Preface

The future of the welfare state is inextricably bound up with its capacity to foster a well-functioning labour market while maintaining its traditional task of providing protection against the vagaries of a modern market economy. Experience has shown that there are no simple ways to realize this twin goal. All countries that were heralded as a paragon of an optimal policy mix at one point in time, such as Sweden, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Finland, were confronted with serious problems later on and had to give up their model status. Nevertheless there is increasing understanding that countries should learn from each other's experiences. Although it is an illusion to think that one could copy the formula for success from one country to another, learning from other countries' experiences is indispensable in order to design a well-considered policy mix. This is now a central element of the so-called open method of coordination (OMC) of the European Union (EU), which has been employed in the areas of employment policies, social inclusion, pensions and health care.

However, one of the problems for policy learning in the EU is that it is often quite hard to establish which policies are successful and which are not. We are convinced that, in order to gain real insight into the effectiveness of social policy, we have to go beyond simple statistical indicators for policy measures and perform an in-depth study that covers the formal laws and regulations as well as the practice of administration and implementation of social policy. This is the main purpose of the seven chapters in this volume that discuss the social policy in a number of European countries. Experts from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom analyse the policies with respect to unemployment insurance, employment protection and active labour market programmes and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the policy mix in their country. In the introductory and the concluding chapter we bring together the results from these overviews and draw some general conclusions with respect to the effectiveness of social policy.

We believe that the European social model is worthy of being cherished and protected against the assaults of the prophets of a liberal free-market economy. With this book we hope to add to the understanding of the

strengths and weaknesses of European social policy. Thus, it might contribute to strengthening the European social model and making it ready for the challenges that lie ahead.

Paul de Beer and Trudie Schils, February 2009