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Trends in social assistance, minimum income benefits and income polarization in an international perspective

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Trends in social assistance, minimum income benefits and
income polarization in an international perspective

Social assistance and minimum income benefits are important instruments as a safeguard against low income and poverty. There have been major developments in minimum income benefits both in developed and developing countries over the last decades. This thesis collects six empirical studies regarding the benefit developments, their determinants and the impact of the benefit changes on income polarization.

Based on quantitative and qualitative analyses, the first study suggests that the real minimum income benefit levels increased in many OECD countries whilst minimum income replacement rates declined on average. The increased benefit levels reflect policy changes while the declined replacement rates do not reflect benefit cuts but larger wage increases. The empirical evidence presented in the second study shows that globalization, soaring levels of unemployment and trade unions have triggered social assistance and minimum income benefit reforms. The third study indicates that the Lisbon Strategy has been positively associated with minimum income benefit developments since 2005. The findings in the fourth study suggest that in China, minimum income benefit programs vary considerably across regions and the benefit generosity has been increasing over the decade although still at low levels in an international perspective. The fifth and sixth studies focus on the indicator of income polarization to analyze income distribution. The fifth study shows that income polarization is stable in European countries and Europe as a whole. The sixth study further indicates that tax-benefit systems are essential in reducing initial market income polarization.

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