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*Published in:*  
Social Work & Society

2020

*Document Version:*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Ullestig, R., Denvall, V., & Nordesjö, K. (2020). Claiming” equality and “doing” inequality – Individual action plans for applicants of social assistance. *Social Work & Society*, 18(2), 1-14.

*Total number of authors:*  
3

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## **“Claiming” equality and “doing” inequality – Individual action plans for applicants of social assistance**

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### **1 Introduction**

Historically, the Nordic welfare states have tried to enhance equality through the establishment of strong welfare systems (Kvist et al., 2012; Hvinden & Johansson, 2007). However, this strong tradition of equality is not apparent in the social assistance systems as they use means testing, which results in large local variation in assistance (Lödelmel 1997; Johansson & Hornemann Møller, 2009). Social assistance systems have been criticised for their lack of participation, transparency, and legal security as applicants are perceived as passive participants. These critiques conclude that applicants need to actively participate in society and actively secure services that are individualised and effective (e.g., Hvinden & Johansson, 2007). To ensure clients have the legal right to participate in decisions and individualised services, some municipalities use standardised assessment tools (Stranz, Karlsson, & Wiklund, 2017).

The standardised assessment tools we studied focused on ensuring that assistance decisions were made irrespective of where one lives (i.e., municipality) or the social worker one encounters. In addition, these standardised assessment tools try to motivate an applicant to become self-sufficient by participating in decisions about services offered and individualising services to the specific needs of the applicant. These goals were articulated in policy documents as well as written descriptions given to social workers on how to use standardised assessment tools (Nordesjö et al., 2016). The last phase of the standardised assessment tools is to secure the applicant’s participation and legal security through an individual action plan. We believe these policy goals are intended to ensure equality of services provided (Alcock, Erskine & May 2002; Kirby 2018).

Social work is the nexus between the individual citizen and the state (and its agencies); in some cases, this relationship is regulated by individual action plans in the form of contracts. Such contracts have been described as self-governing mechanisms that transfer responsibility from the state to the citizen (Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2003, 2005; Veitch, 2011; Hamilton, 2014), motivating applicants to adapt and participate in the society (Keskitalo, 2007). However, few studies have investigated how contracts are used at the street level within social work. This street-level perspective can look beyond a formal policy design and help uncover the operational side of how policy is ‘done’ (Lipsky, 2010; Nothdurfter, 2016).

Here, we will scrutinise Stockholm’s claim of enhancing equality for applicants of social assistance by examining how social workers as street-level staff use individual action plans.

An individual action plan is a contract between the social service agency and the applicant. Therefore, these plans represent a possibility to "do" equality for poor and vulnerable groups in Sweden. To this end, we ask the following question: How do individual action plans for social assistance secure equality for the poorest and most vulnerable people? That is, this article explores individual action plans for social assistance applicants from a street-level perspective and its ability to "do" equality. Our empirical material can be used to develop theories that can help promote dialogue about what it means to ensure equality in the distribution and implementation of social services (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007).

## 2 Background

It is unlikely that politicians or social workers would say that equality is not an issue when determining who will receive assistance and what type of assistance will be provided (Kirby, 2018). However, equality, an inherently difficult concept, needs a nuanced understanding and demarcation to be useful. For example, equality has a thin and thick aspect. The thin aspect of equality aims to give citizens individual freedom while ensuring equal treatment before the law and without prejudice from the state, also known as formal equality (Alcock et al., 2002; Albertyn, 2019). The thick aspect of equality (also known as substantive or social equality) aims to address inequalities regarding economic power, disadvantages in society, and inequalities in redistribution of wealth or power. Formal equality is not about challenging the structures of economic inequality but about focusing on the applicant's individual worth.

The Nordic countries and other welfare states in Europe have increasingly used social contracts to mediate the power balance between citizens and the state (Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2003, 2005; Veitch, 2011; Hamilton, 2014; Keskitalo, 2007; Van Berkel & Roche, 2002). These contracts are used to encourage individuals to manage their problems by being active, responsible, and making good choices (Hamilton, 2014). These contracts can promote the concept of equal worth of citizens (i.e., formal equality) (Johansson, 2006; Keskitalo, 2007) as well as getting applicants follow through on their commitments. However, according to Veitch (2011), the use of social contracts obscures structural causes (and solutions) of social problems and therefore de-politicises social problems. Individual action plans and other social contracts gain their legitimacy as tools that promote formal equality – i.e., equality for all citizens (See Albertyn, 2019). The state can also use, what is seen as, an applicant's choice to ignore a contract to legitimise the denial of support, which is made more legitimate by the contract. This arrangement could shift the responsibility of failure from the state or agents of the state to the individual: 'If the service user is to blame, street-level bureaucrats are shielded from having to confront their own failure or the failure of the agencies for which they work' (Lipsky 2010, p. 153).

National and universal welfare systems are designed to help people who become sick, injured, or unemployed and people who need financial support such as child allowance, old age pension, or disability pension (Harsløf & Ulmestig, 2013; Hvinden & Johansson, 2007). As the last safety net, Sweden delivers social assistance to the poor (Geremek, 1991; Piven & Cloward, 2012). In Sweden, as in other Nordic welfare states, social assistance is only for the poorest in society, which makes it more stigmatising than in countries with one system for all its citizens (Lödemel 1991; Köhler et al., 2008; Thorén, 2008). Applications for social assistance are handled by social workers, who have at least a BA in Social Work. In addition to financial counselling, these social workers are supposed to provide other counselling such as parenting and work training counselling. The social assistance system is organised by municipal social services and is regulated by the Social Services Act (2001:453), which gives few precise instructions on how applications should be handled. Therefore, the handling of

the applications is performed by the social workers as street-level staff and their decisions profoundly affect the rights and duties of the applicants as they “do” equality (Thorén, 2008; Ulmestig & Marston, 2015).

Over the last few years, Sweden has introduced several models and structured assessment instruments to organise social assistance (Nordesjö et al., 2016; Nybom, 2012), including the Standardised Assessment Instrument for Initial Assessment (IA), which is used in Stockholm. IA consists of four parts and more than 100 questions (Nordesjö et al., 2016). The final part of the IA is the completion of an individual action plan. The IA, including the individual action plan, aims to secure equality through legal security by matching clients with the right intervention as well as by ensuring transparency in documentation and decisions. This approach to equality have the goal to encourages applicants to become financially self-sufficient and to participate in the formulation of their individual action plans, further promoting independence and inclusion in society. IA and individual action plans are conducted using Motivational interviewing (MI): ‘MI is not a way of tricking people into changing; it is a way of activating their own motivation and resources for change’ (Miller & Rollnick, 2012; p. 16). The client's own perception and self-determination are central to MI and specific techniques are used to motivate the client to change. An official document from Stockholm municipality describes long-term applicants of social services as follows: ‘[Clients’] resistance and fear of change can affect the clients’ motivation to participate in a work-life-related rehabilitation’ (EÅV 2016: p 15). Although often used in addiction treatment, MI still lacks actual scientific support outside the field of addiction (Björk, 2016). We have not come across any research on the ability of individual action plans to enhance the formal equality of citizens who apply for social services.

### **3 Theory – Making equality on the street level**

This article starts from the perspective that equality as we all as inequality are “done” in the interaction between citizens and the state (Herz & Johansson, 2012). For example, the social workers who handle individual action plans can be understood as de facto policymakers as they informally perform or “do” policy in the course of their everyday handling of social assistance applications (Brodkin, 1990; Lipsky, 2010). Several studies confirm that benefits, sanctions, and how applicants are handled on the street level shape the rights and duties of citizens (Brodkin, 2007; Ulmestig & Marston, 2015).

However, means testing for poor and excluded citizens is complex and difficult work that cannot be completely regulated (Ulmestig & Marston, 2015; Thorén, 2008). This problem is “solved” by policymakers who give street-level staff far reaching discretionary powers (Lipsky, 2010; Brodkin & Marston, 2013). On the one hand, the street-level staff can find individualised solutions that make a difference in the lives of their clients (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). On the other hand, this discretion means policy-makers can ignore complex social issues such as poverty or lack of resources by pushing the responsibility to the street-level staff. In addition, this discretion, often through means testing, weakens the position of applicants, increasing their inequality as the applicants’ lack of power affects all aspects of the relationship with the individuals who control the resources, the social workers (Moffatt, 1999). That is, such discretionary power of the social workers compromises equality (See Lipsky 2010; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002): ‘The poorer the people are, the greater the influence street-level bureaucrats tend to have over them. Indeed, these public workers are so situated that they may well be taken to be a part of the problem of being poor’ (Lipsky, 2010; p. 6). Individual action plans may help balance the equality equation between applicants and streets-level social workers.

#### 4 Method

We studied 48 individual action plans for social assistance written for 28 women and 20 men of various ages living in a community (*Statsdelsnämnd*) in Stockholm (Table 1). The individual action plans were produced over a six-month period and the clients had received social assistance for more than three months. The individual actions plans were part of a model for handling social assistance applications that aimed to enhance participation based on MI and legal security. The model provided written support that together with IA (including the plan) was intended to meet the goals of social services. Although the model was tested in a local community of the municipality, it was intended for the whole of the Stockholm municipality. The social workers found that they were not given enough time to develop the individual actions plans even though the model required using the plans. That is, although the model requires all long-time applicants to receive an individual action plan, few applicants were given an individual action plan. Most social workers were only able to produce at most a few plans, prioritising applicants with several problems. The model aims to help social assistance applicants change their vulnerable situation by identifying obstacles, by enhancing their legal security, and by requiring them to participate in society and especially in the labour market. We understand the model and the individual action plans as social work that aims to enhance formal equality for the applicants and therefore society at large (See Alcock et al., 2002; Albertyn, 2019).

Table 1. Decade born

Born	Number
1950s	6
1960s	15
1970s	14
1980s	10
Unknown	3

The ethical boards in Linköping (2017/81-31) and Stockholm (3.2.1-271) approved the study. The individual action plans included sensitive information, but the names and social security numbers were deleted before we were given the data.

The analysis was carried out through a reflective dialogue between the researcher, earlier research, theory, and the empirical material as proposed by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007). The desire to analyse individual action plans in the study came late in the research project on IA (Nordesjö, Ulmestig & Denvall, 2016). What puzzled us was that the plans became the end-point or perhaps the outcome of what was possible to observe with respect to the claims of “doing” equality rather than as a process. This was symbolised by signing the plan, making it binding contract. If the plans changed, these changes were required to be reflected in the individual action plans, although changes were only revised in a couple of the plans.

We started the analysis by reading the headings in the plans and examining how they were used. Next, we performed a small literature review on social contracts and individual action plans to gain a better grasp of what it was we were analysing. Then, we read and analysed every plan very carefully so we could identify themes (Braun & Clarke 2006). Three themes were identified: 1) the incomprehensible structure of the individual action plan; 2) motivation through participation; and 3) the lack of legal security. Because the themes had been

discussed in earlier research and could be understood from our theory, we were confident they were reliable. We made themes understandable in the specific context of social assistance with the theory on street-level bureaucracy. During the analysis, it became obvious that we were not making conclusions on the principals of the individual action plans but on an empirical example of how equality was “done” on the street-level within social work. The last step in the analysis was to further abstract the results of the analysis from a perspective of equality.

This abductive approach has a relationship with both induction and deduction, but at the same time it is neither ‘a simple `mix’ of these nor can it be reduced to these’ (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; p. 4). Abduction strives to both explain and understand a phenomenon. In practice, the analysis often deals with identifying underlying patterns, for example, associated with equality. However, our analysis can only be understood in relation to the specific empirical material with the 48 plans from Stockholm, our theoretical as well as methodological choices, and within our aim.

## **5 Social inequality and individual action plans**

All names of the headings in the plans are underlined to distinguish them from other citations.

### **5.1 The incomprehensible structure of the individual action plan**

The social worker and the applicants are supposed to complete the plans as a team, giving the opportunity for securing the same formal equal rights as other citizens to secure individualised services. The individual action plans in our study are structured according to a social contract to enhance such formal equality (Veitch, 2011; Hamilton, 2014; Keskitalo, 2007). With the exception of some scale questions under heading 7 – *Is there anything that may make it hard for you to become self-sufficient?* – the questions are open-ended. The eleven headings below reflect the basic structure of the plans:

1. Applicant
2. Current situation
3. Changes that you want to make to achieve self-sufficiency
4. The main reasons you want to make the change
5. What to do to achieve goals
6. You will take the following steps
7. Is there anything that may make it hard for you to become self-sufficient?
8. Scheduling and follow-up
9. This I need to do to be entitled to social assistance
10. Distribution of responsibilities, subheadings: The responsibility for the social worker & Responsibility for applicants
11. Signature

The structure of the plan presents questions about the juridical status of the plans as well as their potential to encourage client participation. For example, a plan’s usefulness could be questioned if an unemployed client seeks employment without aid from a social worker. One of the plans noted that the unemployed applicant ‘Continues to apply for work and stay in XXX [the local activation scheme]’. Applying and going to the activation scheme is a

prerequisite in the Social Service Act. Why should social services require an individual action plan especially since the same social workers describe time constraints as a major problem (Nordesjö et al., 2016)?

Problems in the structure of the plan are exemplified in one plan and under the heading *You will take the following steps* and the response ‘Taking care of himself – training’. If this is not a demand to be granted social assistance, this is unproblematic; however, under the heading *This is what I have to do to be granted social assistance* is the injunction ‘Follow the planning’. It is very hard to understand if taking care of himself and training is a requirement for receiving social assistance or just good advice or a suggestion. This ambiguity indicates how the structure of the plan is hard to comprehend when the demands on the applicants are unclear. A clearly stated legal status of the plans, which now is missing, would make it easier for clients to claim their rights (Keskitalo, 2007).

The analysis shows how the plan reproduces inequality rather than formal equality. That is, the individual plan inhibits the applicants from understanding and claiming their legal rights with respect to the social services and fully becoming a member of society. A structure that could enhance equality needs clarity and transparency. That is, the applicants are not a primary reference group for street-level staff as they define what a social worker does and what constitutes equality (Lipsky, 2010). The individual action plans have the potential to stimulate applicants to participate in their planning and to be acknowledged as equal citizens with equal worth as other citizens (Keskitalo, 2007). However, the plan should clearly define the applicants’ responsibilities and rights. According to MI theory, motivation also demands a sense of participation among the applicants (Miller & Rollnick, 2012). Participation is hard to achieve when the structure of the plan is hard to grasp because of its lack of clarity. This would not be acceptable in other parts of the welfare system in Sweden.

## 5.2 Motivation through participation

By encouraging the applicants to participate in the individual actions plans, social workers hope to motivate the applicants to change their behaviour. However, for applicants to participate, they must have the possibility to affect street-level decisions that directly affect them (Hammel et al., 2008). According to MI theory, applicants can be motivated by participating in addressing the problems they identify and therefore tailoring solutions that address these specific problems in the individual action plan (Miller & Rollnick, 2012).

Under the heading *Current situation*, one participant stated that the plan required finding housing before finding employment (“Accommodation first – then work”), but the plan does not provide any solutions or suggestions for his homelessness. This lack of participation in formulation of a solutions could partly be related to social services generally having very limited influence on housing issues. This inability to influence housing does not enhance equality as the participants lacked the ability and right to advocate for their own cause. Lack of housing is a structural problem that needs to be addressed with thick social rights. Each plan that lacks individualised solutions is a lost opportunity for enhancing participation.

However, a few plans directly addressed the specific self-identified needs of the applicant. For example, one well written plan details how the social worker encouraged the client to talk about his situation: ‘[Applicant] feels a strong need for ADHD medication and has received information that it is hard to get in contact with the neuropsychiatric clinic’. This plan clearly couples the applicant’s self-identified needs with specific actions as ‘Contact the neuropsychiatric clinic’ was written under the heading *The responsibility for the social*

*worker*. The social worker also decided to provide a gym membership as the client wanted to start training, although this type of service is not obligatory. This plan shows the potential for securing participation that gives higher possibility for equality.

In one plan, the applicant wanted to 'genuinely try to become self-sufficient' and in another plan the applicant wanted to 'come to the appointments and show a will [to participate]'. However, the focus on the applicants' need for motivation are over emphasised. That is, structural problems described in the plans such as housing shortages, health services that are difficult to activate, and changing labour markets with low tolerance for minor deviations from the standards of what constitutes a good worker are often the main obstacles to becoming self-sufficient, not the lack of motivation. These systemic social problems are referred to in one applicant's description of the motivation problem:

X says that the gain she sees of being self-sufficient is to feel that she has a human worth. X also says she could get what she wants. X says she is not getting enough money through social assistance. X describes that she would get respect back for herself if she managed without social assistance. X says that the change could help her to be free, independent, and she could do what she wanted.

Clearly, increased individual motivation will not solve her problems. In the same plan under the heading *Responsibility Distribution*, it is stated that she should actively seek medical help and that she should follow her plans. These stereotypes of the unmotivated poor are the opposite of formal equality and the idea that every citizen has the same worth. The social worker's responsibility is testing 'the right for social assistance'. This responsibility is regulated by law, so it is unclear why this was included here. The applicant may continue to seek support from other agencies with success or not and will probably continue to face structural problems obtaining services while facing more and more inequalities. The social worker will probably continue writing ineffectual individual action plans without the participation of the applicants. Being street-level bureaucrats, social workers cannot control their work situations as they lack resources, must follow vague rules, and manage high caseloads, all of which make it difficult for them to find individualised solutions for their charges (Lipsky, 2010).

Using MI theory as a theoretical basis for developing individual action plans affects the plans and how they are used within our empirical material. The emphasis on a lack of individual motivation reproduces prejudice about being poor such as the poor are lazy, further reproducing inequality in society (See Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2003; 2005). According to Lipsky (2010; p. 182), stereotypes about the poor make it more difficult for social workers to perceive their clients as worthy of adequate support and they consciously or perhaps unconsciously reproduce inequality (i.e., the lack of formal equality) (Van Berkel & Van Der Aa, 2012; Moffatt, 1999), including a lack of legal security (Lödemel, 1997; Köhler et al., 2008; Hvinden & Johansson, 2008).

### **5.3 Lack of legal security**

Legal certainty, transparency/clarity, and juridical competence are important parts of legal security and therefore equality and ultimately make rights and duties transparent. To protect applicants against local arbitrary decisions, the individual action plans need to be handled in the same way irrespective of the social worker or the applicant. Prerequisites for legal security also include clients understanding their responsibilities and having the possibility to appeal decisions made by authorities (Mattsson, 2015; Warnling-Nerep, 1995).



The language in the plans resembles notes from a medical journal with abbreviations and short summary sentences rather than easily understandable language:

PES has requested LUH from psychiatry (OR neuropsychiatric investigation): Planning with PES awaits LUH. Upd XXXXXX (authors note - date): Meet after coordination with PES and NSIA.

PES and NSIA are abbreviations for Public Employment Service and National Social Insurance Agency (the meaning of LUH is unknown to the authors). That is, the text's language ignores the needs of its audience (i.e., the applicant). Another individual action plan is even more ambiguous: 'Physical health 6 Fitness Mental Health 7'. The plan does not define what is meant by 6 or 7 much less physical health and mental health. The same plan, under the heading *Current Situation*, cryptically includes 'PES-MISA' without identifying what these abbreviations mean.

We find several examples of formulations like 'Contact with PES, continue as usual', which linguistically are so vague that it is impossible to derive any clear meaning. This ambiguity further compromises the applicants' juridical right to appeal decisions. At a minimum, formal equality for the applicants requires social workers to understand their clients' rights and duties so they can give them a chance to appeal decisions made by authorities. In addition, the plans contain misspellings, breaking conjunctions, and ambiguous language. Consequently, the way the plans are written make it difficult for readers to understand, especially for people with limited ability to understand Swedish. This abbreviated writing style might be the result of street-level staff trying to deal with the stress of limited time and resources (Lipsky, 2010; Fletcher, 2011).

We also found that the ambiguity and inconsistency of the language and design of the action plans compromised the applicants' legal rights. Under the heading *This I need to do to be entitled to social assistance*, several individual action plans indicate that the client should 'follow the planning' to be eligible for social assistance; however, it is unclear what planning this refers to. For example, one plan under the heading *This I need to do to be entitled to social assistance* makes it evident that 'Following the drawn-up planning' is a prerequisite for receiving aid. From a legal security perspective (Mattsson, 2015; Warnling-Nerep, 1995), it is unclear whether the planning refers to *You will take the following steps* or other requirements written under *Distribution of responsibilities*, which describes different possible plans to follow. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the applicants need to follow one or both of these requirements, an ambiguity that further threatens the legal rights of the applicants. We found a lack of consistency in the 48 plans with respect to how the prerequisites were interpreted. Because equality and legal certainty aim to make the authority predictable for citizens (Popelier, 2000), citizens must agree how to interpret the prerequisites associated with the state's authority (Braithwaite, 2002).

Our analysis illustrates, within the limits of our empirical material, the lack of formal equality with regards to the lack of legal security within means tested systems found in other parts of the welfare state. That is, these plans reproduce the applicants' unequal position in society. The legal challenges would be less obvious if the prerequisites were clearly stated in the law (Greer & Jarman, 2012). Clearly stated legal requirements could enhance the applicants' equality within the system. Perhaps, social workers should use their limited time focusing on the client's specific needs rather than writing individual action plans. Lack of time and resources result in street-level staff taking short-cuts that affect the quality of the service

(Jewell, 2007; Brodtkin, 2012). Nonetheless, clients will find it difficult using the plan to argue that they have met the prerequisites for receiving social assistance (Lipsky, 2010). Although legal security is intended to protect the clients from arbitrary decisions made by social workers and social services (Popelier, 2000; Bovens & Zouridis, 2002), social workers seem to be able to fill in whatever they choose without considering legal security (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002).

## 6 Conclusions

The results show that vague rights and duties, the lack of applicant participation, including the right to argue for one’s own cause, weak legal security, and individual action plans written in ambiguous language make formal equality difficult if not impossible for applicants. The establishment of formal equality is made even more difficult when individual means testing is used to determine social assistance. Individual means testing generally inhibits the clients’ formal equality by stigmatising the poor, even in a Nordic welfare state like Sweden. Individual action plans, however, have the potential to enhance equality (Keskitalo 2007; Johansson 2006).

We have two arguments for why the individual action plans result in social inequality. First, it is difficult to enhance equality at the street level in a society where structural problems exclude poor applicants from basic resources such as decent living conditions, work, wages, health care, and legal safety. The individual action plans are created without considering structural and systemic social problems, and politicians and management require social workers to handle the goals of formal equality with little or no support. However, the social workers are not innocent victims of vague policy aims as the plans also protect them from taking responsibility for formal equality. The social workers can never be held accountable, neither by the applicants nor management, for not achieving the policy goals as long as they do what the organisation requires of them. The individual action plans show few signs of how the social workers use their discretion to give the applicants a more equal position within social services. Requiring the social workers to handle social problems on an individual level blurs the connection between poverty, bad health, lack of adequate housing, and unemployment (Lipsky, 2010; p. 7). This ambiguity makes it possible for policymakers to ignore inequality in society. Therefore, the individual actions plans are more or less incomprehensible, lack input from the applicant, and ignore legal rights, factors that reproduce inequality rather than promote formal equality. Second, the ambiguous structure and language of the plans reproduce inequality rather than fighting it, further sustaining the lack of power among the applicants. Legal security is about protecting the citizens from the state and disciplining the authorities (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). When the plans become a palette of legal security problems for the applicants, opportunities are lost that give the applicants some sense of equality in relation to other citizens: ‘[A] person must be able to rely on an established administrative practice or policy. [...] If the government or administration raises certain expectations, it must honour them’ (Popelier, 2000: p. 327).

Our results are consistent with previous research on social contracts and individual actions plans (Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2003, 2005; Veitch, 2011; Hamilton, 2014; Keskitalo, 2007; Van Berkel & Roche, 2002). However, our study, within its limitations, extends the analysis of “doing” equality on the street level. According to these two arguments, social work that uses individual action plans becomes theatricalised: social workers perform their roles as problem solvers to satisfy their work requirements and applicants perform their roles as the poor to receive social assistance (Boland, 2016). We understand the rhetoric on equality and the

individual actions plans as techniques for self-regulation rather than as a cry for enhancing position (i.e., formal equality) of social assistance applicants.

Nordic welfare states have been successful at enhancing equality. Although the poorest citizens of these welfare states are given access to schools, health services, and other universal rights, they are still not offered full formal equality with respect to other citizens. While most citizens can enjoy agency through participation, individualisation, and legal security, the poorest citizens are caught in a system that reproduces inequality. However, there is also a structural problem with the individual action plans. When social services focus on formal equality, they make other inequalities invisible. To address these issues, social services could enhance social equality such as access to housing and other forms of economic equality. Unfortunately, the poorest and most vulnerable citizens in a mature welfare state such as Sweden are not granted even formal equality. We hope that our critical analysis, driven by theory, has provided insight into how to improve individual action plans for social assistance applicants from a street-level perspective so these plans promote rather than inhibit equality. Social workers are in a difficult position as they do not have the professional resources or support that would allow them to publicly criticise how individual action plans discourage participation, legal security, and individualised services and ultimately inhibit formal equality. However, the social services could choose to construct individual action plans based on legal security, recognise applicants as participants in making their plans, and make the plans a legitimate claim for social assistance. This approach would enhance formal equality in the sense that both parties, the social worker and the applicant, could use the plan to claim their rights and duties. If this approach is adopted, the individual action plans would become part of the solution for the poor, not a tool for reproducing inequality.

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