assume that the following is an overall valid finding, namely that there exists a strong interplay between policy context and opportunities for successful professional work.

Differentiated attitudes towards reforms

Acknowledging the way a dysfunctional political context may influence professional work suggests differentiated attitudes toward reform strategies. As we have seen, in Norway top-down initiatives would normally result in social workers smoothly implementing new political initiatives. However, in Bolivia the overall institutional order comprises many of the unfavourable elements for implementation described in the huge amount of implementation literature (see Rothstein, 1994). In our study, descriptions of the Bolivian situation, e.g. the SAFSI programme, or the workings of the supervision bodies, provide evidence of how weak implementation capacities hindered enduring successful policies. In this latter context, the conditions appeared less favourable to top-down reform.

By contrast, there were reports of successful learning at the local level. Hence, individual training, as well as 'bottom-to-bottom' learning, as opposed to top-down initiatives, would possibly avoid the structural coordination problems attached to nationwide reform programmes where there exists weak state capacities.

Policy transferability

On a larger scale, differences in policy context would also affect the possibilities of successful policy transfer, at least theoretically speaking. We will briefly introduce three positions, thereby underscoring the advantages the third perspective.

The literature on conditions for successful policy transfer, especially regarding emerging welfare states, is ambiguous. One position stresses the colonial past and the aspect of ethnocentrism, adding up to 'dependent learning', when the South is supposed to simply replicate the former colonial powers (Gough & Therborn, 2010, p. 710; Greener, 2002). Analysing developmental paths, Gough and Therborn find it

unlikely that the global South will repeat the developmental paths of the European welfare states (Gough & Therborn, 2010, p. 711).

Secondly, it is not so that learning from external policy practice implies a need for total change in one big blow (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2010; Dolowitz, 2003; Jones & Newburn, 2006; Stone, 2004), e.g. in a vast area such as democratization, there has been successful strategic learning (Welzel, 2009, p. 82). There is also historical evidence of vigorous individuals in fact correcting entire bad policy practices, for instance in the second part of the 19th century regarding the entire public sector of England (Fukuyama, 2014, p. 126 ff.), or specific institutions within American public administration (ibid., p. 174 ff.). Latin American examples on the possibilities of human agency include the case of Costa Rica (Fukuyama, 2014; World Bank, 2014), as well as recent examples from the Colombian city of Medellín (Vulliamy, 2013; Swope, 2014).

Hence, the question is not simply whether some policy may fit into existing cultural and political traditions, but whether these traditions may also undergo change. Moene and Wallerstein (2006) convincingly raise this third perspective, discussing policy transferability with regard to the Scandinavian labour market model. They conclude the social and democratic experiences of Scandinavia could be repeated in Latin America, or more precisely: They regard pessimists to be one-sided (ibid.).

We believe this latter perspective is relevant to our own study, insofar as constructively combining sound analysis with prospective opportunities. Realism is called for. However, it is possible to combine advocating specific policy programmes, while at the same time working to transform its policy context.

Conclusion

We have examined the interplay between the wider institutional context and the professional social work in two polities. In comparing and contrasting Norway and Bolivia, we concluded that the impact from the political context is strong. Our study indicates it is not simply the particular form of welfare arrangement that influences everyday social work. What seems to matter even more is the workings of the overall organizational structure and the political culture.

To a certain extent, policymakers and nation builders have the ability to shape fair and sound institutions, in turn forming trust and advantageous social norms (Rothstein, 2015, pp. 36–37). To see if in fact policymakers and nation builders will be able to overcome the hardships of an unfavourable sequence, as described by Fukuyma (2012, 2014), is still an unwritten story. In contexts in which corruption and autocracy leave no option, this might remain the last hope.

Political work advocating changes like these would embody the IFSW understanding that social justice and social change belong to the fundamental principles of social work (IFSW, 2012, 2014). To work for programmes that potentially involve institutional change might sometimes be the best way to honour the principles of the IFSW.

End note

1. The international overviews representing Bolivia are sometimes controversial. Sometimes, the political authorities are those who choose consultants to perform research for international comparisons (e.g. the Indian Counsel of South America, Human Rights Watch and Franciscans International, in The United Nations Office at Geneva, 2015). Results then become less credible, and independent organizations and researchers will often contradict them (cf. Abdullahi, 2009; European Network of Ombudsperson for Children, 2010; Child Rights International Network, 2010).

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