

Report from the Norwegian WelfSoc focus groups

Introduction

The Norwegian focus groups – organised by TNS Norway – took place on 10-12 October 2016. The five focus group meetings were held at TNS Norway's premises in the centre of Oslo. In preparing the focus groups, Ms Camilla Eriksson from the Qualitative Department at TNS Norway liaised closely with the team from NOVA. While TNS and the NOVA researchers jointly established the exact recruitment criteria following instructions from the UK team, the participants were recruited by TNS Norway. Ten persons were recruited to each group in order to be sure to have at least eight participants in each group. In line with the Norwegian social science research ethical guidelines, NOVA had notified and obtained consent from the Data Protection Official for Research about the project (NSD). The five focus groups took place in a room designed specifically for focus groups with a one-way mirror that allowed observers to follow the discussion from a separate room. Kjetil Klette Bøhler attended all five groups whereas Mi Ah Schoyen observed three of the groups. All groups were scheduled to last 2 hours without a break (see table below), but in practice it was difficult to conclude the discussion within the allocated time.

Date	Time	Focus group	# of participants
10 October	4.30-6.30 pm	Working class	9
10 October	7-9 pm	Young people	9
11 October	4.30-6.30 pm	Middle class	8
11 October	7-9 pm	Women with care responsibilities	8
12 October	2-4 pm	Retirees	9

The moderator, Ms Camilla Eriksson, followed the same structure for each group. After explaining briefly the aim of the focus group and going through the rules (speaking one at the time, no right or wrong answers etc.), the participants introduced themselves (first name, age, family status, current or former occupation, interests/hobbies). Each participant was also asked to say what she associated with the term 'welfare state'. The six vignettes had been translated from the common FG specification and were introduced and discussed one at the time. As instructed, the vignettes were broad and gender neutral, i.e. the persons in the vignettes were not given any names or age (with exception of the 70-year old). The moderator introduced each vignette orally. To remind the participants

she had also written each vignette on an A4 sheet, which she attached on a white board at the same time as presenting it:

Vignette I: Unemployed in good health

Vignette II: 70 year old person in good health

Vignette III: Family with young children and average income

Vignette IV: Low-income worker (considerably lower than median income)

Vignette V: Worker earning well, i.e., considerably more than average

Vignette VI: Immigrant

Group 1: Working class

ID	Born	Gender	Education	Occupation/Labour market status	Civil status	Children	Political orientation
W-1	1974	F	Vocational- paediatric nurse	Disability pension	married	Adult	left
W-2	1974	F	University college – teacher training	teacher	married	11/14 yrs	left
W-3	1969	M	Upper secondary, vocational track	Administrator, car repair business	married	12 yrs	right
W-4	1963	M	University degree in music (equiv. to bachelor degree)	Piano teacher	single	9/12 yrs	left
W-5	1970	F	Upper secondary	Church City Mission	single	None	left
W-6	1968	M	BI Norwegian Business School / bachelor business economics	sick leave	divorced	5 yrs	centre
W-7	1983	M	Lower secondary school	unemployed	single	None	centre
W-8	1977	F	Upper secondary – vocational track	Medical secretary	cohabiting	None	left
W-9	1974	M	Upper secondary – vocational track	cook	single	12 yrs	left

Overall, the group agreed that the welfare state covered many important needs. The majority associated the welfare state with positively loaded notions like solidarity, community, gratitude and help in difficult situations. However, there were also a couple of more critical voices that seemed to suggest that the welfare state spent too much money and made some people lazy. Although there were some nuances, the majority seemed to think that welfare provisions were a public responsibility. Moreover, the majority of benefits and services should be universal as this enhanced the legitimacy of the system. Instead of cutting support to better off people, the group pointed to a progressive tax system as the best way to make sure that the 'haves' pay more than the 'have-nots'. Several participants seemed to favour tax increases on the well off and/or tax cuts for the poor rather than more differentiated or targeted benefits and services. *Need* should be the main

criteria for the allocation of benefits and services, while people should be asked to contribute to the system according to their *economic abilities*.

Vignette I: The group agreed that it was necessary to know *why* the person was unemployed, i.e., whether the person had quit her/his job or had been laid off. Some participants suggested that persons who had quit their job should get less benefits. However, it was also pointed out that sometimes employees are practically forced to quit his/her job, e.g., resignations are not always voluntary. Overall, the discussion of vignette I was much about how strict the criteria for unemployment benefits should be and whether benefits should be differentiated according to needs and degree of effort to find a new job. There seemed to be consensus that unemployed with children should receive extra financial support. Moreover, one also needs investments in services aimed at helping unemployed back into the labour market. Everyone agreed that benefits and services should be the responsibility of the state. They pointed to tax money as the main source of funding.

Vignette II: There was consensus that a 70-year old person in good health should be able to choose whether she wanted to work or not. In the latter case, she should get a reasonable old age pension as well as access to public health care. A 70-year old who wants to work should be allowed to do so. On the question of who should pay for old age pensions and other services aimed at the elderly, there seemed to be consensus that this was a public responsibility (i.e., the state through tax money). One participant argued that the elderly are not necessarily worse off than younger people. On the contrary, even if they generally do not have income from work anymore, they often have more wealth. Thus, he suggested that it would be reasonable to require that they pay somewhat higher user charges/copayments (within the national health system) when going to the doctor. Another participant criticised the mandatory occupational pension scheme, which is mandatory for most employers. He suggested that it would be better to integrate this scheme into the public old age pension system since most pension insurance companies were expensive and charged considerable administration fees.

Vignette III: The first benefit the group mentioned was child benefits. Several participants also highlighted the importance of childcare facilities and suggested that nurseries for small children should be free in the same way as schools are free. The majority seemed to think that the experiment with childcare at a reduced fee or completely free of charge for immigrant families should be extended to the whole population.

Vignette IV: As a starting point, the person should have the same entitlements as everyone else. There was some discussion about the extent to which the person deserved access to more services or benefits. If anything, low-wage workers

should be rewarded through the tax system (i.e., lower taxes) rather than a privileged access to welfare benefits and services. Some participants suggested that a person who has a low-wage job could improve his/her own situation by undertaking further education or training. It was also pointed out that sometimes people choose occupation out of interest without thinking about money. One participant who was a professional musician, pointed to himself as an example. He preferred to earn less and have a job that he liked rather than doing something only for the money. The moderator asked the group whether it mattered if the person worked part-time or was on a temporary contract. Again the group emphasised that it mattered whether the employment status was voluntary or not. However, the participants did not manage to reach a conclusion as to exactly how an involuntary part-time or temporary job should influence your entitlements from the welfare state.

Vignette V: In line with the idea that most benefits and services should be universal, the majority seemed to think that a person on a higher-than-average income should generally have the same entitlements as everyone else. For instance, the group underlined that rich people should have access to the national health system in the same way as everyone else. The main difference between a well-off person and people earning less was that the former should pay higher taxes. That is, there should be a progressive tax system. Some participants seemed to defend further tax increases on the rich in order to generate the revenue necessary to maintain a comprehensive welfare state. Even though, in general, the group expressed a preference for universal arrangements, there was agreement that it was reasonable to have an income ceiling above which one does no longer accumulate any entitlement to further benefits. In this regard, they were happy with how most benefits are regulated today.

Vignette VI: The group immediately pointed out that they needed more information in order to conclude on what the person should be entitled to. Parts of the discussion centred on the importance of citizenship. While some participants argued that social rights should be attached to citizenship (regardless of country of origin), others suggested that citizenship was less relevant and that entitlements should be awarded primarily on the basis of what you contribute. After some discussion most seemed to agree that if you work and pay taxes, you should be entitled to benefits and services regardless of whether you are a Norwegian citizen or not. In addition, some participants argued that some basic rights should be granted to citizens even if they are unemployed or do not pay taxes. The group seemed to agree that immigrants should be entitled to Norwegian language training. They saw this as an investment that could pay off by improving immigrants' chances on the labour market, which in turn would benefit the economy and society as a whole (e.g., less crime).

Group 2: Young people

ID	Born	Gender	Education	Occupation/ Labour market status	Civil status	Children	Political orientation
Y-1	1992	M	UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL	Student: Bachelor in creativity and innovation	Single	None	Left
Y-2	1986	F	Master	Project manager, Norwegian Farmer's Union	In relationship	None	?
Y-3	1994	M	University college	Unemployed	Single	12 yrs	Right
Y-4	1982	F	Bachelor	Student: medicine	Divorced	3 yrs / 7 yrs	Left
Y-5	1996	F	UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL	Student: economics		None	Centre
Y-6	1994	M	Upper secondary school, vocational track/craft certificate	Student, social education	Cohabiting	None	Centre
Y-7	1985	M	UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL	Student: sales management	Single	None	Right
Y-8	1989	M	Master	Consultant	In relationship	None	Right
Y-9	1985	M	Lower secondary school	Assistant, public leisure programme for primary school children	In relationship	None	Left

General impression

In general, the discussion was characterised by openness and the participants were able to develop personal interpretations based on what others said and showed a sense of collective reflection. These reflections were also more open-ended and playful than for example group 4. They used the discussion as a means of testing out arguments and viewpoints rather than defending preconceived viewpoints. While some subjects were more active than others, overall, the group showed a rather equal distribution of statements among the participants. People used a mix of personal experience, abstract reasoning and knowledge about specific technicalities of the welfare state to support their arguments.

When faced with vignette I they argued that it was important not to distinguish between physical illness and mental illness. They argued that anyone not able to work due to sickness (mental or physical) should be entitled to the same welfare

benefits. They were particularly concerned about the lack of recognition of mental illness as this was something many identified with. Interestingly, this viewpoint corresponds to existing studies on youth and young adults in Norway, who reports an increase in mental health problems (e.g. the Ungdata surveys). Still, they argued that it was very important that those who are able to work are able to get a job. One of the informants further questioned what we mean by good health and suggested that as the threshold for this changes across time and across cultures, we have to establish a baseline definition to know who should be entitled to welfare benefits and not. While the group recognized the importance of offering robust welfare services, they underlined that getting people back to work was the key to guaranteeing everybody a decent level of living. They believed that people would experience more wellbeing when having a job and feeling useful. They also supported the idea that the state should help people find new jobs so that crucial labour, manpower and knowledge are not lost (here reference was made to the many unemployed engineers in the oil sector due to the low oil prices experienced in recent years). At the end of the discussion one participant asked whether the hypothetical person described in the first vignette was ethnically Norwegian, immigrant or an asylum seeker. This statement changed the course of the subsequent discussion, so that it also related thematically to the last vignette. The group discussed how the welfare state was conditioned on a certain sense of solidarity and shared values. Immigrants, who did not have these values, might challenge this.

When asked about vignette II, the participants agreed that it was important to increase the retirement age and keep people longer in work. They argued that it was simply not sustainable to keep the current pension system if we were to maintain the same welfare state. Instead of keeping a fixed retirement age, they believed that there should be more flexibility and that most people want to work. Nonetheless, they also argued that one should get the benefits one needs. Some participants used an economic rational to back the viewpoint that we need to work more and called it a 'socio-economic problem'. This reasoning seemed to be well received among the other participants.

When confronted with vignette III the group expressed contrasting views. On the one hand, some emphasized improved support for families. On the other, others stated that it was not a human right to have children. If people want to have children, they should prepare for this. The latter argument was controversial and provoked strong reactions. One participant presented the counterargument that Norway needs more children and (welfare) benefits and services should support this aim.

A female participant, a medicine student, described how parents with chronically sick children receive poor social welfare support and assistance. She presented

the technicalities of the health care services within the welfare system. Afterwards everybody agreed that chronically sick children should have better support. They further agreed that some of the services that are specially designed for families and children, e.g. support to go to the dentist, should be upgraded to the whole population. Everybody supported the view that the state should be in charge of financing all these services.

When asked about vignette IV they all agreed that people with poor income should have access to substantial welfare services to enjoy a minimum living standard. However, they did not agree on exactly what these benefits and services should include. Faced with vignette V, the group also argued that rich people should receive fewer services than the poor since they could afford to pay for these themselves. They did not see why rich people should receive welfare services they could pay for themselves.

Vignette VI led to a stronger degree of disagreement among the participants. Some argued clearly for a more exclusive welfare state that should only give services and support to Norwegian citizens. They argued that if these services were given to everybody, we would attract too many immigrants and we would not be able to sustain the welfare system. They also pointed to the need to distinguish between entitlements for asylum seekers versus for economic immigrants. They were particularly sceptical towards giving welfare services to economic immigrants. Others argued that we have a duty to receive many immigrants, economic immigrant as being part of a more globalized world, and, more importantly, asylum seekers.

Group3: Middle class

ID	Gender	Born	Education	Occupation/ Labour market status	Civil status	Children	Political orientation
M-1	F	1974	Bachelor	Senior engineer	Single	None	Right
M-2	F	1970	Master	working environment consultant	Single	15 / 18 yrs	Right
M-3	F	1970	Bachelor	Teacher	Married	17 / 21 yrs	Right
M-4	M	1972	Bachelor	Nurse / student	Divorced	None	Right
M-5	M	1973	Bachelor	Milieu therapist	Married	18 / 20 yrs	Left
M-6	M	1975	University college 5 yrs	HR advisor	Married	5 / 8 yrs	Centre
M-7	F	1966	University college 4 yrs	Customer advisor, wage managment	Single	Adult	Left

M-8	F	1965	University college	Consultant, construction and maintenance	Divorced	Over 18 yrs	Left
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The group associated the welfare state with notions like social safety net, benefits to cater for various needs, health care, giving people opportunities (e.g., leave arrangements, education). In general, there was a high degree of support for publicly funded welfare arrangements, i.e. the state should pay with tax money. The group also tended to favour publicly delivered services (elderly care, nursery schools etc.), but during the discussion arguments both for and against came up. In most cases they did not see how gender should be a factor in deciding whether or not you should be entitled to a benefit or service.

Vignette I: Several benefits came up in the discussion about the unemployed person. The majority found it reasonable that an unemployed person was entitled to unemployment benefits. Several participants pointed out that they expected that benefit recipients do what they can to find a job. Against this background, they emphasised the importance of employment services to assist people in their efforts to find employment. There was some discussion about the design of such services in order to be useful, i.e., about what kind of courses and type of assistance they should offer and the kind of conditions that should be attached to the benefits. The group seemed to agree that family status was relevant in determining what benefits and services you should be entitled to. Hence, they identified instances in which the unemployed person was entitled to more than just unemployment benefits. For instance, childcare responsibilities and/or low income trigger other benefits and services. However, these should be independent of employment status. Thus, unemployment benefits along with employment services are the main provisions relevant to the status as unemployed. Vignette I also led to a general discussion of means-testing of benefits. While a few participants called for a greater degree of individual adjustment of benefit levels with need as the main criterion, another participant pointed out that means- or income-testing demands generally leads to more administration and bureaucracy.

Vignette II: It was obvious to the group that the person should be entitled to an old age pension. After some weighing for and against the majority seemed to agree that 70-year olds should also be allowed to work they wanted to. However, they emphasised that it should be voluntary. It was important not to pressure older workers who might be worn out after many years in the labour market. The general view seemed to be that senior employees often had a lot of valuable experience and that employers are often not good enough at exploiting this. In this regard, there was some discussion about how one could give elderly workers opportunities in the labour market and in society in general without squeezing out young people who try to enter the labour market.

Vignette III: The group agreed about the importance of parental leave and the possibility to take out sick leave to stay at home with sick children. Further they reasoned that if these benefits had been the responsibility of employers, it would have created more inequalities. Not all employees would get these entitlements or alternatively, it would affect who gets hired in the first place. One of the participants emphasised the role of services and benefits aimed at children in allowing especially women combine work and family responsibilities, which, in turn, is hugely beneficial for the economy as a whole.

Vignette IV: Several participants seemed to think that dental treatments should have a ceiling on user charges like in the national health system. This would benefit especially low-income families and prevent that some people avoid going to the dentist because it is too costly. The group also discussed to what extent it is reasonable to hold individuals responsible for their own situation. What can individuals do to improve their income? It was suggested that for many people it might be possible to improve formal qualifications by taking further education. However, one participant also pointed out that the labour market is tougher than in the past and that it was likely to get even more difficult in the future. Hence, it might be necessary to think about alternative forms of income protection in the future. This remark led to a debate about introducing a basic citizen's wage. Since this was a new concept to several of the participants, the discussion was not coloured by strong opinions for or against. Instead, it was very open and exploratory.

Vignette V: Generally, a person on a high income should be entitled to healthcare, and schools like everyone else. It was pointed out that they pay more for these services than low-income services through the progressive tax system. As far as benefits are concerned, some participants favoured cutting child benefits for the rich. Housing allowances should continue to be means-tested like it is today. Most participants seemed to find it reasonable that income above a certain threshold does not generate further benefit entitlements in the public system. They agreed that individuals who wanted income protection above the income ceiling could afford to insure privately. The main concern of the welfare state should be to offer a reasonable level of social protection that allows individuals to maintain a decent (but not luxurious) living standard. The group recognised that the Norwegian tax system and the welfare state work together to equalise income. They seemed to view this as a positive trait.

Vignette VI: The group discussed what rights you should have if you migrate to Norway to work while your family remains in your home country. Several participants argued that if you leave your family behind you should either not get child benefits (and other family related allowances) at all or they should be

adjusted to the (presumably lower) cost of living in your home country. They gave two explicit explanations or justifications for this view. First, they did not see why the Norwegian welfare state should be responsible for persons who reside abroad and have never lived in Norway. Second, in the first years after immigration to Norway your income is normally taxed at a lower rate. However, if you move to the country with your family, the majority seemed to favour a more generous approach, suggesting that the family should be able to enjoy benefits and services according to the same rules as everyone else. Overall, the group seemed to agree that everyone should acquire the right to welfare entitlements through employment (i.e., what counts is the number of years in employment) regardless of country of origin. In addition, some rights are inevitably tied to citizenship regardless of whether you work or not. As one participant stated, without evoking any protests from the rest of the group, 'we do not operate with a type A and a type B citizenship'!

Group 4: Women with care responsibilities

ID	Born	Education	Occupation/ Labour market status	Civil status	Children	Political orientation
W-1	1980	Upper secondary school	Logistics. On leave with foster child	Married	2/12/17/18 yrs	Left
W-2	1976	Upper secondary school	Refurbishing and selling houses	Married	4/6 yrs	Right
W-3	1968	Upper secondary school	Medical secretary	Married	12 yrs	Right
W-4	1976	Master	Advisor food safety	In relationship	None	Left
W-5	1966	Master	College (folkehøyskole) manager	Married	14 and 16 yrs	Left
W-6	1980	Two bachelor degrees	Assistant editor	Cohabiting	2 yrs	Left
W-7	1964	Master	HR manager	Divorced	15 and 21 yrs	Right
W-8	1971	Upper secondary school	Head of public leisure programme for primary school children	Single	None	Right

General impression

The group consisted of eight women who had different care responsibilities. In general, this discussion was characterized by much emphasis on demands and requirements for those who were unemployed. These arguments were particularly present among two or three participants who dominated the discussion. The discussion was also more repetitive and marked by less reflection

and openness than in the other groups. Overall, the participants used much anecdotal evidence to support their claims, either from personal experiences or by referring to persons they knew or friends of friends.

When asked about vignette I the group clearly underscored that many who receive unemployment benefits should face much stricter conditions. Many used personal evidence and argued that they knew somebody who cheated on the system. Thus, they stressed that people should be pushed more. Even though some of the group members tried to moderate this, all agreed on stricter conditionality for the unemployed.

When faced with vignette II they recognised that it depends on the person, job and sector. Many for example suggested that people in certain jobs, like policemen and firemen, should work more. In general, they thought that people should stay longer in work and the current pension regime was not sustainable. They particularly criticised the current private sector early retirement scheme (*AFP*)¹. They felt that it was not just that someone could both receive pension and work. One participant argued that “the 70s are the new 30s” and suggested that people should stay longer in work.

When exposed to vignette III the group argued more for solidarity expressed through common welfare services for all (e.g. free nursery schools and more support per children). The key argument here was that children should not suffer even though their parents were poor. In short, they argued that all children should grow up under equal conditions.

When asked about vignette IV the group members questioned why this subject had a low income. If it was because they had been lazy or did not want to study, they should to a certain extent pay the price for this. However, others in the group were opposed to this view and stated that not everybody wants to study and that people should still have a decent pay.

When confronted with vignette V the group members argued that persons with a good pay should be able to pay for themselves. Still, they argued that even the rich should enjoy some basic welfare services. When asked about vignette VI the discussion became heated with some arguing that immigrants should have the right to less welfare services, while others arguing that this should be equal for everybody independent on their citizenship status. This discussion developed into a more specific discussion about whether the immigrant had worked or not, if he or she had education, and what citizenship he or she had.

¹ Collectively bargained private sector occupational pension scheme that most large enterprises adhere to.

When asked about whether gender mattered, the group members tended to argue no.

Group 5: Retired (between 62-72 years old)

Nr.	Gender	Year of birth	Education	Occupation	Marital status	Children	Political stand
R-1	M	1950	High school	Retired	Married	Moved out	Left wing
R-2	M	1954	Lower secondary school	Retired	Married	Moved out	Centre
R-3	M	1944	Lower secondary	Retired	Married	Moved out	Right wing
R-4	F	1947	University college	Retired	Widow	Moved out	Right wing
R-5	M	1944	College	Retired	Married	Moved out	Left wing
R-6	F	1951	College	Retired	Single	Moved out	Left wing
R-7	F	1949	College	Retired	Married	Moved out	Left wing
R-8	F	1951	University college	Retired	Single	None	Left wing
R-9	M	1952	University college	Retired	Single	None	Right wing

General impression:

The group featured five men and four women all of whom were between 62 and 72 years old and retired. They were deeply engaged in the discussion and the subject matter and asked if they could get pen and paper before they started in order to keep track of ideas and thoughts.

When asked about vignette I, the group agreed that one has to distinguish between voluntarily and non-voluntarily unemployment. They argued that persons who take advantage of the system and are voluntarily on unemployment benefits should face stricter conditions. At the same time they stressed that it was important to help those who wanted to work but were unable to find a job. However, there was a rather heated discussion about whether it was a problem that people were cheating the system and were voluntarily unemployed. The participants used either their own experience or people they knew as evidence.

When discussing what unemployed should and could do to get work, the group agreed that it was too much to demand people to move far away. They argued that moving could imply a high cost for the whole family. However, some challenged this view and argued that it could, in some cases, be a better solution if the family moved. After the group had discussed the first vignette for a while, they discussed the different bureaucratic procedures that unemployed had to go through. This

discussion was very much dominated by those who claimed to know these technicalities.

When the moderator asked who should pay for the services to the unemployed, everybody stated in unison “The State, NAV” (NAV is the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration). Still, one participant argued that he was positive towards more collaboration between the public and the private sector.

When exposed to vignette II the group members, all of whom were pensioners, argued that it was crucial that a 70 years old person had a good pension. On the one hand, they deserved this after working for a long time and, on the other hand, they were dependent on this kind of financial support in the absence of income from work. They were also very positive to the current pension rules in Norway. Persons are now allowed to retire early and still remain in work, taking out a pension and a salary at the same time. One participant pointed out that he had never earned as much as he did now.

When asked about vignette III the group argued for the need of various types of support targeted at families with children (e.g. financial support per children and more nursery places). Under this point the group members also argued for universal welfare provisions that should be equal for all not to discriminate among children. The argument was that even though some families were wealthier than others, children should not suffer because of this.

When the moderator presented vignette IV, they argued that everyone should be guaranteed a decent standard of living and certain minimum standards should be available for everybody. However, there also seemed to be some support for the view that the degree of deservingness related to assistance from the welfare state also depended on *why* (s)he had a low income (e.g., voluntary part time employment vs. poorly paid full-time job).

When asked about the next vignette, V, they argued that persons within this group should maybe not have right to the same type of support. However, here the views differed with some arguing that these people did not need much support, while others insisted that the services should be equal for all.

The discussion became the most heated when the moderator described vignette VI. Here some argued that it should be a clear difference between native Norwegians and immigrants with regard to the accessibility of welfare services. Here people also discussed whether this person had citizenship or not, and whether or not he worked or had worked. All these issues influenced the extent to which the immigrant should receive welfare benefits.

When asked whether it mattered whether the person in the vignette was a man or a woman, the spontaneous reaction was 'no'. They thought the question was whether gender should be a discriminatory factor in the allocation of welfare services. Intuitively they did not see any reason to treat men and women differently. However, some participants suggested that women should be compensated for the loss of pension entitlements because they had stayed at home doing housework and taken care of children instead of taking a paid job.