Peer Review The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020 (Brussels, 14-15 January 2014)

Discussion Paper: Involving stakeholders in developing policies to combat poverty and social exclusion[1]

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Introduction

The January 2014 Peer Review of the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 will examine the question of how the involvement of stakeholders[2] can best be achieved at national (and sub-national) levels so as to support the mainstreaming of social inclusion objectives in the implementation of the European 2020 Strategy. Ensuring adequate coverage of social inclusion issues in their National Reform Programmes (NRPs) and National Social Reports (NSRs) and adequate involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the process has been a weakness in many Member States since the Europe 2020 Strategy started. The Belgian Platform provides an interesting example of a structured effort to ensure the involvement of stakeholders in the process.

This discussion paper does two things. Part A examines the European policy framework that underpins stakeholder involvement and identifies the main lessons that can be learned from the past decade of promoting stakeholder involvement in European initiatives to promote social inclusion. Part B outlines the main features of the Belgium Platform and provides a preliminary assessment of some of the main strengths and weaknesses of the Belgian approach.

Part A: Setting the scene – overview of the related policy developments at European level

A.1 The policy framework at European level

The European policy framework for this Peer Review is set by the Lisbon Treaty,[3] the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (Social OMC) and the Social Investment Package (SIP). These important policy initiatives aim to mainstream efforts to tackle poverty and social exclusion at the heart of European Union (EU) and national policy making. In doing so each stresses the importance of Member States involving all relevant

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[2] In their study on stakeholders involvement in the Social OMC Inbas and Engender provide a useful definition of stakeholders as "those people and organisations that are affected by something – for instance a policy, programme, action or organisation – literally, those who have a stake in it." (Inbas and Engender 2010, p.8).

[3] Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Available at: http://bookshop.europa.eu/is-bin/INTERSHOP.enfinity/WFS/EU-Bookshop-Site/en_GB/-/EUR/ViewPublication-Start?PublicationKey=FXAC10083

stakeholders and all levels of governance in the process of developing, implementing and monitoring policies to promote social inclusion. (see Annex 1, EU Policy on Mainstreaming Social Inclusion through Stakeholder Involvement, for an outline of how each of these key policy documents stress the requirement to put the issue of combating poverty and social exclusion and the involvement of stakeholders at the heart of European Policy)

A.2 Practice and lessons from Member States

The situation in Member States

Although, as outlined above and in Annex 1, there is significant emphasis at EU level on the importance of involving stakeholders in the European Semester process and particularly in the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) the evidence from the first three rounds of the NRPs is that, from a social inclusion perspective, the involvement of key stakeholders in the process has, in many countries, been limited and of poor quality. This has been highlighted by the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion in their assessments of the 2011, 2012 and 2013 NRPs for the European Commission. For instance, in 2011, "The extent of stakeholder involvement in the preparation process was quite varied. In many cases, consultation seems to have been quite limited and certainly less extensive on social inclusion issues than was the case with the National Strategy Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. Also, in many cases the consultations that did take place on social inclusion issues seem to have had little impact on the final version of the NRPs. Experts highlight that quite often the limited or absent consultation with NGOs reflects the predominantly economic and labour market focus of the NRPs."(Frazer and Marlier, 2011, p. 11) Again in 2012 the overall conclusion from the experts' assessments was that "Stakeholder involvement is only rated as being well addressed in two NRPs and two NSRs. There is significant criticism that consultation with stakeholders was still too limited and one-sided, and in several countries experts point to a weakening in consultation."(Frazer and Marlier, 2012, p. 10) In 2013 "Stakeholder involvement is assessed positively in the case of only five NRPs and two Strategic Social Reports (SSRs). While in most other countries there is some degree of stakeholder involvement there is considerable room for improvement." (Frazer and Marlier, 2013)

In its Annual Report for 2012 the Social Protection Committee (SPC), while reiterating the importance of stakeholder involvement and noting that measures can be identified in a number of Member States, reported that "No involvement or very limited involvement of relevant actors (including those affected by poverty and social exclusion, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and service providers) in the development, implementation and evaluation of active inclusion strategies is reported by larger civil society organisations (such as EAPN, Eurodiaconia, Eurocities)." (Social Protection Committee 2013, para. 46)

The lack of meaningful involvement of people experiencing poverty in the NRP process has been highlighted repeatedly by the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN). In its 2013 assessment of the NRPs it reported "an overall lack of progress towards implementing meaningful participation in the NRPs processes at national level" and went on to state that "Organisations start to question the value of engagement. Organisations working with and for people experiencing poverty have been demanding and have been prepared to input into the NRP process at national level since it was launched. But given the lack of engagement and room for influencing the actual content of the NRPs they are about to put this engagement under question." (EAPN 2013, p.10) A similar criticism can be found from organisations working on child poverty and well-being. For instance, Eurochild's

assessment of the 2013 NRPs concludes that "Civil society organisations in general and organisations working with children in particular, were rarely consulted on the preparation and implementation of NRPs (and consultation with children themselves is completely absent)." (Eurochild 2013, p.4) According to the European Social Network (ESN), senior officials involved in delivering social services were not much involved in the development of the NRPs in 2012 even though the issue of "adequate and affordable social services" had been highlighted as an important issue by the Commission in the Annual Growth Survey 2012. Thus ESN concluded that "Even if the NRPs (and NSRs) are unlikely to produce new policy initiatives, greater stakeholder involvement could at least close various reporting gaps." (ESN 2012, p.6)

Lessons from the last decade

In light of the emphasis that has been given to the involvement of all levels of governance and all stakeholders in the development of policies to combat poverty and promote greater social inclusion in the key EU initiatives over the course of the Social OMC from 2001-2010 and even before that with the three EU poverty programmes in the 1970s, 80s, 90s (see for instance European Commission 1999) it is not surprising that a considerable body of learning has built up and many examples of good practice have been identified. From the outset of the Social OMC this was a topic that featured regularly in Commission reports on the process and Member States were encouraged to report on stakeholder involvement every two years in their National Action Plans on Inclusion and then in the social inclusion strand of their National Strategy Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (NSRSPSIs). Their approach to involving and mobilising all relevant bodies and actors, including those experiencing poverty, was then analysed each time by the Commission and reported on in Joint Reports on Social Inclusion (see for instance European Commission 2002, pp 68-74 and European Commission 2004, pp 112-125). In addition there have been a whole series of initiatives to document and highlight good (and bad) practice in this area. For instance there have been transnational exchange projects (e.g. on mainstreaming social inclusion, see Combat Poverty Agency 2006), Peer Reviews (e.g. on the NAPInclusion Social Inclusion Forum, Swinnen 2007), research studies (e.g. Inbas and Engender 2010 and Frazer, Marlier and Nicaise 2010), reports from civil society organisations (e.g. EAPN, 2012), the Annual European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty[4] and regular assessments of the NSRSPSIs and NRPs by the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion[5].

Why involvement of stakeholders

From the sources mentioned above one can identify nine main reasons why ensuring the involvement of stakeholders in the development of strategies and policies to combat poverty and social exclusion such as the National Action Plans on social inclusion, the National Strategy Reports and the National Reform Programmes is important. These are:

▪ The quality of public policy making is enhanced by having as wide a pool of knowledge to draw on as possible – a broad range of stakeholders often provides detailed and specific evidence from the ground that is not available to policy makers at national level;

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[4] Readers can find out more about the 12 European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty at http://www.eapn.eu/en/what-we-do/issues-we-focus-on/the-european-meetings-of-people-experiencing-poverty-history

[5] The reports of the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion can be found at: http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1025&langId=en

- Holding widespread discussion with stakeholders and taking account of different perspectives and experiences leads to more effective policies and legislation. It brings new energy, ideas and creativity into the policy making process and this can lead to new solutions that might not be found by officials and policy makers working in isolation;

- Involving stakeholders from across different policy areas enhances horizontal coordination of policies;

- Involving stakeholders from different levels of governance increases vertical coordination of policies;

- The involvement of a broad range of stakeholders helps to build up support for and legitimacy of policies as more people "own" the policy;

- Involving stakeholders helps to identify new issues and emerging social inclusion challenges earlier. In particular, people experiencing poverty are the first to identify new issues. They also bring direct experience of the impact of policies;

- Involving stakeholders enhances democracy by increasing democratic dialogue and debate;

- Inclusion of those affected by policies in their development is a recognition of people's right to be consulted about the decisions that affect them and empowers them as active citizens. In particular, for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, participation in policy making is a means of empowerment and an important step towards social inclusion and full citizenship;

- Involving stakeholders helps to create greater awareness of EU social inclusion processes and this helps to build support for EU involvement in social inclusion issues.

Overall the key argument for increased stakeholder involvement in the EU social inclusion processes is that it is vital for the successful mainstreaming of social inclusion objectives in national and EU policy making. As the European Commission funded Mainstreaming Social Inclusion project concluded "for the mainstreaming of social inclusion to be effective, a key element is the involvement of all relevant actors at each stage of the policy cycle. It requires the Member States to introduce structures and processes to make participation possible." (Combat Poverty Agency 2006, p.148) Similarly, a report for the Belgian EU Presidency in 2010 on developing the social inclusion dimension of Europe 2020 concluded that "stakeholder involvement is not "just" a principle of democratic decision-making: it also guarantees a more evidence-based design of policies and improves their effectiveness through stronger consensus and ownership at all policy levels." (Frazer, Marlier and Nicaise 2010, p.198).

Different levels of involvement

The extent and nature of stakeholder involvement varies widely across Member States and from issue to issue. One study of stakeholder dialogue and engagement in the Social OMC describes a continuum ranging from information provision, through consultation, involvement, and collaboration to empowerment (see Engender and Inbass 2010, p.10). Similarly, the Mainstreaming Social Inclusion project identified an involvement spectrum across Member States ranging from no information at one end through information, consultation, and participation to joint-decision making or co-determination. It stresses that "Each step on this spectrum is dependent on the previous step, thus providing the building blocks for involvement. Information and the sharing of knowledge is the 'life blood' of involvement, as without the full and complete availability of information on the policy initiative, which is made available in good time, it is not possible for either consultation or participation to be meaningful. Consultation provides those individuals or groups

who are interested and involved to express views on a proposal and to influence the final decision but not to be involved in the making of that decision. This remains the prerogative of the policy-makers who may, or may not, take into consideration the views put forward through a consultation process, in making the decisions. Consultation cannot be effective unless those who are been consulted have all the relevant information on the proposed policy. Participation recognises the contribution made by all the stakeholders in the decision-making process and it provides individuals and groups with the ability to influence the process and to have their views incorporated in the final outcomes. Co-decision making goes one step further by ensuring that a consensus is reached during the decision-making process, that policies are arrived at jointly and that they reflect the concerns and priorities of all those affected by the decision, resulting in all the stakeholders having a joint ownership of the final outcome." (Combat Poverty Agency 2006, pp. 153-154)

Key elements of a successful approach

In spite of the limitations of the extent and quality of stakeholder involvement in the implementation of Europe 2020 and the backward steps in many Member States in the last few years there are still many positive examples on which to draw. Thus it is possible to identify from the literature and experience of over a decade of the Social OMC many of the main features of what makes a successful approach to sustainable stakeholder involvement in the development, implementation and monitoring of social inclusion policies in general and the NRPs and NSRs in particular. Ten key elements are briefly summarised below which can provide a useful guide when assessing the Belgian Platform. These are:

- **Ensure political leadership and political commitment to the consultation process:** for consultations with stakeholders to be meaningful it is essential that they are supported politically, that the process is given status and recognition within national policy making and that the outcomes are taken into account when making policy decisions;

- **Link to national economic and social policy making processes:** it is important that consultations around EU processes like the NRPs and NSRs are not stand alone processes but are linked to and inform existing national (and sub-national) policy processes on economic and social issues. If they are not they are unlikely to have much impact;

- **Establish formal structures and clear remit:** if consultation is to be effective in mainstreaming social inclusion policies it is important to move beyond once-off and ad hoc consultations to regular and continuous structured dialogue on the planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of EU and national policies across the whole range of areas which impact on people experiencing poverty (see for instance CPA p.163). It is also important to be clear what the parameters and purpose of a consultation process is so that expectations amongst stakeholders are realistic;

- **Cover economic, financial and environmental policies as well as social policies:** poverty and social inclusion are affected by all areas covered by the NRPs thus consultations with social inclusion stakeholders will have a greater impact if they cover the broad range of issues included in Europe 2020. Such a broad approach will be more likely to lead to the identification of possible synergies between policy areas and to ensuring that social inclusion objectives are mainstreamed across policy areas;

- **Involve a broad mix of stakeholders:** effective consultations need to bring together a broad range of stakeholders. One report (Inbas and Engender 2010, p.3) has identified three categories of stakeholders: decision makers in charge of

policy decision (e.g. government ministers, national civil servants, regional and local authorities); secondary stakeholders in the policy process (e.g. local and third sector organisations providing services, advocacy and representative groups of vulnerable groups, social partners, the media); and primary stakeholders (i.e. those affected by the policy and people experiencing poverty and social exclusion). Ensuring that the different policy areas affecting social inclusion, the different levels of government and the different types of stakeholders are all involved is key to ensuring in depth discussion, a multi-dimensional approach and real ownership of the process;

- **Allow time for meaningful consultation:** too often consultation happens too late and in a rushed manner and this does not allow time for real preparation of inputs and real dialogue about the best solutions;

- **Support and invest in participation:** effective consultation of stakeholders on something like the NRPs and NSRs is more likely to happen successfully if it is built on a broader tradition of encouraging participation and dialogue at all levels of governance and on on-going support for local community development projects that empower people affected by poverty and social exclusion to participate collectively in policy making. Participation is a process that needs to be built up over time. Particularly for civil society organisations and people experiencing poverty this means long-term resourcing, supporting and encouraging participation and regular discussion and feedback about its effectiveness and how it can be improved. It also means fostering a culture amongst policy makers that understands and is open to stakeholder consultations – training can be a very important tool in this regard;

- **Develop open, transparent and accountable ways of working:** when establishing consultation procedures it is important to ensure that they take account of the different levels of knowledge of different stakeholders and put in place operating methodologies that help to build trust and dialogue between stakeholders and enable them to participate as equals. This means ensuring that all relevant information is made available in good time and that transparent and accountable procedures are put in place;

- **Demonstrate and give feed-back on impact and make outcomes visible:** one of the things that undermines effective consultation is if it is not clear what the outcomes are. Stakeholders need to know what impact their inputs have had on policy development and if none why not. If there are no visible impacts on policy then groups may begin to question their participation. Often people experiencing poverty can become disillusioned with the process if they do not see results and this needs to be anticipated by those who initiate direct participation;

- **Establish ongoing monitoring and evaluation:** developing effective stakeholder involvement is a gradual process and evolves over time. To ensure this happens it is important to monitor and evaluate the process and to ensure that all stakeholders regularly have an opportunity to make suggestions for improvements to the process.

Some interesting examples

In spite of the overall limitations in stakeholder involvement in the Europe 2020 process some Member States have begun to take interesting initiatives which can be further developed. For instance:

- In **Denmark** the involvement of stakeholders in the process around the NRP is mainly secured through the Contact Committee for the Lisbon Strategy. The Contact Committee consists of 29 NGOs, among these four new members were included since February 2011 representing the social dimension in order to take account of the focus on social issues in the Europe 2020 strategy. These four

organisations are The National Council for Children, the European Anti-Poverty Network, Women's Council and The Council for Socially Marginalised People. The Contact Committee is involved in the NRP through various meetings that are held throughout the working process of the NRP. The draft of Denmark's NRP 2013 was sent for consultation to the Contact Committee in mid-March and subsequently discussed at a meeting of the Committee, and the Committee members afterwards had the opportunity to submit comments of the draft;

- **Ireland** has an annual Social Inclusion Forum (SIF) which is part of the institutional framework put in place by the Government to support the development of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016. The Forum provides an opportunity for wider public consultation and discussion on social inclusion issues, particularly with people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and the groups that work with them. The 2013 Forum included a focus on the social dimension of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the poverty component of the National Reform Programme and progress towards meeting the National Social Target for Poverty Reduction;

- In **Luxembourg** in preparing the social inclusion chapter of the 2012 NRP and NSR, the government consulted in October 2011 with social partners, local social offices and all relevant NGOs. A report of the meeting was made available, which facilitated the follow up by the participants. As a follow up of these consultations, at least two working groups became operational (housing – minimum income) and resulted in new policy initiatives. In February 2013, government organised a consultation meeting with representatives of civil society in preparation of the 2013 NRP and SSR;

- In the **Netherlands** the main stakeholders, the social partners, local authorities and non-governmental organisations were consulted during the drafting of the NRP. Others who were consulted included the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) and the Social Alliance (a network of about 60 organisations engaged in combating poverty and social exclusion). The social partners have prepared separate documents outlining their input to the National Reform Programme and the Europe 2020 strategy. The NRP contains an appendix with their contribution;

- In **Spain** the drawing up of the NRP 2013 was based on consultations with trade unions, business organisations and, above all, the Social Action Third Sector, which actively participates in the fight against social exclusion. Specifically, the Third Sector Platform contributed to the design of the NRP, by submitting a dossier stressing the importance of five social inclusion targets: pinpointing poverty reduction targets up to 2020; rolling out an emergency plan on poverty and social exclusion, with an appropriate budget, the multidimensional strategy against child poverty and social exclusion, employment of excluded persons in a gender dimension; development of youth employment programme such as the development of the European recommendation on the "youth opportunities initiative" (Plataforma del Tercer Sector de Acción Social, 2013).

Part B: Assessment of the Belgian Platform

B.1 Brief summary of the Belgian Platform

Background, goals and tasks

The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 forms the central consultation body for the preparation and monitoring of European and Belgian policy in the area of combating poverty and social exclusion and in particular to contribute to the preparation and follow-up of the National Reform Programme and the National Social Report. It evolved from two the working groups 'Actions' and 'Indicators' that were established in 2005 at the Belgian level in order to involve stakeholders in the monitoring and structuring of the NAPincl (National Action Plan on Social Inclusion) as concerns policy measures and indicators respectively. This transformation took place in order to take account of the launch of the Europe 2020 Strategy and to parallel the establishment at national level of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EPAPSE).

The overall goal of the Platform is to enhance the development and monitoring of policies to combat poverty and social exclusion by involving all relevant stakeholders in an ongoing dialogue. More particularly the Platform's tasks are:

- the preparation of policy proposals based inter alia on the Bi-Annual Report from the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service Substantive exchange;
- the setting of priorities for and the preparation and follow-up of the Belgian NRP and the NSR from a social inclusion perspective; the preparation of Belgian participation in the annual Convention of the EPAPSE; the discussion of relevant EU policy and its implementation; and the discussion of (inter)federal policy related to the fight against poverty.

Participants and ways of working

The Platform aims to bring together as many stakeholders as possible from all levels of governance and a broad mix of public and private organisations. These cover: the Federal Public Service for Social Integration which is the lead government body responsible for the Platform; the Office of the Secretary of State For the Fight Against Poverty; key local, regional and federal actors; the Federal Public Service for Social Security; the Service to Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion; umbrella bodies representing local authorities; the social partners; research institutions; organisations focused on combating poverty; people experiencing poverty and their organisations, especially the Belgian Anti Poverty Network (BAPN); the Autonomous Working Group on Indicators.

The Platform meets four times a year. It also organises a bi-annual Open Platform Day one of whose key functions is to evaluate the functioning of the Platform. Participation at Platform meetings may vary depending on what is due to be discussed.

The secretariat of the Platform is established within the Federal Programming Service Social Integration which, in consultation with the technical committee, determines the agenda, coordinates the preparation of content, calls the meetings, draws up the reports and is responsible for ensuring open and transparent communication with all stakeholders. The technical committee involves liaison officers from the federated entities and the federal government mandated to this end. There are no civil society organisations represented on the technical

committee. BAPN works with people experiencing poverty to help them to prepare for participation in meetings.

Implementation

Since its establishment, there have been 6 meetings of the Platform. In each instance about 50 people attended from various groups of stakeholders: political policy makers, the academic world, social partners, local authorities, social services, people living in poverty and their associations, etc. The invitation and the reports from the Belgian Platform are distributed among some 200 institutions and organisations which have expressed an interest. The first Open Platform Day was held on 28th March 2013.

The Belgian Platform reports to the Inter-Ministerial Conference on Integration in Society and the conclusions from the Platform inform the preparation of a policy note which the Secretary of State for Social Integration prepares as a political input into the discussions on the preparation of the Belgian NRP. In addition, the official from the Federal Public Service for Social Security who coordinates the preparation of the social dimension of the NRP and who is on the editing committee for the NRP, which is coordinated by the cabinet of the prime minister, participates in the Platform's meetings and is on the technical committee. He is assisted with a draft on poverty and social exclusion issues from the Federal Public Service for Social Integration who are the secretariat to the Platform.

The participation of the Gender Institute in the Platform ensures that there is a gender dimension to the discussion of issues. However, to date the gender dimension of participation or the gender dimension of issues under discussion does not appear to have featured highly.

B.2 Assessment[6]

Results and achievements

The main result of establishing the Platform is to create a space in which a broad range of stakeholders have the opportunity to contribute to and help set priorities for the social inclusion strand of the Belgian NRP and NSR. As well as contributing suggestions for the development of the social inclusion dimension of the NRP and NSR, the meetings have resulted in: greater visibility of social inclusion issues; increased exchange of information on social inclusion issues and European processes; enhanced dialogue between public and private sectors; greater participation of people experiencing poverty in the discussion of policies that affect them; more dialogue between different levels of governance. The meetings have also helped to prepare the Belgian input into the Annual Convention of the EPAPSE.

Success factors

Five key factors can be identified that contribute to the success and usefulness of the Platform to date. They are:

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[6] There is not much written material yet available assessing the work of the Belgian Platform. The Platform's secretariat is currently undertaking a survey of stakeholders views on the effectiveness of the Platform but the results were not available at the time of drafting this report. Thus this assessment is very much a preliminary one and draws on helpful conversations with officials from the Federal Public Service for Social Integration, the Federal Public Service for Social Security, the Service to Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion and the Belgian Anti Poverty Network as well as the reports of the Belgian experts from the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion.

- **Good information:** the Platform meetings provide stakeholders with a lot of useful information about developments on social inclusion issues at EU level, particularly the Europe 2020 semester, which would otherwise not be readily available to them;
- **Openness:** the Platform is open to all interested actors and all levels of governance and stakeholders have the opportunity to put forward issues for inclusion on the agenda;
- **Involvement of different levels of governance:** the involvement of both the federal and federated levels of government in the technical committee ensure that the different levels of governance in Belgium are actively involved in the development of the Platform;
- **Open dialogue:** there is a good open dialogue involving different stakeholders with wide-ranging expertise: people experiencing poverty, NGOs, policy makers, national and regional public administration. Participants are all encouraged to express their views at meetings;
- **Preparation for participation:** the participation of people experiencing poverty is supported by the preparatory work undertaken by BAPN7 and by the ongoing and in-depth work of the Service to Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion (Service Lutte Contre la Pauvreté). Government resourcing to these organisations to support the participation of people experiencing poverty in policy discussions is an essential prerequisite for their meaningful participation;
- **Ongoing process:** consultation is ongoing with four meetings a year which allows the possibility of some issues being examined over time rather than just a once-off discussion;
- **Strong political commitment to EU social inclusion objectives and processes:** Belgium has always given quite a high priority to the social dimension of European policy and makes efforts to link these with national policy making. Thus consultations on the NRPs and NSRs are seen by many of the stakeholders as being more important than in many other Member States.

Obstacles and constraints and areas for development

Developing effective dialogue between all actors evolves over time and it is still relatively early days for the Belgian Platform. However, there are number of lessons that can be learned so far about the barriers or constraints that need to be overcome if the Platform is to achieve its full potential. The following are key areas where there could be room for further development:

- **Enhancing status and making clearer impact on policies:** some stakeholders are concerned that the conclusions of the Platform do not appear to have made a significant impact on political decision making and in particular on decisions about what the social inclusion priorities should be when drafting NRPs and NSRs. The Platform could benefit from stronger political support and leadership and from being given more status within the policy making process – e.g. official recognition as a consultative body similar to the status given to the National Council for Employment and the Federal Council for Sustainable Development. Also, given that responsibility for the NRP rests with the Prime Minister, it could be helpful to have political involvement that extends beyond the Secretary of State for social integration if there is to be an impact that extends beyond just social policies to cover economic and financial policies that impact on poverty;

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7 The BAPN plays a key role in supporting the participation of people experiencing poverty in the Belgium Platform. Indeed playing this role is one of the conditions of federal funding for the network.

- **Need to move beyond "soft" outcomes:** to date the most obvious positive outcomes tend to be "soft": e.g. capacity building, exchange of information, networking, making issues more visible. However, unless the actual policy impact on the content of NRPs and NSRs is visible there is a risk that the Platform could come to be seen as a somewhat powerless talking shop or a "window-dressing" exercise;

- **Allowing time for meaningful input to NRP/NSR:** in 2013 non-governmental stakeholders had to make their comments and suggestions without seeing any draft versions of the NRPs/NSRs. Moreover, in 2012 as well as 2013, only one meeting was specifically dedicated to the NRP. Hence, the stakeholder involvement in the NRP and NSR/SSR was relatively weak. Time pressure was one of the reasons for this flaw: the 2012 NSR mentioned that a consultation of stakeholders was not possible due to the late availability of guidelines for the report and the need to align the NSR with the NRP. By contrast, the participation of stakeholders was explicitly mentioned in the report when dealing with the pension and health care reforms;

- **Ensuring that people experiencing poverty can participate fully:** sometimes not enough time is allowed for preparation with the agenda and papers being circulated too late for thorough preparation by participants. Also there is a need to ensure that language isn't too technical and complicated. Exploring new methodologies to create a structured dialogue between stakeholders and adopting a less traditional approach to meetings could help people experiencing poverty to feel listened to and heard and could ensure that there is a meaningful two way conversation on an equal basis. The challenge is to make meetings more than an expression of views by stakeholders and become a real process of engagement;

- **Making stakeholder views visible in the NRP:** the lack of visibility of stakeholder inputs to the NRP on social inclusion issues could be addressed by attaching them as an Annex to the Belgian NRP as has been the case in some countries. This would help to ensure that their voices are heard even if not all their proposals are adopted;

- **Clarifying roles:** the relationship between this new federal Platform and the well-established and independent inter-federal Service to Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion needs to be further clarified.[8] The Belgian Platform can provide a useful opportunity for a broad range of stakeholders to discuss the findings of the Service's valuable in-depth reports;

- **Broader policy representation:** Given the multi-dimensional and cross-cutting nature of poverty and social exclusion issues and given the many issues covered by the NRP it could be helpful to broaden the involvement of key decision makers to include representatives from all the relevant ministries involved in the NRPs and NSRs, economic as well as social. For instance the contact persons in different ministries for the Federal Poverty Reduction Plan could be useful participants;

- **Defining stakeholders:** while the openness of the Platform to all interested stakeholders has been one of its strengths in the initial stages it may be useful to consider moving towards a clearer definition of who stakeholders should be so as to ensure that there is a good balance and regular participation of all key interests;

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[8] The Service was created in 1998 to evaluate policies at all policy levels and to organise a permanent in-depth dialogue between stakeholders – i.e. associations where the poor have a chance to speak, Public Centres for Social Welfare, trade unions, professionals from different sectors, administrations, etc. The Service produces important bi-annual reports which are fed to all relevant parts of the government administration to inform their work.

- **Move beyond commenting to developing concrete proposals:** the Platform could make more impact by moving beyond just reacting and commenting to spending more time in developing and agreeing on concrete policy proposals;

- **Low status of social inclusion dimension of Europe 2020:** the impact of the economic and financial crisis and the dominant focus on financial consolidation has led to the social inclusion dimension of Europe 2020 (to date) being relegated to a very subsidiary role in the Europe 2020 semester. This makes it more difficult for the Platform to make a significant impact on the NRPs;

- **Difficulty of reconciling different expectations:** finding a balance between the slow nature of policy evolution and change and the expectations and requirement of many stakeholders (especially people experiencing poverty) of concrete outcomes and real change remains a real challenge for the Platform. In this regard defining more clearly the power and possibilities of the Platform and its limits could be helpful;

- **Lack of transparency and openness of EPAPSE:** the Belgium Platform's objective of feeding into the work of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EPAPSE) is limited by the lack of time to prepare inputs into the Annual Convention of EPAPSE due to the late information about the meetings. Also the structure and methodology of the Annual Convention is not very conducive to the participation of people experiencing poverty;

- **Lack of clear guidance from the European Commission:** the impact and political status of the Belgium Platform could be enhanced if the European Commission were to develop guidelines for Member Status on good practice in stakeholder involvement (as promised in the Commission's 2008 Communication on the Social OMC). Also, if the Commission developed indicators and monitored and reported in more detail on Member States' performance on stakeholder involvement as part of its monitoring of Europe 2020 implementation and the achievement of Europe's social objectives and if there were Country Specific Recommendations made to countries with weak performance in this regard this could help to increase the political importance given by Member States to stakeholder involvement. The new European Semester Officers in European Commission offices in Member States could help to encourage and raise the status of consultations with social inclusion stakeholders.

B.3 Relevance to Europe 2020 and the Social Investment Package

Potential contribution to goals of Europe 2020 and SIP

The Belgian Platform has the potential to make a significant contribution to the goals of Europe 2020 and the SIP. First, it is an important effort to give greater visibility and status to the social inclusion dimension of Europe 2020 and the implementation of the SIP. It can thus contribute to strengthening the social inclusion dimension of the NRP and NSR. Secondly, it addresses what has been to-date, a major weakness in the Europe 2020 process from a social inclusion perspective: the low level of involvement and ownership of stakeholders.

Learning value for other Member States

Many Member States still face significant challenges in ensuring that the social inclusion dimension of their implementation of Europe 2020 receives as much attention as the economic and financial aspects. The Platform provides valuable lessons (both positive and negative) as to what is required at national (and sub-national) level to make progress and get a more balanced approach to Europe 2020 which gives as much status to inclusive as well as smart and sustainable growth.

The Platform also provides real learning value for other Member States in how to go about ensuring the involvement and ownership of all relevant stakeholders in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies impacting on poverty and social inclusion. Given the widespread criticism of many Member States' performance in this regard in relation to the NRPs and NSRs the Belgian approach offers very valuable practical learning as to what works and what does not.

The experience of the Belgian Platform also helps to highlight areas where the Commission could do more to support the involvement of social inclusion stakeholders in the European 2020 semester, the implementation of the Social Investment Package and the Social OMC.

Conclusions

The involvement of stakeholders in the mainstreaming of social inclusion objectives at the heart of the Europe 2020 Strategy is intended to be a key element of the Strategy. However, to-date such involvement has been quite limited in most Member States. The Belgian Platform represents an important and structured attempt to ensure both the mainstreaming of social inclusion issues and the involvement of stakeholders. Thus the meetings of the Platform to date provide important lessons as to what works well but also serve to highlight some barriers to effective involvement and some aspects that require more attention. These lessons can be valuable to other Member States in improving their own approaches to involving stakeholders.

Questions/issues for debate

- What can be done (both nationally and at European levels) to increase the political importance given to mainstreaming social inclusion objectives into the European Semester so that consultations on social inclusion issues are meaningful?
- How can the political status and importance of stakeholder consultation on social inclusion issues as part of Member States' implementation of the Europe 2020 objectives, the Social OMC and SIP be increased?
- How can one ensure a good mix of stakeholders covering all relevant policy areas?
- How can one increase the impact of stakeholder consultations on all policy areas (including economic) that impact on poverty and social inclusion?
- What is necessary to ensure the effective involvement of all stakeholders and especially people experiencing poverty in the consultation process?
- How can one manage expectations and avoid disillusionment with the consultation process?
- What can usefully be done at European level to support and encourage Member States in developing effective processes for involving and consulting stakeholders?

Annex 1 – EU Policy on Mainstreaming Social Inclusion through Stakeholder Involvement

There are four key documents that provide the political basis for putting the mainstreaming of social inclusion through stakeholder involvement at the heart of EU policy making. These are: the Lisbon Treaty, the Europe 2020 Strategy, the EU's Social Objectives and the Social Open Method of Coordination (Social OMC), and the Social Investment Package (SIP).

Lisbon Treaty

The status accorded to social inclusion policies in the European Union (EU) was significantly enhanced with the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009. Article 9 of the Treaty states that "In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health". The "Union" in the Treaty refers to both the EU as a whole and its individual Member States, which means that this new clause introduces the legal basis for mainstreaming social protection and social inclusion objectives across EU and national policies.[9]

As well as stressing the importance of mainstreaming the Treaty on European Union emphasises the importance of consultation and involvement. For instance Article 11 talks about giving "citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action" and maintaining "an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society". Thus the Treaty provides a stronger legal basis than heretofore to ensure that the twin concerns about tackling social exclusion and promoting involvement are reflected in EU policy making.

Europe 2020

The *Europe 2020 Strategy* (European Commission 2010), which was launched by the EU Heads of State and Government in June 2010, at least in theory puts social inclusion at the heart of EU policy making. It emphasises enhanced socioeconomic coordination and the incorporation of inclusive growth as one of the EU's three key priorities, alongside smart and sustainable growth. In addition *Europe 2020* includes a headline target on social inclusion – i.e. "promoting social inclusion, in particular through the reduction of poverty, by aiming to lift at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and exclusion (by 2020)".[10] The creation of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion as one of the seven flagship initiatives which were established as core elements of the *Europe 2020* strategy also provides an important context for work on social inclusion issues and the involvement of stakeholders.[11]

As well as putting social inclusion at the heart of EU policy making the *Europe 2020 Strategy* also emphasises consultation and involvement of stakeholders in the

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[9] The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has elaborated on the potential of Article 9 for mainstreaming social inclusion in EU and national policy making. (See EESC 2011).

[10] Two of the other Europe 2020 targets (raising the employment rate for women and men and reducing school drop outs) are also very significant from a social policy.

[11] For a thorough discussion of some of the major social inclusion challenges and governance issues linked to Europe 2020, see the various contributions included in Marlier, Natali and Van Dam (2010).

implementation of the Strategy. The Commission Communication which underpins the Strategy emphasises a partnership approach which "should extend to EU committees, to national parliaments and national, local and regional authorities, to social partners and to stakeholders and civil society so that everyone is involved in delivering on the vision." (European Commission 2010) It stresses that at national level "Member States will need to promote shared collective and individual responsibility in combating poverty and social exclusion".

The European semester for strengthened coordination of economic, structural and budgetary policies is the key delivery tool for the Europe 2020 Strategy. The submission and assessment of the **National Reform Programmes** (NRPs) prepared by Member States forms an integral part of the European semester. The NRPs are intended to set out and report on how Member States are implementing the objectives and targets, including the social inclusion target, of *Europe 2020.* They are prepared in line with the Integrated Guidelines[12] and with the general guidance to Member States issued by the Commission (in the Annual Growth Survey) and the European Council at the beginning of the annual cycle of surveillance. Guideline 10 is on promoting social inclusion and combating poverty.

The preparation and monitoring of the National Reform Programmes provides a key opportunity for Member States to involve a broad range of stakeholders in the development of policies which impact on poverty and social exclusion. The importance of doing this is stressed by the European Commission when giving guidance to Member States. For instance, the guidance note for the 2012 NRPs, under the heading "involvement of concerned parties" suggested that "In line with the Europe 2020 Integrated Guidelines and the conclusions of the European Council of 24-25 March 2011[13], the Europe 2020 strategy should be developed in close partnership with all national, regional and local authorities, closely associating parliaments. Depending on the division of competencies in individual Member States, regional and local authorities also play an important role in implementing the strategy. When reporting on implementation of the NRPs, Member States are invited to refer to any good practice at regional or local level. Social partners and representatives of civil society shall also be consulted in the preparation of the NRPs and involved in the follow-up, as relevant and in line with national practices. All NRPs should continue reporting on how concerned parties are involved in the process."[14]

Most recently the Commission's 2014 Annual Growth Survey stresses that in terms of deepening the European Semester as a process, there are a number of areas where further improvements are needed if the EU's new economic governance is to deliver its full potential. Of particular relevance in the context of this paper is the comment that "In many Member States, there is a need for greater involvement of national parliaments, social partners and civil society in the process in order to secure public understanding and acceptance of the necessary reforms. The Commission continues to recommend that the National Reform Programmes (NRP) and Stability or Convergence Programmes (SCP) be discussed with national parliaments and all relevant parties, notably social partners and sub-national actors." (European Commission 2013d) Of course the emphasis here is especially on economic governance but, in the context of Europe 2020, and its integrated objectives this should apply just as much to social inclusion governance.

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[12] Europe 2020: Integrated Guidelines for the economic and employment policies of the Member States, available at http://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/Brochure%20Integrated%20Guidelines.pdf

[13] Conclusions of the European Council, 24-25 March 2011.

[14] European Commission (2012), *Guidance for the National Reform Programmes – 2012 update.*

EU Social Objectives and the Social OMC

Since 2000, the EU and the European Commission have been actively cooperating in the field of social policy on the basis of the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (Social OMC). From 2001 the Social OMC provides the framework within which efforts to promote social protection and social inclusion and to fight poverty and social exclusion in the EU were implemented.[15] The June 2011 EPSCO Council, on the recommendation of the SPC, concluded that the social dimension of Europe 2020 would benefit from being underpinned by continuing and "reinvigorating" the Social OMC. They thus re-affirmed the EU Common Objectives for Social Protection and Social Inclusion and committed to annual reporting on social protection and social inclusion. Thus, the social dimension of the NRPs are now complemented by National Social Reports (NSRs) covering the three strands of the EU cooperation in the social field (social inclusion, pensions as well as healthcare and long-term care). These are currently submitted bi-annually with an update (Strategic Social Reporting) in intervening years.

A key feature of the EU's social objectives is the emphasis that they put on the involvement of stakeholders. For instance, one of the three overarching common objectives which the March 2006 European Council adopted is "to promote good governance, transparency and the involvement of stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring of policy." Specifically in relation to social inclusion there is an objective emphasising that, in order to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion, it is necessary to ensure "that social inclusion policies are well-coordinated and involve all levels of government and relevant actors, including people experiencing poverty, that they are efficient and effective and mainstreamed into all relevant public policies, including economic, budgetary, education and training policies and structural fund (notably ESF) programmes." The same objectives are now pursued by the reinvigorated Social OMC.

In its 2008 Communication on reinvigorating the Social OMC the Commission gave particular emphasis to improving the involvement of all relevant actors: "Regional and local authorities should be better involved in the EU process for social protection and social inclusion. At present their involvement remains limited in most Member States. Several countries have made considerable progress in involving civil society and other relevant stakeholders in the policy planning phase, but this is rarely continued into the implementation phase. Experience shows that coordination and participation of relevant actors throughout the full policy cycle are essential for effective implementation. The Commission proposes to make these governance aspects increasingly the subject of mutual learning efforts within the Social OMC. On this basis the Commission will develop voluntary guidelines for Member States." (European Commission 2008, p.9)

Similarly the Social Protection Committee (SPC) has also stressed the importance of stakeholder involvement. In its 2011 opinion on reinvigorating the Social OMC the SPC commented that "Whilst the Social OMC is primarily an inter-governmental process supported by the Commission, it has proved a useful mechanism to involve other stakeholders in policy making and this should be built on. It is important to improve the involvement of social partners, NGOs, regional and local authorities with a view to increase the ownership and effectiveness of the policies developed in

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[15] In 2006, the originally three separate OMCs covering social inclusion, pensions, and healthcare and long-term care were streamlined into one integrated "Social OMC" with three commonly agreed EU objectives for each strand as well as three overarching objectives addressing cross-cutting horizontal issues. The Social OMC is coordinated jointly by the SPC and the Commission.

the context of the Social OMC and to enhance mutual learning." (Social Protection Committee 2011, para. 15).

This emphasis on stakeholder involvement was reflected in the Commission's guidance note for the preparation of the 2012 NSRs. This stated that "In line with the Europe 2020 Integrated Guidelines, the conclusions of the European Council of 24-25 March 2011, Europe 2020 should be developed in close partnership with all national, regional, local authorities as they play a key-role in implementing the strategy. In accordance with the SPC opinion (§ 15) and the OMC overarching objectives, it is also important to improve the involvement of social partners and NGOs with a view to increasing the ownership and effectiveness of the policies in the context of the Social OMC. The NSRs should report on how the stakeholders are involved in the process of policy design, implementation and monitoring. Member States are also invited to consult with the relevant stakeholders as part of the preparation of the NSR." Again in 2013 the guidance note to Member States on Strategic Social Reporting stressed that "Member States are invited to consult the national stakeholders according to their national practice before submitting their Strategic Social Reporting by 30 April 2013." It is likely that the guidance note for the 2014 NSRs will contain similar encouragement.

Social Investment Package

The emphasis on involvement of all relevant stakeholders which is evident in the *Europe 2020* Strategy and the Social OMC was reinforced in February 2013 with the Commission's launch of the Social Investment Package (SIP) (i.e. the Commission Communication on Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion, the accompanying Recommendation on investing in children and the various staff working papers). This is an important initiative to reinforce and underpin the social dimension of Europe 2020. It provides a framework which brings together initiatives in a range of key social protection and social inclusion issues and sets a clear agenda going forward. In doing so the SIP stresses the need to strengthen social investment as part of the European Semester and "Member States are urged to strengthen the involvement of relevant stakeholders at all levels, most notably social partners and civil society organisations, in the modernisation of social policy as part of the Europe 2020 Strategy." (European Commission 2013, p.22) Also, when emphasising the key role that can be played by EU Funds, the SIP stresses the importance of involving stakeholders: "Involve stakeholders, particularly civil society organisations close to the target groups for social interventions, in programming and implementation and facilitate their access to funds." (re EU Funds, p.18)

More specifically the 2013 Commission Recommendation on investing in children emphasises the need to "Promote close cooperation and regular dialogue between public authorities at all levels, social partners, local communities and civil society organisations" and to "Support and further develop the involvement of children, including in the implementation of the present Recommendation." (European Commission, 2013b) Also, for the 2014-2020 Structural Funds it stresses the need to "Promote partnership in the programming of and access to Structural Funds by involving relevant stakeholders at national, regional and local levels, in particular the relevant public authorities, social partners and non-governmental organisations, in order to mobilise action to combat child poverty." (p.23)

Promoting an **active inclusion** approach is at the heart of the SIP and the staff working paper on active inclusion which accompanies the SIP is very critical of the limited involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of active inclusion policies to date. It recommends that Member States "Engage relevant actors more vigorously in the development, implementation, and assessment of policies. Active

inclusion is a joint responsibility in European societies. Efforts to engage the relevant actors need a boost. The actors include those affected by poverty and social exclusion, civil society organisations, nongovernmental organisations, local administrations and the private sector. They should get involved in designing strategies that help those furthest from the labour market to get jobs, thus bringing valuable human capital to national economies." (European Commission 2013c, p.56)

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