



European
Commission



Peer Review
in Social Protection
and Social Inclusion

The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020

SHORT REPORT

Belgium, 14-15 January 2014

Social Europe

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The Peer Review on **The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020** took place in Brussels, Belgium on 14-15 January 2014. The host organisation was the Belgian Federal Public Planning Service Social Integration (PPS SI). The participating peer countries were Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland and Malta, and the stakeholder organisations were the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) and the Social Platform. The Thematic Expert was Hugh Frazer from the National University of Ireland Maynooth. Also present were representatives of the European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion's Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction and Social Policies, Innovation and Governance units.

1. The policy under review

The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 is a forum that brings together a broad range of relevant stakeholders, including people experiencing poverty, to contribute to the formulation and evaluation of Belgian Federal government policies to combat poverty. In particular it focuses on efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy. It makes suggestions for the preparation and follow-up of the Belgian National Reform Programme (NRP) and National Social Report (NSR) from a social inclusion perspective and prepares Belgian participation in the annual Convention of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EPAPSE).

Belgium's Public Planning Service (PPS) social integration, which coordinates the Platform, defines poverty not just as a lack of financial means, but a multidimensional phenomenon. Action is therefore required across a wide range of policy areas, in order to empower people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

The complexity of Belgium's federal/regional/linguistic structure makes cooperation a vital aspect of governance. The Platform grows out of a long history of dialogue at different levels and was established in its current form in 2011. It is one of several different mechanisms for consulting on the development of federal and regional policies to combat poverty and social exclusion.

The Platform meets regularly four times a year, attended by around 40 people, including representatives of different levels of government, academics, social partners, the Central Economic Council, social services, NGOs and people experiencing poverty. Every two years an Open Platform Day offers a broader forum for debate. The Platform reports to the Interministerial Conference on Social Integration, comprising all ministers involved in poverty reduction.

The Platform tries to safeguard that a number of preconditions are met in order to ensure its effective functioning. These include: grounding its work in the EU framework of action to combat poverty and social exclusion; guaranteeing and building on Belgium's long established practices of stakeholder participation; investing in capacity building and preparation of stakeholders; recognising each participant's expertise; encouraging joint ownership of the work of the platform by key actors; ensuring open and transparent dialogue; providing feedback on the impact of the Platform's work; ensuring an open structure that is accessible to the whole spectrum of social actors; and ensuring high-level political commitment to the work of the platform.

The Platform is still at a relatively early stage of development. While it has been successful in bringing together a wide range of actors in an open dialogue and in increasing awareness of European social inclusion processes at present the Platform is seen by many actors as having little visible impact on policy making. Some participants are concerned that it could become a 'talking shop' enabling policy-makers to justify their decisions on the grounds that consultation has taken place.

A number of key challenges for the future development of the Platform were identified in the background papers and during the course of the meeting. These include: increasing the political status of and support for the Platform; defining its role in the Belgium policy making process more clearly; seeking a stronger obligation to take the Platform's proposals into account in the development of policies to combat poverty and social exclusion; giving clearer feedback on the impact of its recommendations; increasing its visibility including through greater use of social media and online information; enhancing the participation of stakeholders in meetings through allowing more time for preparation and avoiding too technical language; better timing of meetings to ensure that outputs are delivered in time to influence policies; ensuring that a broader mix of policy makers covering the different policy areas affecting poverty and social exclusion are involved in the work of the Platform.

In an online evaluation by stakeholders in November 2013, 80% of respondents said the Platform enables them to stay in touch with European policy and over 80% feel it covers important topics, while around one half believe it has an impact on policy-making. Some called for the Platform to have a role in the ex-ante evaluation of social policy.

Overall, the Belgian Platform is an important example of an initiative to foster stakeholder involvement in the development of policies to combat poverty and social exclusion in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy. Its experience to date provides many positive lessons on involving stakeholders, particularly people experiencing poverty and the non-governmental organisations working with them. It also highlights particular barriers that need to be overcome if the impact of such participation is to be maximised.

2. Key issues discussed during the meeting

There was overwhelming agreement that a full range of stakeholders, including representatives of people experiencing poverty, must be closely involved in the development, monitoring and evaluation of policies to combat poverty and social exclusion at all levels. This is essential for developing effective policies but it is also important to build consensus and to ensure the legitimacy of policies. Consequently there was a good deal of interest in the Belgian example.

On the other hand, the impact of the economic crisis on poverty in Europe was a major concern for Peer Review participants. Whereas the Europe 2020 strategy aims to take 20 million people out of risk of poverty by 2020, the number has actually gone up by 7 million. Belgium alone set a target of 380,000 fewer people at risk of poverty by 2020, but has seen an increase of 77,000.

Some stakeholders may have high expectations of the impact that their participation in consultative fora such as the Platform can have on policy-making. A key question that arose was how can these be managed in a realistic way in order to avoid disillusionment? A key way to address this issue is to be clear from the beginning about the status and purpose of the instrument, how far involvement extends and what its limits are. Also, being open about how outcomes are transmitted and giving feedback on their impact is helpful. Making outcomes visible can also help. For instance, some countries append recommendations from different stakeholders to National Reform Programmes (NRP) or National Social Reports (NSR).

Another key issue that was discussed was how formal should consultation mechanisms be. Some Peer Review participants were in favour of structures with a formal legal status or a binding impact on policy, which would also guarantee continuity. In France, for example, consultation with beneficiaries is compulsory by law and the National Committee of policies against poverty and social exclusion (CNLE) draws on a 'college' of participants proposed by NGOs. But it was widely felt that it would not be realistic

to expect recommendations to be binding. Several participants felt that less formal and more open and flexible arrangement can work better in their culture and that putting too much emphasis on “representativeness” could undermine openness and accessibility for many stakeholders. For instance, the Belgian Platform is open to all relevant stakeholders. Given the country's complex representational structures, the flexibility and openness of this approach is believed to encourage participation. On the other hand, in some countries it can be helpful to define clearly the full range of stakeholders to be involved in participation processes.

Another key question was how to encourage people experiencing poverty to participate in consultation. If the Platform represents the 'tip of the iceberg' of participation, below the surface is the vital contribution of NGOs and those who work to empower people experiencing poverty and support them to participate in policy development. Ensuring effective participation takes time and preparation and this needs to be supported and resourced on an ongoing basis. In the context of the crisis, funds to subsidise stakeholders are hard to find, but representatives of people experiencing poverty stressed that it is not reasonable to expect them to take part unless their time and expenses are covered.

3. Key learning elements

▪ Importance of stakeholder involvement

There are many good practice examples. Involving stakeholders creates better policies and helps achieve EU targets. People in poverty have rights and should be empowered. Representative and participatory democracy are complementary, and consultation needs to have greater impact.

▪ The Belgian Platform is an important initiative

It is still early days, and the structure is flexible and evolving but shows many positive lessons, as well as room for development. The (political) status and visibility of stakeholder involvement could be improved, possibly through legislation requiring recommendations to be considered. EU recognition is a key part of the Europe 2020 process.

▪ Political leadership & status is vital

Impact depends on the degree of political support. Topics should be prepared in advance and connect with main policy-making processes, so that outputs are timetabled for maximum impact.

▪ Development of a culture of involvement

Formal arrangements like the Belgian Platform should just be the tip of iceberg. Involvement should be sustained and ongoing at all levels, not only during policy formulation, but also for monitoring and evaluation.

▪ Defining stakeholders broadly

Involvement must cover all policy domains; levels of governance; ages (including children); and sectors. Ensuring private sector participation is a challenge.

▪ Involving people experiencing poverty is vital

This means balancing openness with structures, solving problems of representativeness, providing resources, support and capacity building, and allowing people time.

- **Ensure clear outcomes and manage expectations**

Impact should be increased, but expectations must be pragmatic and realistic. This requires clarity about the status and purpose of recommendations (e.g. advisory v binding) from the beginning, and a structure tailored to purpose. The trade-off between formal (legal) structures and more open/flexible/accessible arrangements will be influenced by national culture and traditions.

- **Openness about outcomes**

There should be feedback on impacts or lack of them (accountability), and making outcomes visible (e.g. attached to NRP/NSR). Different impacts should be regularly evaluated and discussed– they can take time to realise.

- **Improving effectiveness/extent of involvement**

Suggestions include use of (social) media/IT; open and flexible ways of working; capacity building also for policy-makers; accessible venues; constant evaluation and openness to change

- **Strengthening EU level support**

Stakeholder involvement in EU social inclusion processes should be strengthened further and be at the heart of the European Semester and the implementation of the Social Investment Package. Stakeholder involvement in the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EPAPSE) has been developed but should be further enhanced. Currently the Stakeholder Dialogue and the Annual Convention of the EPAPSE bring together NGOs, social partners, national/regional/local authorities, international organisations, EU institutions, think tanks and foundations dealing with social protection and social inclusion. The aim is to inform about the decision-making process and the European Semester, to monitor the Poverty Target, to raise awareness and support of EU policy initiatives, to identify areas of concern, to enhance democratic legitimacy and, ultimately, contribute to the implementation of the Social Investment Package (SIP) to achieve better policies. Stakeholder involvement could also become a key element in monitoring the Social Dimension of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the implementation of Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs) in the framework of the European Semester. The EU could also continue to help to overcome obstacles by encouraging permanent dialogue as part of the Europe 2020 process: e.g. through the Annual Growth Survey (AGS); by increasing its role in the preparation and monitoring of the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) (economic as well as social aspects); in the CSR process; and in the development of the National Social Reports (NSRs).

The EU can boost practical support through using EU Funds to support involvement at all levels in particular in less developed and transition regions and cohesion funded countries. It can encourage the development of more national platforms to feed into the EPAPSE. It can promote more exchange and mutual learning in future, for example by highlighting good practice through the Knowledge Bank, through the European Social Policy Network's reports, through more Peer Reviews and through social innovation initiatives. These can assist Member States in developing their own practice in this regard and can provide a basis for monitoring arrangements in the context of the European Semester.

Many participants favoured the preparation by the Commission and/or the Social Protection Committee of guidelines of good practice on stakeholder involvement as already included in the Commission Communication on the EPAPSE.

- **Dialogue has started – let's continue and deepen it!**

4. Contribution of the Peer Review to Europe 2020 and the Social Investment Package

The Belgian Platform is grounded in the framework of the Europe 2020 strategy and the Social Open Method of Coordination (OMC), reflecting the objectives of the EPAP, one of the seven flagship initiatives in the Europe 2020 strategy, which aims to enable people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to share the benefits of growth, live in dignity and take an active part in society.

The Peer Review fleshed out the Social Investment Package emphasis on stakeholder involvement, urging Member States to “engage relevant actors more vigorously in the development, implementation and assessment of policies.” Promoting active inclusion is at the heart of the SIP, and is seen as a joint responsibility for all actors in society, including civil society organisations, people experiencing poverty, NGOs, local administrations and the private sector.

The Social Platform and the European Anti-Poverty Network both put forward recommendations for strengthening policy and reducing the democratic deficit at EU level through stakeholder involvement. This included acting on stakeholders’ input across the spectrum of EU policies and processes – economic and environmental as well as social – including the Europe 2020 Strategy, European Semester, AGS, NRPs and CSRs, NSRs, and the SIP, which also proposed the setting up of a knowledge bank.

Over-arching EU objectives are implemented at country level by NRPs, and the OMC is the best instrument for enhancing cooperation and sharing good practices such as the Belgian Platform. The idea that stakeholders’ recommendations should be appended to NRPs received a great deal of support, with the additional demand for accountability and feedback on how they are adopted and implemented.