1. Introduction

Rune Ervik, Nanna Kildal and Even Nilssen

In the rapidly growing literature dealing with the impact of globalization and Europeanization on welfare states, the focus has been more on economic and technological forces than on ideational ones. This book addresses this topic by venturing into several kinds of welfare policy themes that have occurred on the political agenda, in the EU, the OECD, the ILO, the WHO, the World Bank and the WTO, but with a major focus on the EU and the OECD. The intention is to examine the content of ideas that the international actors are promoting through recommendations and decrees concerning various systems of social welfare and health policy. A second research topic is to ask if and how these policy ideas might influence national policies. How important are international actors in the shaping of national welfare policy, in which ways do actors on these levels interact and influence each other in different policy areas, and how do the national institutional arrangements of welfare states impact upon these policy processes? The chapters of this book deal variously with these main questions, but a common point of reference is the policy ideas of international and national actors.

Currently, many different discourses on welfare policy are present at the national and international levels, where certain normative ideas contain an important part of the vocabulary, for example concepts like ‘dependency’, ‘individual responsibility’, ‘work incentives’, ‘freedom of choice’, ‘normalization’ and so on (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Kildal 2001, 2005; Nilssen 2000, 2006; Schmidt and Goodin 1998; White 2003). Hence, international debates concerning social problems and welfare policies include normative concepts and discourses founded on various conceptions of the social world.

The international literature on policy transfer has traditionally undercommunicated the importance of ideas and primarily concentrated on material forces and self-interests (Campbell 1998, 2002; Stone 2004). Nevertheless, several studies have demonstrated the impact of ideas and discourses on policy formation (Armingeon and Beyeler 2004; Béland 2005; Blyth 2002; Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Campbell 1998, 2002; Ervik and Kuhnle 1993; Hall 1992; Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1996;
The role of international organizations in social policy

Schmidt 2000; Weir and Skocpol 1985). This book will add to the knowledge contained in these studies.

THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF SOCIAL POLICY

Ideas on social policy have travelled between countries since modern forms of workers’ protection legislation were initiated in the 1840s in Britain, followed by social insurance legislation in Germany in the 1880s. A host of conferences and congresses were arranged, and organizations established, to address the social questions or the worker questions of the day, where representatives from national authorities, various social scientists and knowledge bearing groups, and representatives from charity and church, met to discuss the new risk landscape created by industrialization and urbanization and to exchange ideas on specific institutional solutions (Kuhnle 1996; Nowotny 1991; Schweber 1996; Wittrock, Wagner and Wollmann 1991). Much of the history of social policy is also a record of learning between countries in addition to factors reflecting the specific national and local contexts of institutions, ideas and social forces (Kuhnle 1981).

Many aspects of globalization and increased economic integration have reinforced the inter- and trans-national aspects of social policy. Increased flows of goods, services, capital and labour, other forms of migration and demographic changes, all have consequences for national social policies, and create common institutional challenges across different types of welfare states, increasing the interdependence between different national welfare systems. Ideas of social policy travel more easily now than 100 years ago and the degree of exposure to such ideas, and other cultural aspects, has vastly increased and has become one of the defining characteristics of globalization itself. In addition, the establishment of international organizations and other actors with a global or broad international reach in the aftermath of the two World Wars, has added a new dimension to questions of social policy. Whereas the International Labour Organization, right from its establishment in 1919, was concerned with labour issues and questions of social security, the key focus of the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank, International Monetary Fund) was initially on macroeconomic questions and on the need to secure a stable system of currency as a prerequisite for international free trade, and to guarantee a relative autonomy for national macroeconomic policy (Deacon, Hulse and Stubbs 1997; Held et al. 1999). Over the past two to three decades, social policy has increasingly been addressed by these institutions in tandem with the growth of the welfare state, the expansion of
the public sector, and its consequences for effective markets and economic growth.

In a European context, this increasing attention towards social policy is evident both within the OECD and the EEC/EU. Since its foundation in 1961, the OECD has of course been engaged in furthering economic growth and economic cooperation, but social policy as an explicit field was not part of its original mandate. Today this has changed, not in terms of the stated goal of the organization, but in terms of an increased attention to, and resources directed towards, a whole range of social policy matters, from labour market policy and pensions to family policy. Clearly the OECD report, *The welfare state in crisis* (OECD 1981), was seminal in setting the mainly negative tone towards the welfare state, reflecting the general paradigmatic shift of economic ideas from Keynesian inspired thinking towards monetarism, supply-side economics and public choice theories; in short, the rise of neo-liberal thinking, both outside and inside the organization. It is fair to say that the OECD today has a more nuanced picture of the welfare state, but scepticism towards public sector solutions is still vivid. However, the OECD possesses no means for getting its advice directly on to national agendas. The organization makes use of a kind of ‘soft regulation’, which means that it has no option but to play what is called the ‘idea game’, using a practice of ‘naming and shaming’ (Marcussen 2002, 2004).

Social policy has traditionally not been an area for supranational interference within the European Community. The national welfare state is a major source of legitimacy for national governments, and the EU has no direct legal or regulatory mandate to determine the social policy agendas of the member states. Following the establishment of the internal market and an increasing focus on European integration, social policy has nevertheless become a supranational topic. This has happened partly because of decisions made by the European Court of Justice, for example, case law concerning the coordination of social benefits within the union, and partly because of the establishment of soft law coordination of social policy through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). The OMC is similar to the ‘soft regulation’ used by the OECD, and highlights a process of mutual learning by the use of measures such as open-ended guidelines and benchmarking (Trubek and Trubek 2005). Originating as a tool in the coordination of EU employment policy, the method has expanded to more and more areas of welfare policy (social exclusion, health, pensions and care). The OMC lacks any formal sanctions against member states which do not comply with the general objectives worked out at the Community level. Compared with the OECD, however, the EU possesses potentially more power, for instance through the European Court of Justice and the
Maastricht Treaty, in terms of fiscal discipline (see Leibfried 2005 and Chapter 5 in this volume). Because these international organizations are acting as producers and/or mediators of social policy ideas in the search for solutions to conceived welfare problems, social policy processes themselves have become globalized. A new international and global agenda on social policy has been established. In this way, the social policy struggles of globalization take place at the international level as well as the national and local political levels (Deacon 2007; Deacon, Hulse and Stubbs 1997; Orenstein 2008; Yeates 2001). In this arena we find actors such as national governments, representatives of capital and labour, non-governmental organizations and international organizations. This trans-nationalization of social policy leads to a situation where:

The social policy of a country or locality is no longer wholly shaped (if it ever was) by the politics of the national government. It is increasingly shaped . . . by the implicit and explicit social policies of numerous supranational agencies ranging from global institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund through supranational bodies such as the OECD and the European Commission. (Deacon, Hulse and Stubbs 1997, p. 10)

Our main focus here is on one type of actor, namely international organizations. These are particularly interesting since they are given their mandate from member states; thus their legitimacy partly rests on the member states and their assumption that these international organizations provide more efficient means of solving problems of common interest across nations than if each state tackled the problems on its own. But the question of legitimacy is complicated by the fact that the power differentials of member states are reflected within some of these international organizations. This implies that international organizations (IO) could also be considered as a dependent variable in the question of ideational development, that is, that the ideas emanating from an IO result from interactions between member states and IOs, and some nations, for different reasons, may be more successful in terms of placing their own ideas on the policy agendas of IOs than others. Thus, also at the international level, Stein Rokkan’s famous dictum: ‘votes count, but resources decide’ (Rokkan 1978 [1966], p. 105) seems to be valid.

In their classification of multilateral institutions, Bøås and McNeill (2004, pp. 210–213) find that Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF are characterized by a high degree of donor control and power, whereas the ILO is typified by a low degree of such control and power. Combining a strong degree of donor control and power in terms of financial resources enables some states, notably the US, to exert a strong
influence on the ideas and policies promoted by these institutions. Within the area of development policy, we can find examples of member states that are under a strong coercive pressure to introduce policy requirements as a condition for obtaining loans from these multilateral institutions.

The examples in this book concern more symmetrical power relationships between these organizations and member states. The focus is on recommendations, in terms of policy ideas characterizing the context where these organizations have few means of directly coercing states to adopt their policy advice. Instead it is the power of these ideas, in terms of their knowledge and normative bases, which is ideally assumed to constitute their authority and legitimacy and convince the member states that a correct course of action would be to incorporate these ideas into more concrete policy measures.²

The general intention of this book is to grasp the kind of ideas that the international organizations are promoting through recommendations and decrees concerning various systems of social welfare and health issues. The underlying assumption is that these policy discourses influence policy makers in their handling of policy problems and solutions.

IDEAS AND DISCOURSES IN SOCIAL POLICY

Ideas are means to understand a multifaceted social world by applying certain concepts that help to reduce complexity. In addition, ideas may also provide a normative function by analysing the social world by invoking various concepts of justice. Both the cognitive and normative aspects of ideas enable individual and collective action, for instance by building and/or changing institutions. Policy ideas, as understood here, are specific in terms of containing both the normative and cognitive functions, as well as prescriptions for actions.

The literature on ideas and discourses applies a variety of concepts to denote the role of ideas and how these interact with institutional structures (Pochet 2003; Radaelli and Schmidt 2004; Schmidt 2002; Taylor-Gooby 2005). Thus, Hall (1993) applies the concept of paradigms to represent an interpretative framework which involves ‘a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing’ (p. 279). Schmidt and Radaelli (2004) define a policy discourse in terms of its content: ‘as a set of policy ideas and values, and in terms of its usage, as a process of interaction focused on policy formulation and communication’ (p. 184). These policy ideas, policy discourses, policy paradigms, or policy stories could be understood as a whole,
The role of international organizations in social policy

consisting of a description of reality, a specific framing of problems, and a provision of solutions wherein normative and factual assessments are interwoven (Béland 2005; Campbell 2002; Hall 1989, 1993; Ney 2000, 2003; Rein and Schön 1993). The policy ideas that different actors propagate influence political solutions, because they tell us how the social world is constructed, what is to be considered just and fair, why things go wrong, and what has to be done to correct what has been messed up, or is malfunctioning. In this way, the values, content and direction of policies are provided by such policy ideas. This ideational perspective stresses the non-reducible role of ideas and their relative independence from material self-interest and power.

There is a need to differentiate between various aspects of ideas and to distinguish between levels of ideas. Elaborating on this will also serve to clarify the focus of this book, which concentrates more heavily on some ideational aspects than others. Following Radaelli and Schmidt (2004), a discourse is understood as containing two dimensions, the ideational and the interactive. These dimensions further contain two essential activities each. Within the ideational dimension there is, firstly, a cognitive activity, enabling actors to make sense of reality, involving knowledge, policy analysis and information about problems, actors and resources, and secondly, a normative activity that assesses and judges reality and thus belongs to the framework of norms and values (Radaelli and Schmidt 2004, p. 364). The interactive dimension consists of the coordinative activity taking place when policy actors try to construct an agreed-upon policy, and a communicative activity, wherein policy actors present the policy for public deliberation and legitimation (p. 365).

In a 1998 article, John Campbell distinguishes between four main types of ideas, based on two dimensions. The first dimension differentiates between concepts and theories in the foreground of debate and underlying assumptions in the background of the policy debate. The other dimension distinguishes between a cognitive and a normative level. Combining these dimensions provides four main types of ideas. Paradigms are cognitive background assumptions delimiting the range of policy solutions considered to be useful for policy-making elites. Public sentiments are normative background assumptions constraining action by delimiting the range of alternatives that elites perceive as being acceptable and legitimate to the public. In the foreground of policy debates we find programmes which are cognitive concepts and theories that facilitate action among elites by detailing how particular policy problems are to be solved. Finally, frames are normative concepts that elites use to justify programmes to the public. Paradigms and public sentiments are second-order concepts, because they constitute the underlying ideas which the first order concepts, programmes and frames, rest upon (Campbell 1998, p. 385). In a later contribution,
Campbell (2002) has made an adjustment to this differentiation of ideas, distinguishing between cognitive and normative background frameworks (paradigms and world views) on the one hand, and foreground programmatic ideas (cognitive) and frames (both cognitive and normative) on the other. Hence, in a policy discourse, a programmatic idea may relate both to normative and/or cognitive frameworks and be justified by both normative and cognitive arguments.

To a varying degree, the chapters of this book distinguish between various types of ideas and activities inherent in policy discourses, but overall there is a stronger focus on background frameworks, programmatic ideas and frames, rather than on public sentiments. In terms of activities, this implies that the cognitive and normative activities are in the foreground of the analyses, whereas the coordinative and communicative activities mostly reside in the background.

The reference to level of ideas is important and is also closely related to the categorization referred to above, that is, ideas may range from whole ideologies, world views and cultures, to detailed and specific conceptual tools and ideas on particular topics (Pierson 2004, pp. 38–40). Thus a paradigm, for instance in economics, may form the basis for several specific programmes within different policy sectors (Béland 2005, p. 8). The discourses analysed here will be placed at different levels of generality. Analysing the content of policy discourses and ideas on social policy is at the forefront of our interest, and constitutes a common theme across most of the chapters.

TRACING IDEATIONAL INFLUENCE

Keeping in mind the internationalization of social policy, presented previously, a further complexity to the relationship between ideas and institutions is added when we ask how welfare policy is shaped by the interplay between the national and international levels. Exploring what consequences the discourses of international organizations have for national welfare systems, we assume that causality works both ways, that is, from the international to the national and vice versa, over the course of time. This points toward an interactional perspective, focusing on the actors at both levels, carrying the ideas that build the various aspects of the international social policy discourse. How important are international actors in the shaping of national welfare policy, and in which ways do actors on these levels interact and influence each other in different policy areas? And how do the national institutional arrangements of the welfare states impact upon these policy processes?
Three general perspectives on how to trace the effects of ideas on policies can be identified according to Yee (1996): co-variational analysis, the congruence procedure and process tracing. The first approach argues that the effect of ideas is demonstrated if these ideas correlate with changes of policies. But very often the relationships between ideas and policies are non-linear and highly contingent on other factors, and reveal disparities in time lags between ideational and policy change. In these situations a lack of co-variation does not prove the absence of a relationship (Beyeler 2004, p. 8).

The second approach is less ambitious in terms of establishing decisive proof of influence when compared to the co-variational approach. Instead it aims at revealing indications of the possible influence of ideas on policies. This method compares the content of policy ideas, in our case the policy ideas of international organizations, with the substance of policy decisions, in order to establish whether there is congruence or not between ideas and policy. If congruence is established, this is indicative of possible influence. However, in this case, the contingency of other factors, for instance other international organizations with congruent ideas, also complicates the question of influence. As a way of addressing this snag, one OECD study (Armingeon and Beyeler 2004) tries to pinpoint instances where domestic actors explicitly refer to the OECD in national reform discourses.

Process tracing is a third approach to studying the influence of ideas on policy, based on thorough analysis of the different steps and sequences of policy making, and pinpointing how specific actors carry certain ideas into the policy discourse, how they interact with each other and how institutions constrain and enable certain actors and ideas in this process. Specific actors may be epistemic communities, transnational actors, advocacy coalitions, policy communities and expert groups. Often what is addressed in policy ideas are various societal institutions and hence there is an important linkage between ideas and institutions. Through policy stories and discourses, existing institutions are scrutinized, criticized, delegitimized, defended and legitimated by actors engaged in political struggles on how the institutional landscape ought to be shaped in different sectors of society. One example of this perspective is Mark Blyth’s analysis (2002) of the changing economic ideas underlying the rise and fall of ‘embedded’ liberal institutions in Sweden and the US. Blyth’s analysis suggests important roles for ideas or discourses in situations where contemporary agents consider the specific event as unique and where the actors are unsure of what their interests are, and thereby also of the means to realize them (Blyth 2002, p. 9). In situations where agents’ interests are not fixed or given, economic ideas are crucial in influencing institutional change. Firstly, in periods of economic crisis, ideas facilitate reduction of
uncertainty by providing interpretive frameworks which confer understanding of how the economy works. A similar point has been made by Goldstein and Keohane (1993), seeing ideas as roadmaps and hence as a means to reduce uncertainty. Secondly, the reduction of uncertainty following from the interpretive framework enables collective action and coalition building. Thirdly, agents use ideas as weapons in order to contest existing institutions. Ideas also function as institutional blueprints by providing alternative institutional solutions to the existing ones. Finally, when ideas have been solidified into institutions, these provide intersubjective understanding and conventions, and hence strengthen institutional stability (Blyth 2002, pp. 34–45).

This book sheds light on several of the roles of ideas pointed out in Blyth’s account. In addition, the movement from embedded to disembedded liberalism is also central, in terms of creating a more general ideational background for our focus on social policy discourses. The economic ideas of disembedded liberalism have influenced the social policy discourses addressed in the chapters to follow. Previous research within the area of pensions has shown the importance of new paradigmatic ideas, based on a broader framework of economic thinking, in challenging existing Pay As You Go (PAYG) paradigms and institutions of pension provision, and also in terms of providing blueprints for new institutional solutions (Ervik 2005; Orenstein 2005). It could also be argued that many of the challenges of social policy, in terms of demographic transformations, the new social risks and economic globalization, represent situations of enhanced uncertainty and hence are states of affairs where ideational factors are decisive in different sequences of institutional change and interest formation.

Institutional constraints or facilitations are identifiable at various levels in the book. In Chapters 6 and 7, national cases (Norway, the UK and Germany) are analysed, reflecting different constellations of institutions in terms of welfare state regimes, types of welfare state and models/variants of capitalism (Barth, Moene and Wallerstein 2003; Esping-Andersen 1990; Hall and Soskice 2001; Kuhnle and Alestalo 2000). The point here is that these institutions create stickiness and path dependencies that influence and frame the effects of, and receptiveness towards, new ideas (Campbell 2002, p. 31; Pierson 2004, p. 43). Being sites of knowledge and idea production, possessing resources and capacities, international organizations are themselves organizations that invite institutional perspectives and frameworks, as described above.

In addition, and with relevance to the overall topic of this book, some of the most central dimensions on which regimes or types differ are also key terms in ongoing social policy discourses. Examples are the discourse on targeting, as evidenced within the debate on principles of selectivity.
and universalism as the normative basis for the welfare state. Another instance is the discourse on the redistributive principle of social policy, ranging from advocates of social insurance schemes based on principles of strict reciprocity, to those favouring schemes based on redistributive social insurance logic. In this way discourses on targeting and redistribution directly engage with aspects of welfare regime classification and specific institutions of social policy.

Finally, at the general level, these welfare regimes also enter into the ongoing discourse on the sustainability of the welfare state. The sustainability discourse concerns the social, moral and economic challenges of the welfare state, and whether these will undermine or severely dismantle the historical accomplishments of this state structure. As several chapters point out, this overarching discourse, especially in a version informed by a focus on the economic aspect of sustainability, strongly frames discourses in particular fields of social policy. Thus, the intrinsic legitimacy of social policy, in terms of securing social rights, is being partly subordinated to a discursive logic, where the legitimacy of social policy rests on its instrumentality in obtaining goals of economic growth and competitiveness.

Analysing policy discourses thus implies addressing ideas, actors and institutions, and their interaction. In scrutinizing the various political discourses, the contributors to this volume study policy documents, and some have interviewed policy actors and experts, in order to elucidate the ideational content of policy discourses. Interviews with key actors and informants, both at the level of international organizations as well as at the national policy level, provide valuable knowledge of how policy makers at both levels think and act in relation to the specific welfare discourses selected. In addition, the interviews are helpful in charting the interaction and contact between actors from the two levels, as well as within each of the levels, and within national case studies. In this way they complement the systematic survey of documents in tracing possible processes of policy transfer not revealed in the written policy documents.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The chapters of this book address different policy fields: social inclusion, labour markets, labour migration, health, pensions and family policy. These ambi of the welfare state are being given increasing political attention and they constitute areas where the interests and ideas of international organizations are increasingly being voiced in discourses on social policy.

The first three contributions concentrate on the content of some of the core ideas in the field of social policy within the OECD (Chapter 2) and
the EU (Chapters 2, 3 and 4). In Chapter 2 Nanna Kildal explores the normative content of the policy ideas furthered by the EU and the OECD in the areas of employment and social protection. After having analysed the two organizations’ policy guidelines and recommendations, general and country-specific, their policy ideas are compared and examined within a framework of justification and legitimacy. Three social policy discourses are brought to light: the discourses on ‘social rights’, ‘rights and duties’ and ‘make work pay’. Furthermore, as the EU and the OECD have had a long-standing cooperation in various policy areas, the chapter also directs attention to their collaborative efforts and working methods in these policy fields. A conclusion is that there are extensive similarities in ideas and working procedures between the EU and the OECD, and that the policy advice given is instrumental in character and mainly justified with pragmatic arguments.

In Chapter 3, Milena Büchs starts from the assertion that social policy and democracy are mutually related and co-dependent. Western national welfare states institutionalize and stabilize this relationship in a particular way. However, the specific relationship between social policy and democracy is becoming porous through European integration. With the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), the European Union has adopted a new governance tool to both strengthen and establish a new relationship between democracy and social policy. The most significant approach to theorizing about this new relationship is directly-deliberative polyarchy. This chapter critically discusses the OMC and questions whether it can be legitimized by this directly-deliberative polyarchy model. It argues that whilst directly-deliberative polyarchy provides useful insights into current problems, it needs to be embedded more coherently into the principles and institutions of constitutional and representative democracy.

In Chapter 4, Even Nilssen elaborates on the founding ideas and policy discourses of the EU Social Inclusion Strategy (SIS), as expressed through the Open Method of Coordination. Following Campbell’s differentiation of ideas (2002), Nilssen identifies three basic discourses containing different kinds of ideas. The most important programmatic ideas are expressed through a discourse on active social inclusion, which emphasizes that the best way to fight poverty and social exclusion is to incorporate people into the labour market. The secondary discourse – the discourse on targeting – states that this is most effectively achieved through a focus on target groups and an individualization of social policies. Although these discourses have important normative implications, they are expressed in a purely instrumental way. Nilssen claims that this has to be understood against the background that these programmatic ideas are framed through a discourse on the sustainability of the welfare state. This mainly economic
discourse embraces problems such as globalization and the demographic changes within the member states (an ageing population), leading the SIS in a material-instrumental direction, where social policy is primarily understood as labour market policy. At the same time this ‘materialization’ of social policy is interpreted as the main reason for the relatively extensive support for the SIS among the member states.

Chapter 5, written by Aksel Hatland and Even Nilssen, takes as a starting point one of the founding ideas of the EEC/EU – the free movement of workers – and elaborates on how this idea has been developed by the rulings of the European Court of Justice (ECJ). The ECJ has established the supremacy of European law over national law, and it has formulated general legal norms of great political and practical importance. The Court has contributed to extended rights for EU citizens to move freely between the member states of the union and to reside wherever they want. Hence, the ruling of the ECJ has also influenced the development of social rights within the EU (for example, through interpretations concerning the coordination of social benefits between member states).

The chapter discusses how this strong political role can be explained. It emphasizes the often vague nature of community law, which gives the Court a strong interpretive power, the judicial style which stresses the purpose of a rule more than a literal interpretation and the multilingual character of community law, which also makes literal interpretations more ambiguous. The court has often been criticized by political actors for legal activism and interference with questions that are essentially political. But there are no examples of a member country refusing to accept the Court’s decision.

Traditionally, international organizations have not focused on family policy. The EU does not even have a mandate for developing policy in this field. Still, in recent years organizations like the EU and the OECD have taken a greater interest in family policy issues, mainly due to their significance for economic issues and performance. Consequently they have expressed policy advice and commented on member states’ policies, mainly reconciliation policies such as parental leave and provision of child care. Tord Skogedal Lindén’s contribution (Chapter 6) connects two fields of comparative social policy research: the literature on ideas and learning, and family policy. It does so by considering theoretical perspectives that explain how actors change ideas, based on advice from international organizations. It relates these perspectives to the case of recent German family policy reforms. The potential influence of international organizations in the field of family policy has so far received insufficient attention. Lindén addresses this lack, based on interviews with national and international stakeholders, as well as a careful reading of EU, OECD
and German governmental policy documents. He finds correspondence between EU/OECD policy advice and German reforms, and argues that the EU/OECD policy line may have enhanced and maintained family issues on the agenda. However, international organizations served more as mediators than as producers of ideas. Individual countries such as Sweden are more important than the EU/OECD in developing ideas. Thus, direct learning between countries is crucial for dissemination of family policy ideas and must be considered too.

The three subsequent chapters (7–9) deal with various aspects of pension policy, an area where important changes have taken place in many countries, in terms of the provision of income security in old age and normative underpinnings of pension institutions. International organizations such as the ILO and the World Bank are actively promoting ideas and learning processes in pension policy. In a European context, both the OECD and the EU have been increasingly engaged in facilitating pension reforms to secure future sustainability and adequacy of pension provision in member countries.

In Chapter 7, Rune Ervik explores the role played by the OECD and the EU in shaping the central ideas of national pension reforms in Norway and the UK, through an interactional and relational process with member states. In addition, important bilateral (and multilateral) exchanges of ideas between countries, taking place outside the realms of these international organizations, is also scrutinized. His focus is on specific key actors within the EU and the OECD, involved in explicit pension policy advice and recommendations. The chapter finds that the EU and especially the OECD could be seen as selective or biased ‘reform boosters’. They have a role as reform agenda framers influenced by a specific knowledge base and an interpretive framework strongly based on economics. However, rather than being a process where pension reform ideas are developed at the European or OECD level and then applied directly to the national level, they are the results of negotiation, debate and the exchange of views between these two levels. Finally, both for the UK and Norway, multi- and bi-lateral contacts with neighbouring countries are identified to be of stronger importance than those with the international organizations, in terms of providing ideas and examples to learn from.

In Remi Maier-Rigaud’s contribution (Chapter 8), the recent search for a new approach to pension policy by the International Labour Office is analysed. The Office (and more specifically the Social Security Department) is identified within the International Labour Organization as the main provider of ideas and expertise that go beyond pure social standard setting. Thus, the unitary actor assumption is displaced in order to take a closer look at the internal composition of this international
organization, and how it relates to changes in policy ideas. This perspective yields several findings: the restructuring of the Social Security Department in 2005 enabled the drafting of a new, possibly more coherent, approach to pension policy. It reduced the omnipresence of social insurance orthodoxy, traditionally endorsed by the Office. Instead, the role of universal social pensions has been strengthened in order to reach higher coverage rates, especially in developing countries. In addition, external factors have affected the pension policy of the Office on different levels. Since the global pension policy discourse is dominated by the World Bank, it has also left imprints on the new approach of the Office. The impact is most visible on the programmatic level, and concerning the framing of the policy recommendations. The paradigmatic foundation is less affected, although the economic underpinning of the Office’s position has resulted in a phase of disorientation which could lead to a paradigm shift. Therefore, internal tension and external pressures are identified as driving forces behind the search for a new approach to pension policy within and by the ILO’s secretariat.

In Chapter 9, Axel West Pedersen and Henning Finseraas explore whether the pension reforms enacted by EU member countries over the last decade exhibit common trends and/or real convergence in the degree and pattern of income security offered to wage earners. The authors use data that have been generated by the OMC process on current and so-called prospective replacement rates for hypothetical cases of ‘typical workers’. They find a general downward trend in gross replacement rates offered by the respective national pension systems, but little sign of convergence in terms of relative differences between countries. For net replacement rates, including private occupational pensions, the downward trend is significantly smaller, and there is no evidence of convergence. However, when it comes to the structure of income protection, measured by the share taken up by private pensions, both a common growth trend and a strong tendency in the direction of convergence are identified. Finally, Pedersen and Finseraas find evidence of declining preferential treatment of low-wage earners, and some convergence towards an overall proportional pension system.

In recent years, health issues have increasingly appeared on the agenda at the international level, due to the spread of a number of new infectious diseases. The need for strengthened international cooperation regarding health policy is generally acknowledged, and the growing number of international organizations has become more important in global health policy.

In Chapter 10, Christof Schiller, Henni Hensen and Stein Kuhnle analyse global health policy discourses by studying the World Health
Organization (WHO), UNICEF, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank. The aim is to map the organizational field of the global health debates over time, and to study how the main important health policy proposals have travelled between and within these organizations. The organizational capacity of each body is examined and compared in order to find out how a possible shift in health policy proposals has been reflected by a change in such capacities of the various organizations over time. One conclusion is that the ideational influence has shifted away from the WHO as the prime actor. Furthermore, the chapter indicates that the focus in the debate has shifted towards specific priority diseases, in contrast to the time of the Alma Ata declaration in 1978, when there was a focus on comprehensive health care approaches. The global health debate has become increasingly ‘technical’.

The chapters presented above present a range of international organizations dealing with social and health policies. The contributors unfold and analyse their ideas and policy outcomes, stressing the internal struggles of these organizations, and thus advancing their demystification, spelling out clearly their heterogeneous character. All chapters stem from new research and provide insights into the ideas and interactions between international and national actors. Some of the contributions reflect recent interviews with key policy actors both in international organizations and at national level. The book describes a complex relationship between the international and national social policy makers, as well as between different international organizations operating in the fields of social and health policy. The book reveals a dynamic and reciprocal pattern of influence, rather than clear unidirectional causal relationships.

NOTES

1. ‘Neo-liberalism’ is a political orientation, originating in the 1960s, that blends liberal political views with an emphasis on economic growth. According to Webster’s Dictionary, ‘neo-liberalism’ describes a political-economic philosophy that rejects positive government intervention in the economy, focusing instead on achieving progress by encouraging free-market methods and less restricted operation of business.

2. Other forms of power are of course relevant in our context, and ideas are important also in contexts characterized by a high degree of more coercive means. In the first case, even within these more symmetrical relationships, there are differences between countries in terms of resources donated and influence obtained. Thus the US contributes about 25 per cent of the OECD budget and so has a more dominant position within the organization than smaller countries such as Norway. An additional point is that these organizations are not necessarily coherent actors, as there are important internal divisions and struggles taking place on policies. Different policy paradigms have been institutionalized to various degrees and so posit unequal abilities to influence within the organizations. As for the latter case, even here ideas are central in terms of justifying the need of reform.
The role of international organizations in social policy

programmes and institutional change. Thus the point is that ideas, institutions, interests and power are interlinked and mutually constitute each other.

3. ‘Embedded liberalism’ refers to a specific form of state, characterized by relatively closed capital markets, demand-side fiscal policies, a belief in an active state, and an understanding of the causes of unemployment as rooted in insufficient demand. ‘Disembedded liberalism’ designates a counter-movement away from Keynesian thinking and its institutional configuration towards ideas such as monetarism, supply-side economics and public choice, promoting a belief in a non-interventionist pro-market state, independent central banks and high capital mobility, and seeing unemployment as dependent on the market clearing price of labour (Blyth 2002).

REFERENCES


Ney, Steven (2000), Inception Report PEN-REF Project (Deliverable D1), Vienna: ICCR.


