

Peer Review The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 (Belgium, 2014)

The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020¹

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1. Historical and institutional context and evolution

From the Actions Working Group to the Belgian Platform against poverty and social exclusion EU2020

The complexity of the Belgian institutional context², together with the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, generated the need to develop national strategies and instruments for the advancement of coordination and cooperation in the area of poverty reduction. The General Report on Poverty (1994) was the result of a dialogue between people living in poverty, their associations, people who are professionally involved with poverty and social exclusion (for example social workers) and academic research institutions. This was one of the first times that the dialogue method in the field of poverty reduction was used in Europe! The report indicates various problems in the area of poverty reduction and became a guideline for several policy initiatives. It ensured the structural embedding of consultation and dialogue between people living in poverty, their associations and those responsible for policy.

In the General Report on Poverty, it was asked that a structural tool be developed for continuing the dialogue in order to fight poverty on a evidence based policy. In 1998, a "Cooperation Agreement between the Federal State, the Communities, and the Regions concerning the continuation of the Poverty Reduction Policy" was signed by the Federal Government and the regional and community governments and approved by its parliaments. This agreement provided for, among other things, the formation of the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service. This Service was established in July 1999. The Cooperation Agreement assigns the Service the task of organising the structural dialogue with the several stakeholders in the fight against poverty. To do this, it uses the dialogue method, which was used in preparing the General Report on Poverty. In this participation method, the object is to intersect the experiential knowledge of people who have themselves lived in poverty with the action knowledge of the social assistance groups, the administrations, civil society, politics etc. and with the academic knowledge of scientists. Every two years, the Service prepares a report on insecurity, poverty, and social exclusion and unequal access to rights. With the application of the dialogue method, this Report differs from many others: it evaluates the effectiveness of the fundamental rights of poor people, on basis of their own experience (for example, the Report 2012-2013 is focused on the right on social

¹ Prepared for the Peer Review in Social Protection and Social Inclusion programme coordinated by ÖSB Consulting, the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and Applica, and funded by the European Commission.
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² For more information on the federal structure of Belgium, see: http://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government/federale_staaf/



protection). The biennial reports are intended to be an aid in political decision-making. The Cooperation Agreement provides the necessary follow-up procedure for this: The Interministerial Conference "Integration in Society", formed as an instrument to achieve more coherence in the policy regarding poverty and social exclusion, must transmit this report to the various political and socio-economic authorities.³

When the Belgian Government, in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy, became fully engaged in the Open Method of Coordination in the European Union (OMC) concerning social exclusion, it was thus able to rely on years of experience with stakeholder participation. These years of experience were converted into an innovative process in which all stakeholders were involved in the formation (specifying priorities and targets), monitoring and evaluation of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (NAP Incl.). Specifically, the Actions Working Group and the Indicators Working group were established for this purpose by mandate of the Interministerial Conference 'Integration in Society' whose members are the ministers in charge of the coordination of poverty policies at different governmental levels.

The Actions Working Group had an open structure and attributed a key role to stakeholder dialogue concerning policy measures whereas the Indicators Working Group concerned itself with statistical indicators. The Actions Working Group gathered all the stakeholders around the table: the federated entities, social partners, people living in poverty and their associations, local administrations, private and public actors, social workers, research institutions... The working group reported to the Interministerial Conference and came together 3 to 4 times per year. A technical committee, in which liaison officers and those responsible for policy from the federated entities take part, dealt with all the technical aspects of the Actions Working Group and prepared its programme. The Actions Working Group created a link with an Indicators Working Group by mutual participating in the meetings. A biennial colloquium evaluated the NAP Incl.

Monitoring the Lisbon Strategy in the Europe 2020 Strategy and reinforcing the OMC in this context required a review of the Belgian procedures and working methods. The opinion of the Social Protection Committee concerning the OMC clearly called for further stakeholder participation in order to achieve increased ownership of the Social OMC. Belgium wished to make full use of its experience in this area and, for this purpose, transformed the Actions Working Group into the Belgian Platform against poverty and social exclusion EU2020. The transformation occurred by analogy to the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion. The task of this Belgian Anti-Poverty Platform was to monitor the current European situation in the area of poverty and social exclusion (NHP with poverty target, Europe 2020 Strategy, OMC, ...) and to gather all stakeholders similarly to what took place in the Actions Working Group. The concrete tasks were: preparing policy proposals, content and information exchange, formulating suggestions, exploring themes, proposing actions and priorities,... As with the Actions Working Group, participation and an open structure were the key concepts that underpinned the functioning of the Belgian Platform against poverty and social exclusion EU2020. It also reports to the Interministerial Conference on Social Integration, in which all competent ministers for poverty reduction take part.

³ For more information about the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service see: www.combatpoverty.be. The full text of the biennial reports is available in French and in Dutch, summaries in English and in German.



2. Activities of the Belgian Platform against poverty and social exclusion EU2020

Since it formally started in 2011, there were eight regular meetings of the Belgian Platform against poverty and social exclusion EU2020 and one open Platform Day.

Regular meetings of Belgian Platform against poverty and social exclusion

The regular meetings of the Belgian Platform against poverty and social exclusion EU 2020 were always attended by around 40 people. There was always a mix of participants from all bodies identified by the Interministerial Conference:

- Federated entities;
- The Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service;
- Private actors such as social services and organisations focused on combating poverty;
- Local authorities by means of their respective umbrella bodies;
- Social partners, research institutions, organisations focused on combating poverty;
- The Central Economic Council;
- People living in poverty and their organisations;
- Working Group on Social Indicators Europe 2020/OMC.

Different themes and points were discussed during the meetings:

- The preparation of the Annual Convention of the Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion;
- The strategic framework and priorities for the contribution on poverty and social exclusion in the National Reform Programme and National Social Report;
- The federal governmental declaration;
- The different regional plans for the fight against poverty;
- Proposals for the federal Plan for the fight against poverty and social exclusion and its follow-up;
- Evaluation of the European semester and the country specific recommendations for Belgium.

The Open Platform Day

It was decided that every two years an Open Platform Day was to be organised to give all stakeholders the possibility to participate in the policy making processes. The first Open Platform Day took place on the 28th of March 2013.

In total, there were approximately 150 attendees, who made up a broad sample of stakeholders: federal, regional and local authorities, administrations, bodies and advisory boards, aid organisations, social partners, civil society organisations, research institutions and universities and people who are living in poverty, represented by their associations in which the poor are given a voice, but also as private individuals. This wide variety, in which all policy levels are involved, guarantees an approach of the complex phenomenon of poverty and social exclusion from different perspectives and positions.

The central theme of the Open Platform Day was progress since the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2010) in social priority areas such as the fight against child poverty, homelessness, active inclusion and a minimum income. These themes were dealt with in separate working groups, complemented with a working group on the use of indicators and working with sub-targets.



As these priorities were in line with the priorities identified by the Belgian National Reform Programme, the conclusions of the working groups were considered to be those of the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 on the 2013 National Reform Programme and strategic social reporting in the framework of the Open Method of Coordination. The opinion was provided to the Belgian State Secretary for Social Integration and, via the State Secretary, to the Prime Minister. It was also published on the website of the PPS Social Integration.

3. Pre-conditions for the effective and efficient functioning of the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020

As illustrated by the description above, the functioning of the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 is firmly embedded in European policy processes aimed at the fight against poverty, such as the EU2020 strategy and the OMC, and tries to link these to the federal and regional policy processes.

Past experience, as for example the Peer Review in 2007 on the Irish NAP Inclusion Social Inclusion Forum, has taught us that a number of pre-conditions must be met in order to guarantee the efficient and effective functioning of such a participation structure. These can be described as follows

- Grounding in an European framework;
- Guaranteeing continuity and long term processes;
- Investing in capacity building;
- Empowering joint ownership;
- Providing feedback;
- Stimulating representativeness and covering the whole spectrum of social actors;
- Public debate and open dialogue are crucial;
- Offering strong and high-level political commitment.

Grounding in an European framework

In its name and by its actions the Belgian Platform is clearly grounded in the European framework of the EU2020-strategy and the Open Method of coordination. This is symbolically reflected in the name of the Platform but it also goes further than this. The European framework gives a legitimate base to interact with other actors who are also involved in these policy processes. For example the recommendation of the Belgian Platform to concentrate on three key challenges (active inclusion, fight against child poverty and homelessness) in the fight against poverty is clearly reflected in the National Reform Programme.

Guaranteeing continuity and long term processes

The Belgian Platform was set up in 2011 but participation of stakeholders is an older practice in Belgium, as set out in the introduction. The Belgian Platform integrated the existing practices in a structure adapted to the recent changes in the European and Belgian context.

The European framework and policy processes are not easily accessible topics. Every meeting of the Belgian Platform starts with an introduction that repeats the framework of the European semester and the Open Method of Coordination. This repetition enhances the knowledge of the framework.

Investing in capacity building

The quality of participation is equally important. This goes along with guaranteeing continuity. Having four meetings a year, requires good preparation from everybody



so that the dialogue and discussions lead to a maximum of supported conclusions and recommendations. Capacity building is here a key issue – for people experiencing poverty, and their representatives, but also for government officials, social workers and other participants.

The organisations that federate people experiencing poverty are here the privileged partners. The Belgian Anti-Poverty Network, that unites the regional networks, has set up a working group called “BAPN Europe 2020” that systematically prepares the meetings of the Belgian Platform. The administration of the PPS Social Integration - that organises the meetings of the Belgian Platform - cooperates closely with this working group and participates regularly in the preparations. To facilitate the contributions of people experiencing poverty, the agenda of the meeting foresees time for them to speak, based on their preparation.

We have found that the people within the working group who have experienced poverty are gaining more self-confidence. In addition to their experience, these people are developing a deeper knowledge of the federal and European policy and the various challenges.

BAPN receives a financial grant from the federal government to organise these preparations.

Empowering joint ownership

The Belgian Platform is organised by the federal administration of the Public Planning Service (PPS) for Social Integration. Every meeting of the Belgian Platform is prepared in a Technical Committee that unites the administrations of the regional governments and the representatives of the Belgian SPC members and the Working Group on Social Indicators Europe. Together they fix the agenda and the follow up of it.

The joint preparations of the meetings with the BAPN Europe 2020 group also stimulates joint ownership. During the meetings there is always time for their contribution.

Providing feedback

There is a need for feedback on the results of people's participation and on what has been achieved since the previous Platform. At each Platform, there is time allocated for reporting back on the progress achieved on a number of key points since the previous meeting and discussion on what happened with the recommendations.

Stimulating representativeness and covering the whole spectrum of social actors

The Belgian Platform works deliberately with an open structure. Everybody who wants to participate is welcome. The reasoning behind this principle is that everybody who wants to be involved in the European and Belgian policy processes is a stakeholder. The invitations are sent to a distribution list of about 150 people and organisations. The meetings are attended by an average of 40 people. One of the indicators used in the Balanced Scoreboard of the PPS Social Integration is an equilibrium in the participants for the four major categories: federal, regional and local governments and administrations, social partners, research and academic institutes and social organisations with among them organisations that federate people experiencing poverty. Efforts are made to reach this balance. For example, to attain an increased participation of the social partners a structural relationship has been developed with the Central Economic Council. Their staff members participate actively in the Belgian Platform.



Public debate and open dialogue are crucial

Open dialogue is a necessary condition to have active stakeholder involvement. During the meetings of the Platform there is always time provided for discussion and open dialogue. We see a growing confidence and trust among the participants to take the floor and speak out about their concerns and point of views.

Offering Strong and high-level political commitment

The meetings of the Belgian Platform are chaired by the president of the PPS Social Integration. This high level senior official guarantees an active involvement of the federal administrations. High level officials of the regional governments take part in the preparatory Technical Committee and are among the regular participants. Some meetings, depending on the agenda, are attended by the federal Secretary of State who is responsible for the coordination of the fight against poverty. Opinions and recommendations of the Belgian Platform are communicated to the Interministeriel Conference Integration in the Society.

4. Evaluation of the Belgian Platform for the fight against poverty and social exclusion EU2020

Informal joint evaluation with the Belgian Anti-Poverty Network

As a follow up of the Open Platform Day, the evaluation of the Belgian Platform was a topic in a meeting of the BAPN Europe 2020 working group. The PPS Social Integration, as secretariat for the Belgian Platform was present at this meeting.

The main conclusions of this evaluation were:

- The Belgian Platform offers structured dialogue with different stakeholders with a wide-ranging expertise. This is extremely valuable and can be translated as an effective structure to fight poverty;
- But, the participation of people experiencing poverty demands time for preparation. The agenda sometimes arrives at the last minute;
- The language used at the meetings is sometimes too technical and too complicated;
- There is a lack of visible and tangible impacts on policies. The results can be described as "soft": capacity building, credibility of the BAPN, networking. There is the risk of becoming a powerless talking shop that serves as excuse for window-dressing.

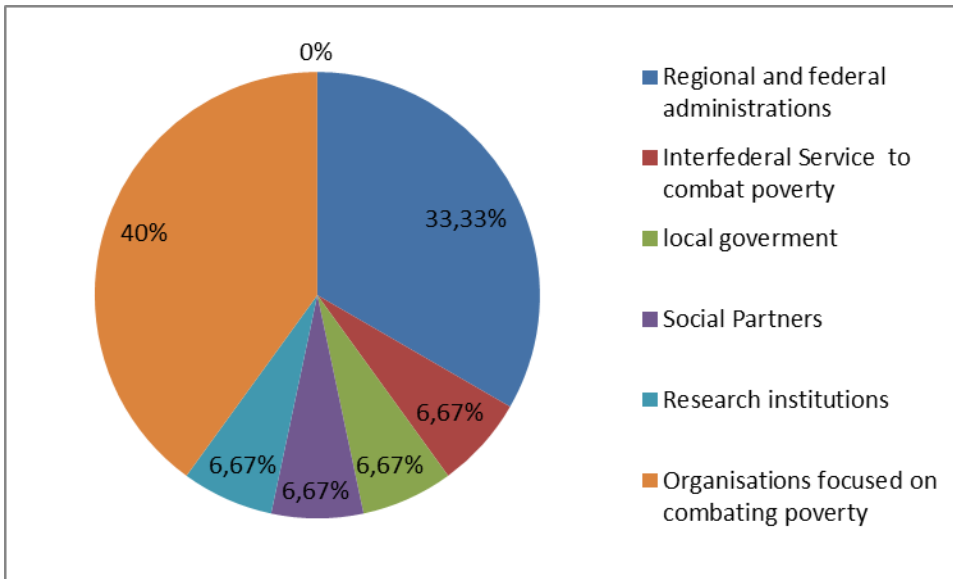
As a result of this evaluation the BAPN decided to continue to participate actively in the meetings. But it demands also more political weight and impact, through the official recognition as consultative body and the broader attendance of decision makers.

Formal evaluation by an online survey

In November 2013 the PPS Social Integration organised a formal evaluation by an online survey. 16 persons took part in it and answered the 8 questions. 16 responses doesn't sound much, but when we see that the Belgium Platform has an invitation list of about 150 persons this means a participation of 10%. A regular meeting of the Belgium Platform has an average of 40 participants, so the 16 answers is a response rate of 40%.

One third of the answers came from the regional and federal administrations and 40% came from organisations focused on combating poverty.

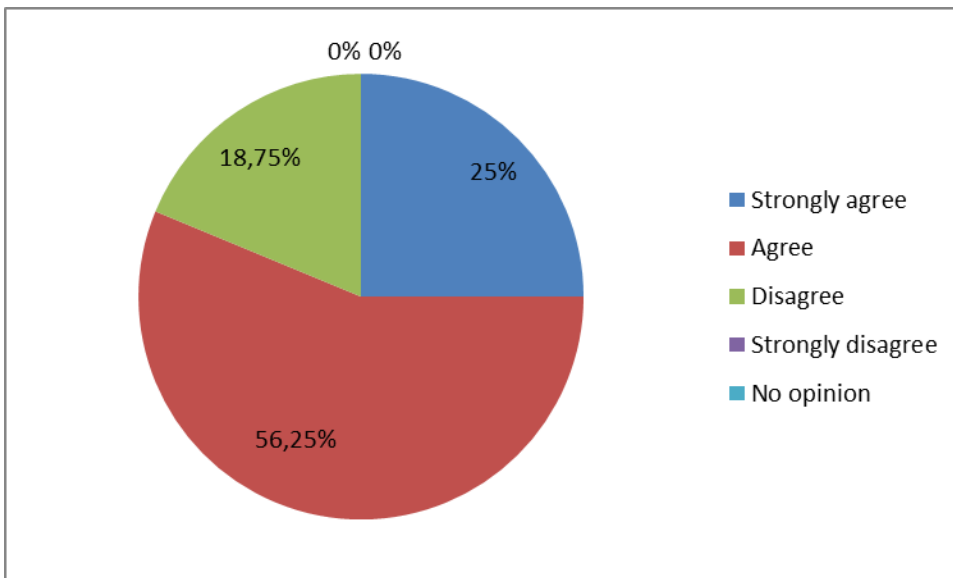




16 answers is not a representative number, but the results give some indication on the evaluation of the Belgian Platform by its participants.

Question 1

The Belgian Platform offers me the possibility to stay informed about the European policy processes and measures in the fight against poverty.

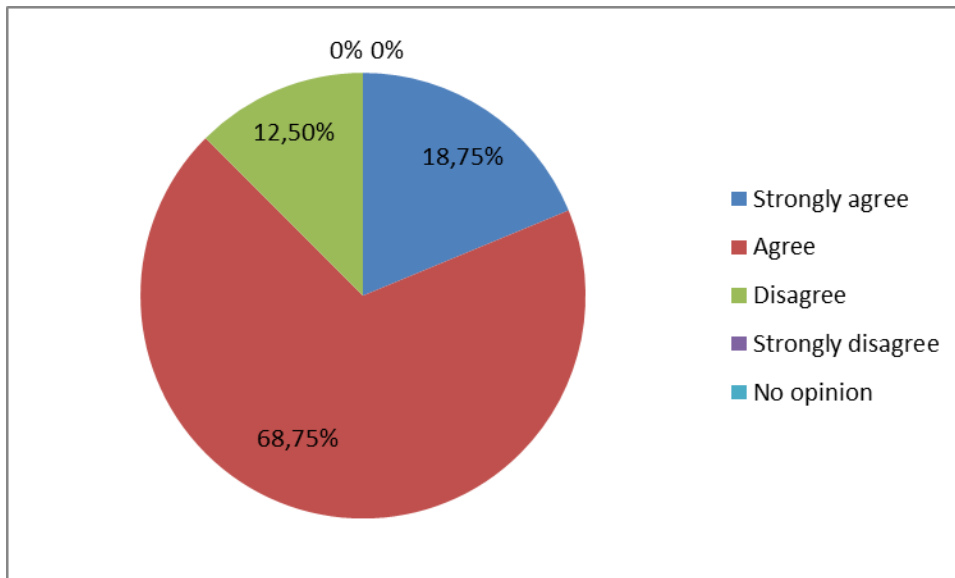


For 13 out of 16 participants (80%) the Belgian Platforms offers the possibility to stay informed about the European policy processes and measures in the fight against poverty. Some participants indicated that they had other sources to stay informed about European policy in the fight against poverty. Other participants asked that the information of the Belgian Platform would be permanent accessible on the internet.



Question 2

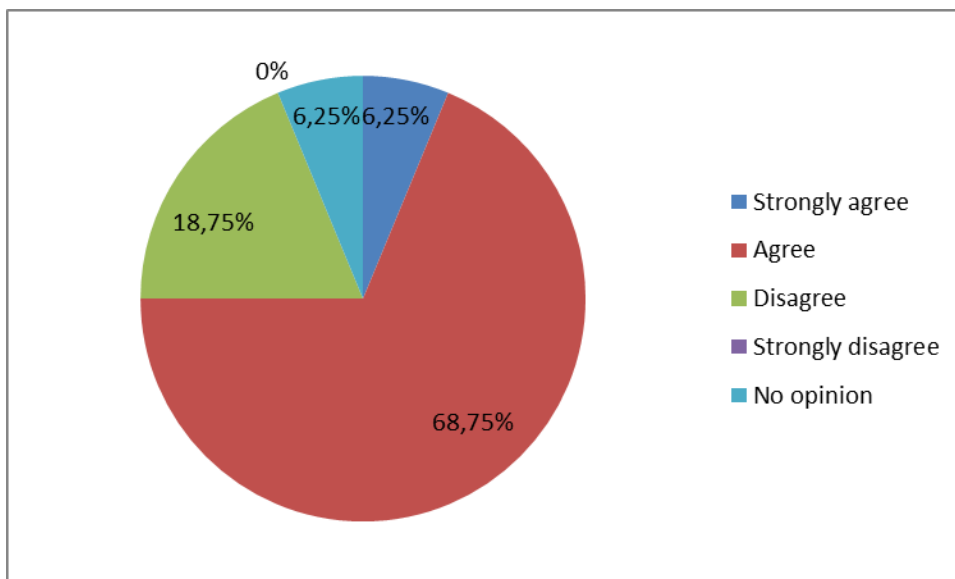
The Belgian Platform covers topics that are important in the fight against poverty at the European level.



14 out of the 16 participants agreed that the Belgian Platform covers topics that are important in the fight against poverty at the European level. There were still some remarks: the need for a more integrated approach in the fight against poverty, more attention for other important topics as gender, prevention, migration, long term policy and the perception about poverty and a focus on the social impact of economic policy.

Question 3

The Belgian Platform covers topics in alignment of my areas of interest in the fight against poverty.

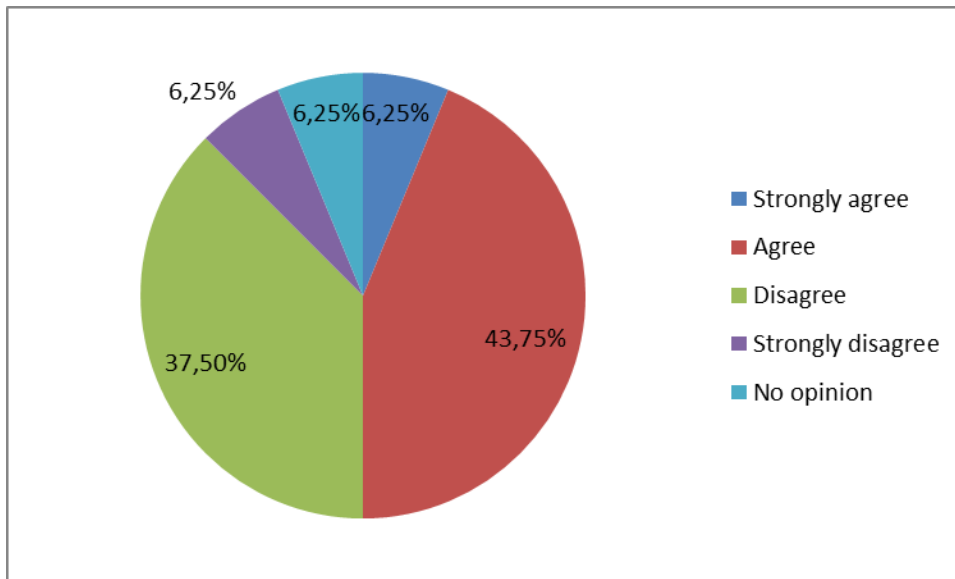


The topics covered on the Belgian Platform are in alignment of the areas of interest of three out of four participants. But nearly one participant out of four disagrees with this.



Question 4

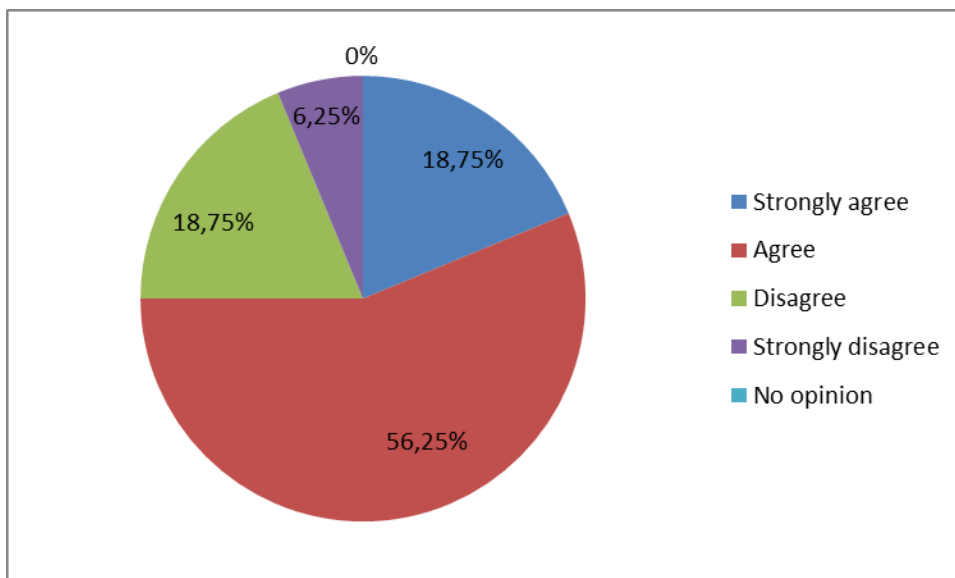
The activities and recommendations of the Belgian Platform have an impact on the Belgian policy in the fight against poverty



Only half of the participants think that the Belgian Platform has an impact on the Belgian policy in the fight against poverty. The recommendations of the Belgian Platform are non-committal. Some participants suggest that the Belgian Platforms have to be involved in the ex-ante evaluation of social policy.

Question 5

The Belgian Platform unites and mobilises the different stakeholders in the fight against poverty.

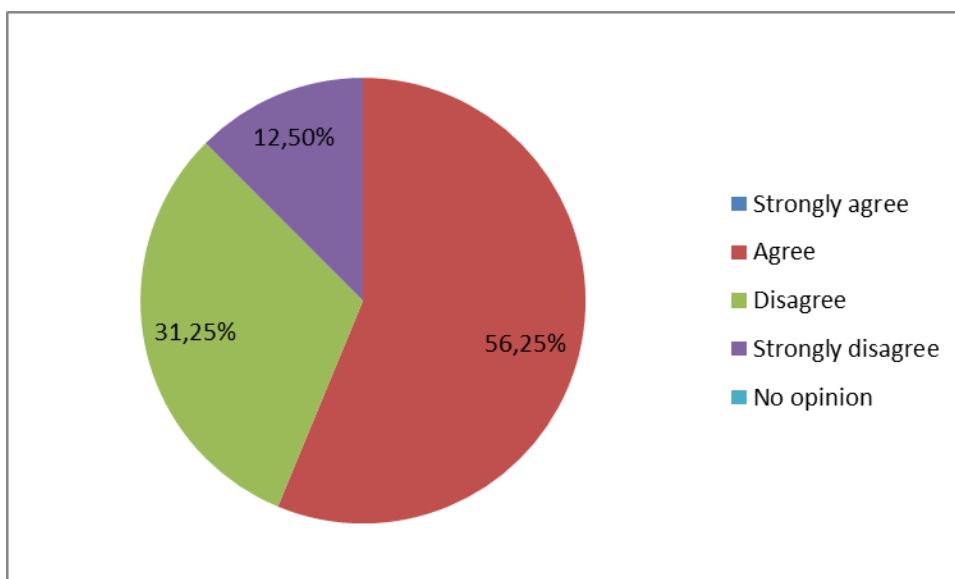


Nearly three out of four participants agree that the Belgian Platform unites and mobilises the different stakeholders. Participants agree that the open structure encourages a broad participation. But some reactions mention that there are also a lot of social organisations missing. There is a disequilibrium between the representatives of the different governmental levels and the grass root organisations.



Question 6

The documents and information that I receive from the Belgian Platform supports me in my professional life.



Participants largely agree that the documents and information that they receive from the Belgium platform supports them in their profession life, but not explicitly. Reactions mention that the information is complementary to the information received by other channels.

Question 7

Do you have any suggestion to improve the functioning of the Belgian Platform.

On this open question we received different suggestions:

- More communication about the Platform and its activities but in a more shorter and powerful way;
- Organising meetings on regional level;
- Formulate more clear objectives and a long term vision;
- Formulate concrete measures and recommendation for the government;
- Organising of ex ante evaluation of policy changes;
- More interactive way of working;
- Inviting of external experts on the topics;
- Strengthening of the relations with the social partners.

Question 8

Which topics would you like to see covered in the Belgian Platform?

Different suggestions were made:

- Homelessness;
- Indicators on poverty in Belgium in an European comparison;
- Immigration;
- Accessibility and maintaining of housing;
- Intergenerational transmission of poverty;
- Best practices in social innovation;



- Gender and poverty;
- Prevention of poverty;
- Perception of poverty;
- Social impact assessment, ex ante evaluation;
- Active inclusion;
- Social investment;
- Effectiveness and efficiency of the social protection.

As a general conclusion of this formal evaluation we can state that the Belgian Platform is largely perceived as an important tool to share information on the European and Belgium policy against poverty. It provides valuable information and exchange opportunities. The impact of the activities of the Platform on this policy is less well perceived.

Questions for the discussion

1. The Belgium Platform organises participation and dynamism on the European and Belgian policy on fighting poverty and social inclusion in general, the EU2020 strategy and the Open Method of Coordination in particular. The impact of its activities is difficult to measure and to make tangible for the participants. How can this be improved?
2. The Belgian Platform deliberately chose an open structure. At the same time, there remains the question of being representative. How can a balance be found herein?
3. Participants in the survey indicate that they see little connection between the European policy processes and their daily activities in the fight against poverty. How can this be improved?
4. The Annual Convention of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion is one of the Flagship initiatives of the Europe 2020 strategy. The preparation of this Annual Convention is one of the tasks of Belgium Platform. Working in partnership with civil society and the participation of people experiencing poverty is one of the five areas for action of the European Platform. The actual format of the Annual Convention with hardly any time for a good preparation, debate and a genuine feedback of the discussions and conclusions weakens the role of the European Platform and the ownership by the civil society. How can this trend be reversed?

