

Matthias Schulze-Böing

# Toward an "Outcome Revolution"? New Approaches to Impact-Oriented Management and Financing of Social Services

*Financing models can contribute to a more impact-oriented approach to social measures if they are embedded in a holistic management concept.*

## 1. What is it about?

The effectiveness and efficiency of social policy in Germany have come under scrutiny. Germany's share of social spending in gross domestic product, at almost 31% by international standards (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 2024), is high. In the federal budget alone, over 200 billion euros, or just over 40% of all funds, is allocated to social affairs. However, there are increasing questions about whether the welfare state is organized in such a way that these investments in social justice and social cohesion are made efficiently and with lasting impact.

A central element of the coalition agreement between the CDU and SPD is the intention to review the "effectiveness and efficiency of social welfare benefits" (CDU/SPD 2025, p. 15). The previous year, the Regulatory Control Council (NKR) had already sharply criticized the excessive complexity of the social assistance system in Germany. A report commissioned by the Council had developed far-reaching proposals for a fundamental reform of the social transfer system (NKR 2024). For Peter Kurz, Mayor of the City of Mannheim until 2023, the German state, and thus also the welfare state, suffers from a fundamental misprogramming of its governance and therefore not only falls far short of its potential, but also far below what the impending era of polycrises and multiple challenges in terms of state capacity to act would require. According to Peter Kurz, much energy and meticulousness is invested in defining standards and regulations, but far too little in reviewing the effectiveness of state measures.



### Dr. Matthias Schulze-Böing

was head of the Office for Employment Promotion, Statistics and Integration of the City of Offenbach and managing director of the Jobcenter. He is a consultant for the city of Offenbach and Chairman of the Society for Business, Work and Culture (GEWAK).

If the state is to function better and the widespread feeling of state failure is to be taken out of the wind, there needs to be a shift away from a fixation on standards and toward a new and consistent focus on impact (Kurz 2024).

The demand for a stronger focus on impact in government action is by no means new. In social policy, the paradigm of action in public administration focused more on efficiency and effectiveness than on mere regularity had already arrived with the emergence of new steering models and the "New Public Management" movement in the 1990s (Reis/Schulze-Böing 2000).

By applying business methods of resource optimization and a clear structuring of the roles of political clients and those implementing

Economic thinking was to be introduced into the social sector by public administrations and publicly funded institutions, and social measures were to become more effective and cost-effective. This was not without controversy. Many saw this as an inadmissible economization of social affairs and a threat to value-oriented action. Moreover, there were, unsurprisingly, strong forces of inertia that opposed greater transparency in social policy and the services provided there, simply because this ran counter to their interest in the greatest possible scope for action while ensuring long-term, adequate funding. Social policymakers themselves often preferred to measure their success in rising expenditures rather than in verifiably achieved social policy effects.

This mixed situation led to the emergence of new concepts soon losing momentum and, in many cases, simply petering out. The new ideas for outcome-oriented management were most consistently implemented in the area of labor market policy, especially in the wake of the so-called "Hartz reforms," which, starting in 2003, transformed the former Federal Employment Agency into a Federal Employment Agency with the help of management consultants and energetic leadership with experience in the private sector. Tight controlling with a multitude of performance indicators characterizes practice (Jann/Schmid 2004; Hassel/Schiller 2010).

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The basic security for job seekers ("Hartz 4"), created in 2005 from the merger of social and unemployment benefits, also benefited from the Federal Employment Agency's management model. Although this system has significantly more complex governance structures due to the significant involvement of local authorities, it was possible to introduce an impact-oriented management process from the outset, which made this newly created system very transparent compared to other social action areas. The basic security management model may not be perfect, but compared to what was previously common in municipal social assistance, it represented a quantum leap in the right direction. The great social and labor market policy success of this system is based not only, but also partly, on the consistent implementation of this impact-oriented management (Schulze-Böing 2013).

The attempt to establish a results-oriented use of public funds at state and local levels through product budgets can, however, be considered a failure for the time being, according to the sobering findings of Bochum-based public administration researcher Jörg Bogumil. Responsible factors are inertia within administrations, the influence of powerful associations, and, last but not least, politicians, for whom concerns about re-election often stand in the way of long-term strategies with potential for conflict. The inherent logic of political processes was completely underestimated in the development and implementation of the new management models (Bogumil 2022).

## 2. Way out: Social entrepreneurship?

A new approach is needed. The idea of "social entrepreneurship" could provide new impetus here. Like the concept of new administrative control, this idea also originates from the Anglo-Saxon world. The central thesis is that greater entrepreneurial activity can trigger social innovations and better use of limited resources. The OECD and the European Union have been promoting "social entrepreneurship" for many years to close the innovation gap in social policy, conducting research projects and launching funding programs (Noya 2009).

Stephen Goldsmith, at the time an advisor to New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, pointedly pointed out in his 2010 book "The Power of Social Innovation" that many social measures, even very expensive ones, fizzle out because people are too afraid to stray from the beaten track and politicians do not look closely at what the money invested in social projects is actually achieving. "Social innovations" should breathe new life into what he sees as an expensive but stagnant social policy. He saw the path to this in a new culture of accountability, in which social institutions not only report what they have done, but also what positive changes they have made in the lives of their clients. Social successes must also be verifiable and measurable (Goldsmith/ Bloomberg 2010).

For example, it's not just about documenting how many learning support sessions have been organized for children from disadvantaged neighborhoods, but also how many of the supported children actually achieved promotion or graduation. In Goldsmith's concept, one would consistently pay an institution not for providing tutoring, but for achieving class goals. Perhaps there are better ways than tutoring to help children and young people succeed in school.

uses the language of evaluation research: It's about "outcome," not just "output." The task of public social policy would then be to keep this search for the better solution going and to organize the competition for innovation. This requires entrepreneurial personalities who are rewarded for success but who are also not afraid of the risk of failure—essentially something like the sociopolitical equivalent of "creative destruction," as described by the economist Joseph Schumpeter as the core of a dynamic capitalist economic system.

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In addition to the models implemented in the USA since the 1990s, the experiences in Great Britain and the Netherlands are also of interest for the discussion in Germany. In Great Britain, the very extensive "Work Programme" was launched in 2011, a concept for outsourcing labor market services for the long-term unemployed that envisaged almost exclusively performance-based financing. This meant that the contractors, predominantly large private labor market service providers with sufficient capital backing, were compensated for the results of their clients' labor market integration, thereby shifting most of the risk of the measures to the private contractors (Finn 2012). However, the experiences were mixed. The integration effects were disappointing. As a result, many contractors of the British Department of Labor experienced financial difficulties. Some withdrew from the market. In 2017, the Work Programme was discontinued (Langenbucher/Vodopivec 2022).

In the Netherlands, since the end of the 1990s, experiments had been carried out with measures in the areas of labor market policy, as well as in education and social work, that were fully or partially performance-related. Due to the highly decentralized structure of social and labor market policy in the Netherlands, it was primarily the municipalities that developed a very diverse practice in this area. This was facilitated by the fact that, unlike in Germany, there has been a relatively long and very diversified structure of private providers of social and labor market services that has shaped the market for these services.

competitive and always surprise with innovative approaches (Langenbucher/Vodopivec 2022).

In Germany, an outcome-oriented instrument for employment promotion was introduced in 2002 with the introduction of the "Activation and Placement Voucher" (AVGS). Under this instrument, compensation is only paid if integration into a job subject to social insurance contributions can be demonstrated. Compensation is paid in two installments: six weeks and six months after the start of the employment relationship. For the long-term unemployed, a bonus of up to €3,000 is paid. However, this instrument is being used less and less. According to the Federal Employment Agency, the number of AVGS issued fell from just over 330,000 in 2013 to just under 20,000 in 2022, and the number of redeemed vouchers fell from around 12,500 to 3,400.

The reasons for this are likely that employment agencies and jobcentres are increasingly relying on their own placement activities and are therefore issuing fewer vouchers. Another important reason, however, is that private placement agencies are increasingly considering the bonuses offered to be less than adequate for a higher proportion of job seekers with particular barriers to integration, and are therefore withdrawing from the market (Stephan et al. 2024).

Bonus payments for successful completion as part of remuneration agreements in job center and employment agency award programs are also common practice. Data on this are lacking. An exploratory and non-representative survey of job center employees conducted by the author revealed that the proportion of such programs with a performance-related remuneration component could be in the range of 15% to 25% of all programs awarded there.

### 3. Venture capital also for social issues?

In the US and Great Britain, and to a lesser extent in the Netherlands and some Eastern European countries, a particularly spectacular variant of impact-oriented financing now exists: "Social Impact Bonds" (SIBs). These bonds operate according to the principle of venture capital investment. An investor provides money, for example, to finance a labor market project for the long-term unemployed, which is being implemented by a specialized company or a provider of labor market measures. The public sector pays the investor when a project is successful—for example, when a long-term unemployed person finds permanent employment. If this

**happens often enough, the investor makes a profit. If it doesn't work, the invested capital is lost.**

The advantage for the public contracting authority is that it can shift the risk of failure, which it would otherwise have to bear when commissioning measures, onto the private investor. If the measure goes well, however, payments become due that are the same, usually somewhat higher, than in the case of a traditional commission for an effective and good measure. In many cases, municipalities or other public contracting authorities calculate the amount of the premiums based on the expected savings that would result in a successful project, for example, in unemployment benefits, residential care, or emergency accommodation for the homeless.

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In the literature, SIBs are often considered particularly suitable for stimulating (social) innovation (European Parliament 2014). They could also serve as a vehicle for mobilizing private capital for social measures, thus boosting public budgets.

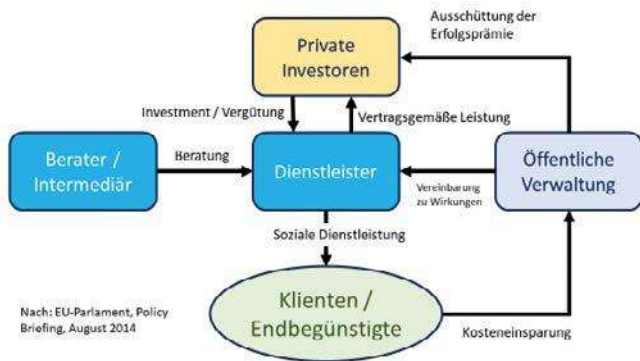


Fig. 1: Schematic representation of a Social Impact Bond (own illustration)

However, due to the complex relationships between funders, public administration, and the implementing service provider, SIBs are associated with relatively high transaction costs. This is likely one reason why the concept has so far had little traction, despite intensive promotion by the Bertelsmann Foundation and others. The number of Social Impact Bonds implemented in Germany to date can probably be counted on one hand.

In the Netherlands, too, this instrument has only partially fulfilled expectations. Overall, only

20 Social Impact Bonds were implemented. Some of them were wound up prematurely due to failure or insolvency of contracting partners (Koekoek/Klein Gunnewiek 2024).

### 4. The social impact ladder

Radical approaches to impact-oriented financing do not appear, at least so far, to offer a model for a broader, new approach to labor market and social policy. Rather, there is much to be said for a balanced and differentiated portfolio of different management and financing approaches that are practical but at the same time more strongly focused on demonstrable impacts than before. Some preliminary considerations and suggestions are provided below.

The concept of impact in the field of social policy sometimes has a rather ambiguous character. For some social policymakers, impact may simply consist in the allocation of funds in the budget for certain purposes and the subsequent disbursement of these funds. A more sophisticated concept of social impact, however, takes a more differentiated view.

Bettina Kurz and Doreen Kubek (2021, p. 5) have summarized the various dimensions of the impact of social programs and measures with the image of an “impact ladder,” which extends from their “output” in the form of activities implemented that reach and are accepted by their target groups, through the “outcome” of the newly acquired skills and knowledge by these target groups, the actual implementation of the newly acquired potential for action, lasting behavioral changes and the resulting sustainable improvement in living conditions, to the “impact” of social and societal changes that may reduce the need for costly social interventions in the future and make the corresponding social system more inclusive and resilient.

Whether it makes sense to include social change in the canon of objectives of social and labor market policy measures with limited scope remains to be seen. In any case, it is very helpful to consider all stages of a ladder or chain of effects in their context and, at the same time, to clarify the terminology used. This can be put into more concrete terms using some practical examples in the following overview.

Koekoek/Klein Gunnewiek (2024) suggest reserving the term “impact” for facts that have a net effect

Maßnahme	Input	Output	Outcome	Impact
Schulunterricht	Lehrkapazität, Sachmittel	Geleistete Schulstunden	Von Schülern erfasster Lernstoff	Qualifizierung für berufliche Anwendung
Gemeinwesenarbeit	Sozialarbeit, finanzielle Mittel	Stunden Sozialarbeit, Beratungsgespräche	Lösung der Probleme der Klienten	Erhöhung der Handlungskompetenz der Klienten
Ausbildungsvorbereitung	Personal, Sachmittel	Lehrgangsstunden, Beratungsstunden	Korrekte Bewerbungen um Ausbildungsplätze	Abgeschlossenes Ausbildungsverhältnis, störungsfrei absolvierte Ausbildung
Gründungsförderung	Gründerberatung, Kredite	Unternehmensgründung	Umsetzung des Geschäftsplans	Stärkung der lokalen Wirtschaftsstruktur

Tab. 1: Overview of the categories of the impact chain, application examples

can be proven. However, measuring this net effect requires complex studies, as a control group with a structure as similar as possible to the intervention group or at least very similar to it must be identified and studied. While the control group design is considered the "gold standard" for achieving valid results in evaluation research, in practice it may be difficult to regularly implement such a design on a larger scale (Picón Martínez et al. 2021).

Technical measures, such as appropriate algorithms for evaluating client files, could reduce this effort and also enable a more widespread use of a corresponding design in measuring the impact of interventions. However, this still seems to be a distant prospect.

### 5.Risks in the process chain

Each link in the described chain of effects is associated with specific risks. If, as is not uncommon in practice, the need for a measure has not been correctly assessed ex ante, there will be a lack of suitable participants right from the start, or, what is also quite possible,

As often happens, "any" participants are referred to the program simply to fill the purchased places. This then places a certain burden on the program right from the start, making it difficult for the contracted provider to implement it effectively. Dropouts from programs or failure to achieve the program objective, such as obtaining a certified qualification, pose risks for both parties – contractors and clients. Finally, in the area of labor market programs, it is a particular risk for both jobcentres and employment agencies if the programs potentially lead to the acquisition of a certificate or proof of skills, but the participants remain unemployed. Finally, there is always the question of whether the procurement and implementation of programs from contracted third parties impacts the overall integration record of an employment agency or job center (Engler/Schulze-Böing 2024, pp. 16– 17). Whether to use one's resources to purchase third-party services is always a risky decision.

1 When observing the impact of a labor market intervention, for example, it might be observed that 40% of participants found a job during the intervention. In the usual sense, this would be considered a success of the intervention. However, even among job seekers who are not supported by a intervention and are limited to self-reliance, the use of publicly accessible job portals, or private networks, certain transition rates into the labor market can always be observed, say 20%. The 40% would then be considered the gross effect, and the 20% the net effect (or "treatment effect") of the intervention.

Risk bearer	Input	output	Outcome	Impact
Client (e.g. Job Center)	Incorrect assessment of the target group; incorrect allocation	measure cancellations; to <b>few successful</b> Completions of measures	Too low integration effect (gross effect)	Too little effect in the integration balance (net effect)
contractor (measure provider)	Too few participants; incorrect matching of measure profile and allocations	measure cancellations; to <b>few successful</b> Completions of measures	Action objectives are not reached	Measures cannot be consolidated and scaled

Tab. 2: Overview of the risk distribution along the impact chain

*“It is always a risky decision whether to use your resources to purchase third-party services.”*

These impact risks of the measures implemented, mentioned here only as examples, pose a challenge for quality management in jobcentres and providers, but also for the selection of financing models if a stronger focus on impact goals is generally desired. As everywhere, financing models in this market must be designed to take into account the risks that a provider must accept in the measures business and to avoid an unfair distribution of burdens between clients and recipients.

## 6. Design of an impact portfolio

When designing impact-oriented management and leveraging measure funding for incentive-compatible management, it is important to recognize that impact-oriented management entails expenditures for impact measurement, reporting, and monitoring. Ideally, this expenditure should not exceed the expected additional return from impact orientation in the form of more effective and efficient measure implementation, which can be stimulated by financial incentives. The more strictly the concept of impact is defined in the above sense, the greater the complexity of impact measurement and its validation. This complexity is associated with expenditures that must be incorporated into the consideration of the overall economic efficiency of a measure or program. From the simple subsidy arrangement, still very common in social policy, to the sophisticated design of impact-financed measures, there are intermediate stages that can be represented as a step-by-step model in the dimensions of impact orientation and management complexity, extending the idea of the "impact ladder" cited above.

When selecting financing models, it seems sensible not to make impact orientation an end in itself, but rather to examine for each individual measure or program whether impact-oriented financing is feasible and whether the associated monitoring and control effort is proportionate to the desired efficiency gains. Various measures can then be organized into a kind of portfolio, which, like any portfolio, should of course be regularly reviewed and, if necessary, readjusted.

*“When choosing financing models, it seems sensible not to make impact orientation an end in itself.”*

In the discussion briefly summarized above, the focus was strongly on the connection between impact-oriented financing of social measures and social innovations. Indeed, it is clear that the development of social entrepreneurship to tap into socio-political innovation potential is closely linked to the effectiveness of financial incentives. Those who take the risk of new approaches expect a premium that covers the associated economic risks. In the traditional regime, the public contracting authority would bear the risk of innovation; with the new financing models of the impact strategy, it could shift this risk to private individuals, but would then also have to pay the risk premiums. From a purely financial perspective, the success of the measure would then paradoxically become a risk for the public budget, which would have to be covered under budgetary law. This is by no means trivial, since such uncertain financing obligations must also be hedged across periods.

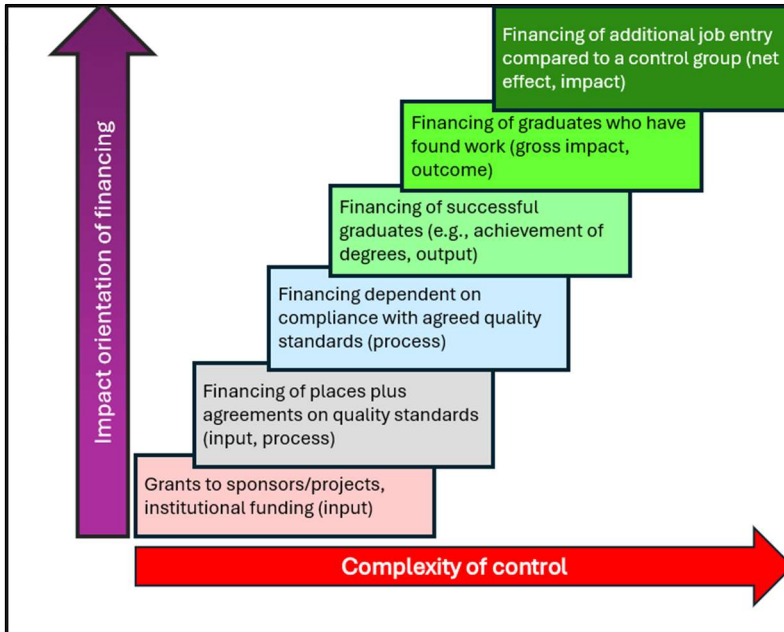


Fig. 3: Relationship between impact orientation and control complexity

Interestingly, Koekoek and Klein Gunnewiek (2024, 33–36), against the background of their evaluated international experiences, point out that the high cost of implementing consistently impact-oriented financing models suggests that they should only be used when a certain degree of scaling is achieved and the costs of system-related complexity can be distributed across a large number of application cases. This argues against applying such models to innovative measures at an early stage, where they often have the character of experimental projects, but only when a certain level of maturity has been reached and larger scaling is possible. This would mean that municipalities or jobcenters wishing to pursue an impact financing strategy would be more likely to focus on proven and sufficiently large-scale measures, possibly in collaboration with other municipalities or jobcenters. For measures at an early stage of the development cycle, it makes more sense to assume the risks of innovation “on one’s own account,” since these very often involve smaller-scale experimental projects. However, within a social venture capital concept, private financiers such as “family offices” of socially minded private asset owners, foundations, and the like could also assume these risks. This would then, at least from the perspective of the overall economic viability of such projects, make more sense in the form of grants or guarantees.

ties for loss compensation and not in the form of impact financing.

Against the background of this consideration, a decision matrix for the choice of financing model emerges, as shown in the following schematic representation.

Eignung für wirkungsorientierte Finanzierung	hoch	Nur mit starker Risikokapital-komponente	Nur mit Risikokapital-komponente	Impact, Outcome
	mittel	Nur mit Risikokapital-komponente	Output, Outcome	
	niedrig	Input, Output		
		niedrig	mittel	hoch
		Reifegrad der Produkte		

Fig. 4: Decision matrix for impact funding

## 7. Holistic impact strategies

A stronger focus on impact in social and labor market policy seems sensible and necessary in view of increasing financing and acceptance problems. This focus is already much more firmly anchored in labor market policy than in other areas, although impact measurement is also simpler here than in other areas of social policy, which deal with more complex situations.

The use of funding for support measures as a lever for impact can be an important element of an "Outcome Revolution" (Koekoek/Klein Gunnewiek 2024, 35) and help unlock efficiency potential. However, such instruments can only have a sustainable impact if they are embedded in a holistic strategy that deploys appropriate impact financing instruments for various tasks and problems and, especially importantly, qualifies the stakeholders involved on all sides to use these steering instruments and productively implement their impulses in practice. In municipalities, this "capacity building" for impact-oriented social policies currently appears to be the most important task, since thinking in terms of impact categories, as Kurz (2024) rightly pointed out, is often still foreign here. But it can also be beneficial for all other actors in local and regional networks to engage intensively with the instruments of social impact policy, to understand their various facets and variations, to recognize the advantages, but also the risks and side effects, and to align decisions accordingly. The somewhat suggestive image of the "impact ladder" should not distract from the fact that the various control options along the impact chain are not mutually exclusive, but can complement each other very well as equally valid options selected based on expediency in a differentiated portfolio of measures and programs.

## 8. Market design

The above-cited example of the declining use of placement vouchers under Section 45 Para. 4 SGB III has also drawn attention to the fact that the implementation of impact-oriented financing also requires a sufficiently developed market of service providers who specialize in impact-oriented

Based compensation models and also possess the necessary prerequisites in terms of entrepreneurial competence and risk-bearing capacity. This requires municipalities and jobcentres to actively develop and maintain the market, be willing to create fair and adequate conditions for the provision of services, and organize the upstream and downstream processes within their direct area of responsibility, such as the selection of job seekers to whom placement vouchers are issued or to whom measures are assigned, in a stable and predictable manner. Only in this way can social entrepreneurial providers and private labor market service providers calculate their risk and plan their services.

***“Impact-oriented financing models must also be attractive for service providers, but of course they must also be designed in such a way that free-rider effects and excess profits are avoided.”***

Experience has shown that such a service segment does not develop naturally and spontaneously, but requires reliable framework conditions and sensible incentive structures. Impact-oriented financing models must also be attractive to service providers, but of course also be designed in such a way that free-rider effects and excess profits are avoided.

What's needed, then, is something like a market design at the regional and supra-regional level that fits the circumstances and objectives of each social policy and task area. There appears to be a considerable need for research and development in this area.

## 9. There are no patent solutions

Impact is therefore not a sure-fire success. What works in the US and the UK, with their cool efficiency thinking and the hyped trend of "effective altruism" among large private donors,<sup>2</sup> encounters a different environment in Germany with established local welfare cultures and a strongly

<sup>2</sup> "Effective altruism" is a doctrine originating from the Scottish philosopher William MacAskill that combines the ethics of social responsibility and charity with a long-term perspective. According to this doctrine, donations and social spending are to be understood as investments, and preference is given to those that promise the highest long-term "return" in terms of social goals such as poverty reduction, health, or even the preservation of the natural environment. This can sometimes lead to surprising and provocative reordering of priorities. See <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/> (last accessed: May 6, 2025).

legal social policy. A smart impact strategy therefore requires not only well-thought-out financing and incentive models, but also an understanding of the complex interrelationships of social policy action. Impact strategies must be integrated into overall strategies; otherwise, they will at best be limited to short-term effects, but will not contribute sustainably to the effectiveness of a municipality's overall social work system, the work of a job center, or social urban development.

The Federal Employment Agency, for example, had to learn that excessive controlling concepts can undermine the motivation of employees and cooperation partners when it implemented its otherwise very sensible control concept a little too stubbornly and without reflection in its initial attempt. It has since corrected this. Likewise, an overly radical impact orientation can disrupt trusting relationships and engagement in local social policy. A middle ground seems to be the right approach here, too – between a more decisive impact orientation, insistence on strict accountability, and a high level of transparency that can be demonstrated in figures on the one hand, and trusting cooperation and joint learning processes among the diverse social policy stakeholders on the other. The two do not have to be contradictory. With a smart local policy, the two sides can even complement each other perfectly.

It can certainly make sense to develop and experiment with concepts for this together with stakeholders. Small social startups are often better partners than established welfare organizations. But they too can and should be open to social innovations. Everyone should have a strong interest in making the welfare state more effective and efficient. This is the only way to secure its future.

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