

If digitalization is the answer -what is the problem? DigiBarnevern and the digitalization of child welfare services in Norway

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Introduction: The state of Norway is vastly investing in digitalizing public services, including child welfare services (CWS). By developing new digital tools, the digitalization project DigiBarnevern (Digi Child Welfare) aims to raise the quality of services, promote efficiency and user participation among children, youth and parents in contact with CWS. Based on a study of the Norwegian case with DigiBarnevern, we discuss the consequences of increased digital communication and work for both clients and CW professionals. We apply theories on street-level bureaucracy and professions to understand the potential challenges and consequences of digitalization of CWS for both children, their parents and professionals.

Methods: Document analysis of 10 policy documents related to DigiBarnevern and digitalization of public services. As policies are not neutral tools, but rather serve as instruments carrying societal values and ideologies, we apply Carol Bacchi's analytical approach "what's the problem represented to be?" to explore which problems digitalization is meant to solve in CWS.

Results: In the policy documents, it is emphasized how digitalization will contribute to increased user participation and thus, have an empowering effect on service recipients. One example is through giving service users the option to digitally give and withdraw consent. This raises the question about what in fact user participation is, and if these changes are merely making previously manual processes digital. Additionally, an attempt of standardizing work processes and reducing the scope of street-level bureaucracy can contribute to rigid digital systems where, at worst, children in risk are left unnoticed because of digital systems' limitations in capturing every situation and reality of a child.

Conclusion: Digitalization and standardization opens for excluding certain client groups and decreasing professional autonomy, discretion and scope of street-level bureaucracy. We also question digital tools' ability to measure and disclose quality.