

Activation in Different Regulatory Settings: Insights from Social Assistance in Switzerland

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Introduction

When implementing activation policies in social assistance, professional social workers must cope with the different conditions that impair a person’s ability for employment. Ideally, caseworkers have possibilities to develop an individual tailor-made activation strategy for each client based on professional standards. This task is complex as such, but also strongly limited and influenced by the available activation services and benefits. Here caseworkers must cope with the complex multi-level and multi-actor systems involved in the financing and delivery of activation services. And, it is thus also the larger regulatory setting in which caseworkers operate, that influences the possibilities for a coordinated, effective, and efficient service delivery.

This paper explores the issue by comparing social assistance clients and their caseworker in social service organizations operating in two different contexts in Switzerland: the Canton of Bern and the Canton of Zurich. These two cantons represent different regulatory regimes regarding the governance of activation policies in social assistance: While in the Canton of Bern, the financing of social assistance as well as the setting up of labor market programs are centrally coordinated, in the Canton of Zurich, financing and program decisions remain almost entirely in the responsibility of the communal level.

Data was collected from social assistance clients (CATI) and their social worker (CAWI) recruited in five local social service organizations in each canton. Furthermore, the heads of the social service organizations were interviewed, to identify organizational governance of activation principles and the discretion of individual caseworker in the different social service organizations. The idea of this methodological approach is to gather at the same time data on (1) the counselling process, i.e. the involved social services, (2) the assessment of the quality of the involved inter-agency-collaboration, as well as (3) on the effects of this process in terms of development of resources and well-being of the client.

A central aim of the Bernese model of central steering is to ensure that integration programs are available in the whole canton and that the local social service organizations can rely on activation specialists offering different programs. The results, however, do not indicate a better fit of the chosen labor market programs in the canton of Bern than in the canton of Zurich, as measured by the supportive statements by the clients and dropout rates. Since in Bern the canton pays for the measure, communal social workers can assign social

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assistance clients to programs without having to justify the chosen measure directly to those who must finance it as is the case in the canton of Zurich. Still, the caseworkers in Zurich have assigned their clients more often to programs than those in Bern. Since they remain responsible and accountable for the entire integration process, including the selection and evaluation of the contracted they seem to be more effective than their colleagues in the Canton of Bern.

Governance of activation policy

Since two decades the activation paradigm is at the core of many policy reforms in the post-industrial welfare state (Bertozzi *et al.* 2008; Bonoli and Natali 2012; Clasen and Clegg 2011; Heidenreich and Graziano 2014). Policy reforms frequently combine *enabling* and *demanding elements*, i.e. activation services to support employment are paralleled by an increase of work conditionality in the reception of social benefits, in the form of reduced duration of benefits, stricter criteria for eligibility, sanctioning systems for non-complying recipients, as well as wider definitions of suitable jobs. In the context of social assistance schemes, implementing activation policies is particularly demanding. Varied and complex conditions may impair a person's ability for employment, making work conditionality of benefits a more controversial issue than for unemployment insurance recipients (Minas *et al.* 2012; Kjørstad 2005). Work conditionally is difficult to implement, if inactivity is the result of "inadequate qualifications, difficulties with reconciling work and family, inadequate housing conditions, mental health issues and/or indebtedness" (Heidenreich and Aurich-Berheide 2014). For the long-term unemployed on basic income schemes, activation therefore often involves a range of different social services, such as social counselling, child care facilities, skill development, social and/or labor market integration programs, training in job application, and others. Furthermore, welfare and activation services for the most vulnerable persons are often delivered at the local level by both public and private agencies (such as NGO, social entrepreneurs or the churches), raising issues of governance (Christensen *et al.* 2007; Green and Orton 2009; Heidenreich and Aurich-Berheide 2014; van Berkel and Borghi 2007): How should these complex multi-level and multi-actor systems be regulated to ensure coordinated and effective action?

The governance-models chosen in different countries to implement activation policies for long-term-unemployed show some similarities but also variation, e.g. regarding the degree of decentralization or centralization of services (Minas *et al.* 2012; Lindsay *et al.* 2007; Lindsay and Mc.Quaid 2009; Lindsay and Mc.Quaid 2009), the marketization of services (Bredgaard and Larsen 2008; Minas *et al.* 2012; Sol and Westerveld 2005), and the degree to which services and insurance systems for different categories of unemployed people are integrated (Heidenreich and Rice 2016; Bonoli and Champion 2013). The literature on different governance models raises a number of issues concerning their effects on the front-line delivery of activation services as well as on the outcomes for welfare recipients.

An important question addressed is whether the chosen activation regimes facilitate or rather impede the possibilities of front-line workers to develop *individualized activation strategies* for each client, taking into account his/hers specific conditions and resources (Rice 2017; van Berkel and van der Aa 2012; Bonvin and Moachon

2007; Garsten *et al.* 2016). Strict control and sanctioning systems, standardization of service provision as well as performance management based on quantitative indicators are associated with lower degrees of service individualization. Rice (2017) for instance finds more variety and innovation in employment services in the more decentralized Dutch minimum income system than in the Danish one that relies more strongly on procedural standardization.

A related issue regards the contracting-out of activation services to private suppliers. By establishing “quasi-markets” for activation services, public managers seek to increase flexibility and innovation at the level of suppliers. Evidence on the effects out-contracting on service quality so far is mixed. A recent study from the British marketization efforts finds an increase in flexibility to tailored services to individual clients. At the same time however also negative outcomes have been observed, such as an increase in creaming and parking practices, (Considine *et al.* 2017). In Australia and Netherlands “extensive creaming and parking of jobseekers” resulted from performance related payment and the delegation of the financial risks to providers (Bredgaard and Larsen 2008).

In the context of implementing activation policies for social assistance clients, trends towards more decentralization as well as more centralization have been observed. In decentralized systems, rights, service availability, and service quality may strongly vary between regions or municipalities (Minas *et al.* 2012).

Efficient activation services, especially for people that are rather distant from the labor market, are likely to depend on a coordinated (if possible integrated) network of the different social services involved. Unified case management, due to a systematization of coordination and collaboration among the different providers and a clear assignment of responsibilities facilitates effective coordination.

The Swiss laboratory

The empirical results presented in this paper stem from a comparative study on the role of activation in social assistance in two Swiss cantons. While the Swiss federal constitution guarantees a minimum subsistence income to every resident, no federal law on the provision of social assistance exists. The regulation of social assistance is therefore left to the cantons. The cantons choose different regulatory systems and frequently leave it to the communities to run and finance the social assistance scheme. The Swiss case therefore allows studying different subnational regimes regarding the regulation of activation policies while at the same time other parameters, such as the national unemployment insurance system, are the same for all constituent units. It should be noted that the absence of a federal law in the domain of social assistance does not mean that social assistance is not harmonized at all among the cantons. The professional association of the social assistance agencies, the Swiss Conference for Social Assistance (SKOS/CSIAS), provides guidelines regarding benefit levels as well as sanctioning mechanisms and incentive systems. Although not binding by federal law, most social assistance agencies follow these recommendations, either because it is prescribed by the cantonal law or because the communal authorities have chosen to follow the guidelines.

Switzerland is late-comer in term of activation policies.

In this paper, the focus on the two largest cantons of Switzerland in terms of inhabitants: The Canton of Bern and the Canton of Zurich. These two cantons particularly represent different regimes with regard to the regulation of activation policies in social assistance.

Governance of Activation in the Canton of Bern

The Canton of Bern is the second largest Swiss canton in terms of size (after Graubunden) and also in terms of inhabitants (after Zurich). It is located in between the German-speaking part and the French-speaking part of the country. It is one of the few bilingual states in Switzerland, with a minority of 11 percent of French-speakers living mostly in the Bernese Jura. The canton has large rural and alpine regions, which partially explains why the canton is a net receiver of structural payments in the Swiss financial equalization mechanism. The share of people dependent on social assistance (4.2 percent) is above the Swiss average (3 percent).

While the municipalities are responsible for the implementation of social assistance payments and social counselling services, the Bernese social assistance regulation imposes quite strong centralizing elements compared to many other Swiss cantons. At the core of the Bernese system is a finance-equalization system. This system strongly reduces the fiscal burden for those municipalities with large shares of social assistance cases (the larger cities and rural municipalities with structural problems), while it increases to some moderate degree the fiscal burden for municipalities with low risks for social assistance among their inhabitants. According to the Bernese model, communities contribute to the financing of the social assistance system depending on the size of their population and not depending on the number of people depending on social assistance. The financial equalization system also includes a quite complex bonus-malus mechanism to reward communities with low numbers of social assistance cases in relation to their particular risk structure.

In order to ensure a comparable degree of service quality, the cantonal regulation requires municipalities to offer their inhabitants access to a social assistance agency, including counselling by a professional social worker. The social assistance agency can either be a division of the communal administration or a regional agency provided through the association of several smaller municipalities. The number of professional social workers financed by the canton depends on the caseload and is therefore standardized.

In 2010 the Canton of Bern implemented a centrally steered model to activation in the context of social assistance (GEF, Gesundheits- und Fürsorgedirektion de Kantons Bern 2013). It did so by building a cantonal network of providers of employment and social integration schemes (*Beschäftigungs- und Integrationsangebote der Sozialhilfe* - BIAS). To this purpose the canton was divided into ten zones. For each zone a 'strategic partner' was contracted as the central provider of activation programs. Currently four of the providers are public agencies, i.e. divisions of the communal social service and 6 are private organizations. With each of these partners the canton has agreements that regulate the planned provision, the quantity and the financing of activation measures. The strategic partners are responsible for a good cooperation with all partners (communal authorities, social service agencies, providers of integration programs, job networks, enterprises). Five types of

measures are relevant: job programs and qualification programs, specific offers for young adults, job networks and long term training programs (Neuenschwander and Winkelmann 2011). While the canton regulates the offer and financing of activation programs, it is still up to the discretion of the communal (or regional) social assistance agency to decide which clients should participate in a program of a strategic partner. Moreover, communities have the possibility to run their own programs or to put up activation measures for specific clients outside of the cantonal offer, as long as they finance these measures themselves.

The Canton of Bern

With 1.4 million people living there, the Canton of Zurich is the largest Swiss canton in terms of inhabitants. The canton, especially the very vibrant city of Zurich and its surroundings, are economically sound. Overall the canton is – unlike the Canton of Bern – a net payer to the Swiss financial equalization mechanism. The share of people dependent on social assistance (3.2 percent) is around the Swiss average. The canton has a strong liberal tradition and the autonomy of the sub-cantonal governmental layer, the political communes, is particularly emphasized.

In the Canton of Zurich, social assistance law does not preview a financing equalization system, leaving it primarily to communities to pay for most of the costs for the social assistance recipients living in the community. Given that the communities have to pay – they also decide themselves how they organize social assistance. Cantonal social assistance law does not require communities to offer their inhabitants a direct access to a professional social service organization in case they seek help – as is the case in Bern. In some smaller communities people will have to contact the community administrator (Gemeindeschreiber) in order to get assistance. Unlike in the canton of Bern, in Zurich it may happen that social assistant clients are not required to see a professional social worker. Social assistance recipients in this case will only be served by administrative staff responsible for the social assistance payments. Still, many communities in the canton run their own professional social service organization or are a member of a regional association of communities that operates such an agency.²

In the Canton of Zurich activation measures have to be financed almost entirely by communal sources. It is therefore the front-line worker and the managers of the local social service organization that decide with what kind of partners they want to collaborate. The final decision whether an activation program is paid, lies in the competence of communal authorities. The social workers therefore will have to formally ask for the funding of activation programs for each client.

Expectations about front line service delivery in different regulatory settings

Although the two cantonal systems compared in this study, especially in international standards, are decentralized, they nevertheless clearly differ on the degree of decentralization. The cantonal level plays a much smaller role in the governance of activation in Zurich than in Bern. Comparing the two systems

² Due to our research design, we were only able to include clients served at such a social assistance agencies. We therefore do not know what the activation efforts look like for clients that are not regularly counselled by a professional social worker

therefore allows studying the effects of centralization by the means of a centrally governed preferred-supplier system.

The central aims of the Bernese model of central steering are to *ensure that integration programs are available in the whole canton* and that the social workers in social assistance agencies can *rely on activation specialists* offering different programs and ensuring a good program-fit for the clients (GEF 2013). Since the canton pays for the measure, communal social workers can assign their clients to the regional strategic partner, without having to justify the measure directly to those who pay for them as in the canton of Zurich. Given central steering of the offer, one can also expect that programs are more widely available in Bern than in Zurich. Accordingly, a central initial hypothesis is that in *the Canton of Bern*, social workers *more frequently rely on integration programs* to activate their clients than in the canton of Zurich.

Integration programs come in many different varieties and whether they really help to activate or not is likely to be strongly dependent on finding the program that fits best with the client's needs. In the uncoordinated system (Canton of Zurich) this decision is left to the caseworker at the social service organization. Especially non-specialized caseworkers in a smaller social service organization this can be a rather demanding task, since a good knowledge of the "market for active labor market programs" is required. In the Bernese model, specialized activation expertise for all social assistance clients is guaranteed and therefore we would expect *a better fit of the chosen integration program in the Canton of Bern* than in the Canton of Zurich (e.g. clients in Bern should be more supportive in terms of their evaluation of the programs they participated and show lower dropout rates).

However, in the Bernese model the external strategic partners are sometimes responsible for all stages of the activation process, i.e. assessment, program selection and program supply are combined in one external organization. If the organization, that runs the work-integration programs at the same time also decides which program is good for a client, this might pose problems: Given that the provider of a work-integration program has an interest in filling vacant program positions, there is a risk that the person will be directed to this vacancy and not to the most appropriate program. In the uncoordinated system in Zurich, the social worker remains more strongly in control of the process and therefore has more possibilities and room of maneuver to act according to his/her professional standards. Having *more direct responsibility and discretion regarding the client's activation* program might increase the efforts of the social-worker to find the solution that promises the best support for the client. If this argument holds, there should be *a better fit of the chosen integration program in the Canton of Zurich* than in the Canton of Bern.

The different steering models in the two cantons are likely to produce also differences regarding the *quality of the programs and the monitoring of program-outcomes*. In the Canton of Zurich, social service organizations must establish own networks with different suppliers of integration programs. Since the program is financed by communal sources, the local social service organization has an interest in efficient programs in terms of cost-benefit-ratio. Only program suppliers that perform well in this respect are likely to "survive" in the system. Program suppliers on the other hand, have an interest in becoming a regular partner in the activation network

of the social service organization. They can achieve this only by delivering good service quality. It is the front-line social-worker who “purchased” the program for the client who will assess the quality of the activation service on an individual basis. She does so by getting feedback from the client and the supplier as well as by observing progress regarding the pursued qualitative goals. Although such a monitoring of program outcomes through the individual social-worker might also take place on the Bernese system, due to the greater individual responsibility of the case-worker in Zurich, they are likely to monitor more diligently. In the model implemented in the Canton of Bern, suppliers are evaluated on a larger scale and by using quantitative indicators, which might lead to practices of ‘creaming’ and ‘parking’ (Bredgaard and Larsen 2008). Since the programs are financed by the canton, the social-workers neither must justify the placement decision nor are they held accountable for the program decisions. Therefore, in the centralized system program evaluation is likely to be less immediate and direct, which might have a negative effect on the performance of activation programs. As a result, the decentralized system in Zurich could be expected to yield *better quality in activation programs*. This certainly only holds, if the demand of activation services by the communal social service organizations is large enough to ensure the (economic) survival of suppliers of activation work.

When comparing the activation strategies in the two cantons one should keep in mind that besides the governance systems also *structural and ideational differences* of the two cantons might explain differences in program assignment and selection. The Canton of Zurich is wealthier than the canton of Bern and the case-loads are smaller, which may alternatively explain the differences in program-fit and the use of activation services. Furthermore, the Canton of Zurich has a stronger liberal tradition and there are indications that the activation paradigm is more widely adopted by the social workers as well as political authorities than in the Canton of Bern. Formal rules, regulations as well as financing mechanisms might explain different behavior, but informal rules influenced by dominant views and ideas are often important factors for the explanation of policy outcomes. If this explanation holds, we could expect that in Zurich clients are more frequently forced into work-integration programs and more often sanctioned than in the canton Bern.

Data and Methods

The data for the here presented analysis stem from a project on inter-agency collaboration in social assistance. Data have been gathered by surveying social assistance recipients as well as the responsible social worker in the social assistance agency. The idea of this approach was to gather at the same time data on (1) the counselling process, i.e. the involved social services, (2) the assessment of the quality of the involved inter-agency collaboration, as well as (3) on the effects of this process in terms of development of resources and well-being of the recipient. In order to make sure that the surveyed clients do have a record of participation in the counselling at the social assistance agency and also had the chance to participate in work integration programs or other measures of activation, only persons had been considered that have been on social assistance for at least 18 months (i.e. long-term unemployed). The surveyed client-social-worker-pairs have been recruited in social assistance agencies in the Canton of Bern and the canton of Zurich.

In order to find client-social-worker-pairs for the survey, we first had to recruit local social service organizations (*Sozialdienste*) in the two cantons that were willing to support our study. This proved to be rather difficult. Given that the social workers had to motivate their clients as well as to fill out an online-survey for each participating client, the heads of the agencies worried that participation would be too much of a burden for their collaborators. And, even if the heads of the social assistance agency supported the project, they sometimes delegated the final decision to participate in the study to their collaborators, which in two cases decided not to participate.

In the end, five public social service organizations in each canton were included in the study (cf. table 1). In Zurich, unfortunately the agencies of the larger cities did not participate in the project. Therefore, all five included social service organizations are operating in smaller cities or larger suburban communities. Four of them are communal and one is provided by an association of communities. One social service organization in Bern had to be excluded from the study, because not enough clients were eligible for the project.

Table 1: Included social service organizations

Code	Number of served communities	Inhabitants of the region/municipality	Number of social workers	Caseload per year
BE 1	1	20'000 – 29'999	>10	600
BE 2	1	10'000 – 19'999	<10	700
BE 3	1	30'000 – 39'999	>20	1250
BE 5	1	> 50'000	> 40	4'000
BE 6	1	> 50'000	> 40	4'000
ZH 1	1	20'000 – 29'999	<10	750
ZH 2	1	10'000 – 19'999	<10	400
ZH 3	1	20'000 – 29'999	>10	1'250
ZH 4	1	10'000 – 19'999	<10	400
ZH 5 ¹⁾	7	> 50'000	<10	200

¹⁾ This social service organization only is responsible for social counselling, the social assistance payments are administered by the contracting communities.

The participating agencies have been visited by one or two members of the research team. At the occasion of a team-meeting, the project collaborators gave a presentation introducing the research project and the central guidelines to be followed by the social worker. Social workers were asked to motivate their clients into the study. As an incentive for participation in the study, social assistance recipients received 40 Swiss francs in the form of a voucher for their preferred supermarket (choice from one of the two major market-chains). The recipients willing to participate in the survey were asked to fill out a form stating their consent to be contacted for a telephone interview and also their consent that their social worker will fill out a corresponding online-questionnaire. The number of declarations of consent that were sent in from clients varied strongly between different social workers. While some of the participating social workers did not recruit any clients other recruited up to five. In the end, we completed 280 interviews: 141 clients (74 in the Bern and 67 in Zurich) and 139 social workers. Field work was done between June 2015 and May 2016. The interviews themselves posed little problems: Once the declarations of consent were sent to the research team, the interviews could be conducted with little problems. The response rate of recipients is more than 95 percent and the response rate of social workers 99 percent.

Beyond the surveys we also conducted in depth interviews with the leaders of the social assistance agency to get information on communal and organizational particularities regarding the provision of activation measures. The interviews have been transcribed and qualitatively analyzed. Furthermore, we organized several workshops to discuss the project with front-line workers and managers.

Results and Discussion

Activation Strategies in the two Cantons

The presented empirical data stems from surveys of clients and their caseworkers in five social service organizations in each canton. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with the managers of the included social service organizations. All interviewed managers emphasized the importance of individualized activation measures, accounting for the resources of their clients. According to them, professional social work methods should guide the integration process elaborated by the frontline-worker for and with each client. The way clients are assigned to active labor market programs or other activation measure differs however widely between the included social service organizations. The variance not only is large between the two cantons but also within each canton.

In the Canton of Bern, we included two larger cities in the sample. Both established in-house specialized agencies as the strategic partners of the canton in labor market integration. In city BE5 the in-house agency does the assignment to the programs and also runs their own programs. In city BE6, the agency does not run own programs and therefore focuses on counselling, developing collaborations with (private) partners and assigning the clients to active labor market programs purchased on the activation market. The three other included social service organizations represent smaller suburban cities and municipalities. They strongly rely on the programs and integration services of the respective strategic partner chosen by the canton. Two of them also engage – together with communal authorities – to set up own in-house programs in addition to the ones that are offered by the strategic partner.

The managers of the Bernese social service organizations were overall positive about the work of the strategic partner and their own discretion to use also alternative suppliers to a certain limited degree. One manager reported “*With [strategic partner] we rely on an organization that often tries to do ‘the impossible’*” (BE1).

While all interviewed managers reported good collaboration with the work-integration agency, i.e. the strategic partner of the canton responsible for their clients, they also mentioned some problematic issues. One manager argued that the preferred-supplier model used in the cantonal financing system provides little incentives to choose the best program in terms of cost-benefit-relation: “*Program X is the best example. It is one of the most expensive programs I know. But since it’s the canton that pays for it, from our perspective, it is cheaper to send someone there and not to program Y that we would have to pay for from communal resources.*” (BE3)

In the context of a workshop discussion, a front-line worker from a Bernese social service organization, argued that one problem of the Bernese model is that program variety of the strategic partners which are the main

suppliers is rather low: “*Often it is just more of the same.*” This is partially a consequence that the types of work-programs that must be supplied by the strategic partner are defined by the performance contract. Still, as the interviewed manager report, the strategic partners are willing to some degree to adopt to the wishes of the social service organizations. And the cantonal system also foresees regular meetings, to address such issues. Overall, the Bernese governance model allows for flexible solutions, and particularly the larger cities can benefit from these more flexible solutions.

In the Canton of Zurich, where there are no steering efforts of the cantonal authorities regarding the provision and financing of activation services, variation in activation strategies are even more pronounced than in the Canton of Bern. In one smaller city, an in-house specialized agency for activation has been established (ZH 3) which is backed by the use of qualifying labor-market programs of private suppliers, if needed. The leader of another social service organization in the Canton of Zurich reported that he and his caseworkers try to find an individual solution fitting for each client and thereby primarily rely on (external) job-coaches that offer intensive counselling while they remain very reluctant in assigning their clients to group programs. He emphasizes the importance of overseeing the assignment process: “*I personally like it very much, that I have the possibility to remain in charge of this principal task of social work. This makes my job very interesting.*” (ZH2). Similarly, manager of ZH5, emphasizes individualization and the placement of people in active labor market programs that ‘*maximize the chances of integration*’).

A third manager prioritizes individual solutions for each client that allow a re-integration in the previous employment sector of the client. To support the strong emphasis on individualization, he adds: “*We dislike group workfare-programs*” (ZH4). This strategy contrasts with the one envisaged by another manager, leading the social service organization of a smaller city in the Canton of Zurich, whose central principle is to stabilize the clients in low-cost and low-threshold social integration programs (ZH1). The more expensive, qualifying work-programs are primarily reserved for persons that have a very good chance of labor-market integration. This manager justifies this strategy by arguing that the clients in qualifying work-programs often feel a very strong pressure to find a job in the labor market. If the chances of getting there are low, the pressure may impact negatively on the client’s motivation and physical health.

In the Canton of Zurich the room of maneuver in promoting individualized activation strategies for the clients is not only larger at the level of organizations but also at the level of the professional social workers employed at a social assistance agency that have been surveyed: The statement “*I have enough room of maneuver and discretion to place the clients in a program that fits well*” applies to 68 percent of the interviewed caseworkers in Zurich (N=25) and only 40 percent of those surveyed in Bern (N=35).

When asked about their position towards *sanctioning and incentive systems* in the domain of work-integration, the caseworkers mainly differ when it comes to the question of sanctioning clients that do not cooperate: 66 percent of the caseworkers in Bern versus 88 percent of those working in Zurich support the idea of sanctioning clients (e.g. by cutting benefits levels) of persons that refuse to participate in work-programs. This

difference supports the expectation that the demand-side of the activation principle gets more widespread support among the front-line workers in Zurich than in Bern.

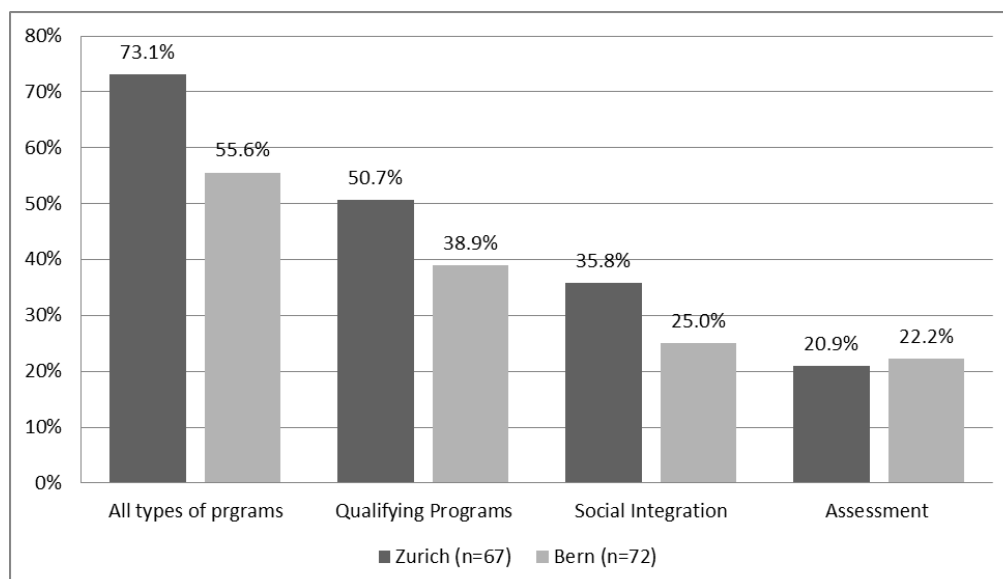
This is also supported from other statements. For instance manager of ZH1 argued that an hour in public transport is a commuting distance that can absolutely be expected from a social assistance receiver, in case the envisaged activation-program is promising good results for the client. A front-line worker of BE1 on the other hand, complained that her clients shouldn't have to commute for 30 Minutes to participate in an activation program run by a strategic partner.

Participation in labor market programs and availability of such programs

The social workers included in the survey reported for each client, whether the client participated in one or several active labor market programs. A distinction was made between (1) programs that aim at work-integration with qualifying elements, (2) programs of the so called social-integration type which do not in the first place focus on increasing the chances of employability but rather at stabilizing clients that have difficulties with everyday life (3) assessments-programs, aiming at assessing what type of integration program would be appropriate for a new social assistance recipient.

When comparing the integration program that has been set up at the individual client level, findings imply rather strong cantonal differences regarding participation-rates: While more than half of the clients of the Bernese social services have never participated in an active labor market program, two thirds of the clients surveyed in Zurich have done so. Especially participation in social integration programs in the Canton of Bern is much lower than in the Canton of Zurich. Only assessment programs are more often assigned in Bern than in Zurich (cf. figure 1). These findings go against the hypothesis that cantonal steering and financing of work integration programs will make such programs more available and therefore also used.

Figure 1 Percentage of the surveyed social assistance recipients enrolled in at least one integration program by type of program



Note: The number of cases refers to all program participations for each client reported by the surveyed social workers.

Since the number of cases is rather low, the possibilities to make more fine-grained quantitative analyses by comparing the results for the clients in different social assistance agencies are very limited. It should however be noted that in the canton of Bern, a larger share of participants in qualifying labor-market programs and a much larger share of the participants in social integration programs comes from the two cities that have established their own specialized work-integration agency.

One likely reason for lower program participation rates in the Canton of Bern is that the offer of programs in terms of program-variation and financing offered by cantonal policies is not sufficient and therefore social workers have difficulties to find suitable programs for their clients. The social workers participating in the study have been asked about their general observations regarding the supply of suitable activation services for their clients. Almost 70 percent of the participating social workers from the Canton of Zurich agree or partly agree with the claim that “in general suitable offers for work-integration or social integration exist”. In Bern this percentage is 43 percent; we find however again a marked difference between the responses from social workers from the two cities that have established an in-house placement agency (55 percent agreement) and those working in one of the other three social assistance agencies included in the study (29 percent). The picture is similar if one looks at the responses to the question about the availability of places: A clear majority of over 80 percent of the participating social workers from Zurich agrees or partly agrees with the claim: “In general, enough places are available”. In the Canton of Bern, this percentage again is much lower (29%) and differs between those agencies with an in-house placement agency and those working with an external partner.

A front-line worker from the Canton of Bern added in her questionnaire: *“In my view, there is still a lack of broad and varied work-programs. It sometimes is difficult to find an appropriate place and to motivate clients to participate even if the place is not fitting. I consider it problematic, that I have to sanction clients in such situations.”*

The Bernese model of centralized steering of labor-marked programs through the preferred-supplier contracts therefore seems insufficient in terms of ensuring adequate supply and variety of such programs. The market-model in the Canton of Zurich on the other hand seems to work rather well in this respect. The suppliers certainly have to compete for consideration by the social service organizations. In the words of a social service manager: *“There is a fight for assignments. You don’t believe how much mailings and phone calls I receive by suppliers.”* (ZH2) To oversee the large supplier market for active labor market programs is, as the manager (ZH2) mentions, a very demanding task: *“I would like to have more support from the canton in thus respect. But discretion at the operative level should remain as it is. This makes my work interesting, because one can think and act in an entrepreneurial manner”.*

Program-fit and client’s motivations

As mentioned above, the interviewed social workers in the canton of Zurich support sanctioning measures to a larger degree than those interviewed in the canton of Bern. One possible explanation for the observed differences in program participation in the two cantons could thus be that the activation paradigm, especially in the “welfare-to-work”-variant, gets more widespread support from caseworkers in the canton of Zurich than

from those in the canton of Bern. Indeed, a somewhat larger share of the interviewed social assistance clients in the Canton of Zurich reported that they only participated to avoid a cut in benefits (26 percent versus 17 percent in Bern). The clients from the Bernese social services are more likely to be in a program because they wanted to participate and they are also somewhat more positive about program participation (cf. table 2). The respondent pattern therefore gives some indications that the larger program participation rates we find in Zurich are related to the more widespread support of (compulsory) activation measures and also sanctioning systems of the caseworkers compared to those in Bern.

Table 2: Evaluation of program participation by the clients (Percentage of supportive answers)

	Zürich (N=42)	Bern (N=36)
“I wanted to participate”	67%	78%
“I like(d) working there”	67%	75%
“I only participate to avoid a cut in benefits.”	26%	17%
“I have dropped out early.”	31%	28%

Note: The number of cases refers to all program participations reported by the surveyed clients, multiple responses per client are possible.

Given the small number of cases, one should be cautious in drawing strong conclusions. The variation within cantons is large – and again, in the canton of Bern it is primarily those clients living in one of the two cities running their one specialized in-house activation agency, where clients were rather positive about the programs they participated in. If dropout rates are taken as an indication for program-fit, those programs assigned by one of the in-house agencies in the canton of Bern, performed best, followed by the programs assigned by the social workers in Zurich. Drop-out rates were highest for the clients of those three social service organizations that delegate the activation program of their clients mostly to a preferred-supplier contracted by the Canton of Bern.

In the survey, we also asked clients and social workers to report on the perceived development of personal well-being and resources of the client. A statistical analysis however does not show consistent relationships between program participation and progresses observed in the integration path of the clients. Only in the assessment of the client’s progress by their social workers, and only from front-line workers in the Canton of Zurich, a weak positive statistically significant correlation can be found. But, this correlation is not substantiated if one takes into account the self-assessment of the client. Unfortunately, it is thus not possible with our research design to evaluate the quality and effects of the chosen programs in the two cantons.

Conclusions

At the core of this paper activation strategies of front-line social workers in two Swiss cantons have been compared. Although in both cantons, social assistance is organized in a highly decentralized manner and discretion by international standards, the two systems compared nevertheless vary with regard to centralized governance efforts in the field of active labor market programs. The regulatory model in the Canton of Bern is based on regional preferred-supplier contracts with centralized financing and performance measurement. In

the Canton of Zurich, there are no centralized steering efforts, and activation policies are primarily steered at the communal level and through market-mechanisms with competing suppliers widely available in the canton.

A first and important conclusion is that variation in the organization of activation work is large in both cantons. In the Canton of Zurich, this is due to higher levels of discretion of managers and front-line-workers alike. In the Canton of Bern, differences in organizing activation depend more strongly on the size of the social service organization (and its resources). In larger cities in-house specialized public agencies became the preferred-supplier of the canton. These agencies yield good results in terms of assigning clients to programs that fit well (low drop-out rates of clients and motivated clients). Those social service organizations that rely on a private partner contracted by the canton, struggle more with regard to program fit as well as the availability of suitable program places.

The front-line workers in the Canton of Zurich, operating as (public) purchasers in a relatively large activation-market, can rely on a larger variety of services and supply is more adapted to their demand.

This not necessarily implies, that a more decentralized, market-based system outperforms the centrally steered one. One also has to take into account that the activation paradigm is more widespread in Zurich and that therefore public sources to pay for the programs are more widely available. Furthermore, the activation principle seems to get more support from the social-workers and the (financing) public authorities in the Canton of Zurich.

Beyond these caveats it is important to stress the specific design of the market-model that has developed in the Canton of Zurich. This is not a 'black box' approach (Considine *et al.* 2017) that merely assigns the front-level workers in the public agencies the role of passive observers and delegates the task of program evaluation to distant functionaries assessing program outcomes through statistical performance indicators. The front-level workers in the social service organizations in Zurich remain responsible for choosing the suitable integration path for their clients and for monitoring the (qualitative) outcome. Their role is the one of a case manager that coordinates the work of activation specialists and other social services required for a successful 'integration path' of the client. And these front-level workers report that this work is satisfying and interesting. As other studies have shown, a unified case management is likely to yield positive results (Hill 2005).

The differences found among the implemented activation strategies in the Canton of Bern further support this view: it is in those agencies that have established their own in-house case-managers where program fit for clients is better. The results presented from the comparison of two models of activation policy in Switzerland therefore suggest that a granting front-level-workers discretion, combined with clear accountability and close monitoring of the client's progress outperforms other steering models. The central authorities could support this process by supporting professional standards and training, and by developing and providing tools that help the front-line workers to oversee, select and evaluate the suppliers in the activation-market.

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