

The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 (Belgium, 2014)¹

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1. Introduction

Effectively addressing the complexity and multi-dimensional aspects of poverty and social exclusion demands a multi-pronged strategy that cuts across different policy areas. This entails mainstreaming the fight against poverty and social exclusion across different policy domains, including areas which fall outside the traditional remit of social inclusion and social protection policies. Given such a multi-dimensional policy issue, the effective development, delivery and evaluation of policies for combating poverty and social exclusion inevitably needs to involve a wide range of stakeholders, including regional and local government, private partners as well as voluntary organisations and people experiencing poverty and exclusion.

The following discussion presents an overview of the coordination of poverty and social inclusion policies and measures within the Maltese context, followed by a brief outline of the nature and extent of stakeholder involvement in the social field. It also presents an assessment of the peer reviewed 'Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion', and its possible transferability for the Maltese context.

2. The Institutional coordination of Poverty and Social Inclusion Issues in Malta

The Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity incorporates the main public service entities responsible for developing and implementing policy, as well as delivering services in the area of social welfare. It is, therefore, the main administrative structure which provides for social protection and social inclusion issues in Malta. The policy areas falling within the portfolio of the Ministry includes social policy, family policy, child policy, social housing, social security, pensions, solidarity services, disability issues and the elderly and community care. Apart from the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, other main strands relating to social inclusion and protection, such as education, childcare and health services, are covered by the Ministry for Education and Employment and the Ministry for Health respectively.

Government's social welfare services are mainly delivered through the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS), which incorporates within it a number of service provision structures: the 'Sedqa', 'APPOĠĠ', and 'Sapport' agencies. These three main agencies offer a comprehensive package of prevention, support and treatment services, both on a community and residential setting within the fields of

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substance abuse; children, families and adults in need; and disability. The Housing Authority is the main governmental body responsible for the provision of services to the homeless and the main policy maker on social housing, including housing exclusion and the prevention of homelessness. Social welfare services in Malta are also provided through a number of community-based initiatives. The 'ACCESS' model of a multi-service community centre, provides a one-stop shop for the provision of information, professional advice and support on a number of areas, including pensions and social security, employment and access to training, housing, child day care, disability day care and social work services with an outreach component for a holistic response to the needs of surrounding communities. The Ministry also manages a number of day care centres and residential facilities for elderly people.

The 'ACCESS' Centres are now going to be developed into social development centres that shall include Family Resource Centres (FRCs) at local and regional level with the aim of providing a point of reference to all families within the community through the provision of various forms of support: professional information, advice, assistance, education, and holistic care. These Centres would also provide a range of activities to enhance the family life and abilities of parents, children and other individuals within the community, especially those coming from disadvantaged groups in society.

In addition, Government's recently launched LEAP project contributes further towards the reduction of poverty in families and individuals from disadvantaged groups, through processes of re-learning the social competences necessary to be able to adapt to life in society. This project will also help to put in place local based mechanisms that stimulate the wide participation of local stakeholders and offer social mentoring to ensure that individuals receive the necessary support and guidance to enhance their success prospects.

Apart from these Departments, Agencies and Authorities, the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity is responsible for a number of Agencies, Boards and Commissions which promote the well-being of vulnerable groups. These include the Children and Young Person's Advisory Board responsible for care orders of minors, the Adoptions and Fostering Boards, the Commission for Domestic Violence, the National Commission for Persons with a Disability, the National Forum on the Family and its related National Family Commission, the National Commission for Children's Strategy and Policy, and the Office of the Commissioner for Children . The Ministry additionally endorses structures relating to the professionalisation of workers engaged in the social welfare sector, such as social workers and psychologists. The Department for Social Welfare Standards also acts as regulator of social welfare services related to residential care and child daycare.

The Office for Social Inclusion within the EU Affairs Directorate is a key component of social policy development and upholds the overall responsibility of promoting social cohesion by reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion across all sectors of society, whilst mainstreaming poverty issues across other national policies.

Apart from government agencies, social welfare provision in Malta is also delivered by a vast range of voluntary organisations engaged in the social and humanitarian field as well as philanthropic religious organisations. Voluntary organisations constitute a robust vehicle for the provision of support services for vulnerable groups, such as children and young persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion, the elderly, persons suffering from a disability, mental health, asylum seekers, and victims of domestic violence and addictive behaviour. The role of voluntary



organisations in the area of social protection and the promotion of social inclusion is crucial given the vital role they play in reaching out at a grassroots level to the more vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society. The wide spectrum of voluntary organisations includes well established NGOs and small self-help groups and support groups set up and managed by service users themselves.

Thus, in the provision of social welfare services, the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity networks and collaborates with a wide range of stakeholders, including other government entities, voluntary and philanthropic organisations and private partners.

3. The organisation and evolution of Stakeholder Involvement in Malta

The Ministry for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties (MSDC) is the main entity responsible for the regulation of voluntary organisations as well as the coordination of consultation practices and dialogue with civil society and social partners. Apart from the provision of information and funding support on EU policies, legislation and programmes, the Malta-EU Steering and Action Committee (MEUSAC), which falls under the remit of this Ministry, is responsible for the coordination of consultative sessions with civil society on EU policies and other decision-making processes with the aim of engaging stakeholders and fuelling national debate on European ideals, values, objectives and long term strategies². These tasks are accomplished through the structures of a Core Group³ which deals with generic issues of national concern, and nine sectoral committees dealing with a number of specific policy areas, including one focussing on Employment, Social Policy and Health⁴.

Through such fora which offer a permanent and regular process of stakeholder dialogue and involvement, social partners have increasingly become essential actors in the development and evaluation of policies developed at the EU level. The MEUSAC Employment, Social Policy and Health sectoral committee offers a multi-stakeholder representative structure to engage with different categories of stakeholders engaged in the social field and has been successfully utilised as a platform for consulting with stakeholders on main social inclusion policy documents, such as the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) and National Social Reports (NSRs). Despite its effectiveness and wide representation, this fora is largely limited to the EU dimension and apart from being reserved to organised social partners, tends to be relatively technical, which factors may hinder the participation of the general public, particularly people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

The participation of people experiencing poverty is increasingly being acknowledged as a paramount objective in the development of social inclusion and social protection policies, both as a tool for individual empowerment and as a governance mechanism. In this regard, Malta holds a relatively good experience of successful and meaningful engagement with service users and people experiencing poverty and exclusion. Some interesting examples include the consultation processes endorsed in the drafting of the NSRs for the 2006-2008 and 2008-2010 OMC cycles, as well as the upcoming National Poverty Strategy.

² Prior to 2004, MEUSAC's main task was to manage the EU accession process.

³ The Core Group brings together Government representatives, political parties, constituted bodies, civil society representatives and Government appointees.

⁴ The other sectoral committees deal with: Agriculture and Fisheries; Competitiveness and Consumer Affairs; Economic and Financial Affairs; Education, Youth, Culture and Sport; Environment; General Affairs; Justice and Home Affairs; Transport, Telecommunications and Energy.

For example, the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion (2006-2008) was drafted following extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. This was carried out through a national consultation seminar attended by around 200 representatives from various government departments, voluntary organisations and the general public.⁵ This national consultation seminar was followed by the collation of feedback from policy makers and service providers through a survey-based research⁶ and the collation of feedback from service users. This consultation was conducted in collaboration with the Anti-Poverty Forum (APF Malta which is a member of EAPN)⁷ and resulted in the participation of around 90 service users. Furthermore, as part of this consultative process, a seminar for service users, service providers and policy makers was organised to give service users the opportunity to engage in open dialogue with politicians and key policy makers in the area of social welfare.

Malta's National Action Plan on Social Inclusion (2008-2010) continued to consolidate the mobilisation and involvement of stakeholders in the Social OMC process by providing more space to people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, service users and service providers. To this end, the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity organised a series of focus group seminars targeting groups of people who are at increased risk of social exclusion. Service users and services providers were also consulted via separate seminars addressing issues concerning mental health, domestic violence, irregular migration, children and young persons, older people, addictive behaviour and disability. Several focus groups on these same issues were also held in Gozo⁸ to address regional specificities.

Malta's impending Anti-poverty Strategy aims to deepen current understanding of poverty and social exclusion and reflect the diversity of people's experiences through a more experiential and evidence-based approach. Prior to its publication as a Green Paper, extensive outreach-oriented consultations were carried out with a wide range of stakeholders, including national and regional government entities, the private and voluntary sectors and the general public. The process included three tiers of consultations on the goals, measures and mechanisms to combat poverty and social exclusion within the local context. Moreover, the Strategy is being issued as a Green Paper in order to further enable the general public to put forth their comments and reactions. Indeed, the Strategy is viewed as offering a public involvement continuum, from information gathering and sharing, dialogue and awareness-raising, to engagement and partnership in the decision-making process.

Consultative sessions on poverty and social inclusion issues which endorse more directly the views of service users and people experiencing poverty and social exclusion have also been held on a regular basis by the voluntary sector. The Anti-Poverty Forum (APF) Malta, comprising a network of 12 organisations, was officially launched in 2004 with the aim of furthering the EU agenda of combating poverty and social exclusion. Apart from service provision in the area of social welfare carried out by its individual entities, the Forum carries out research, disseminates information and organises conferences, seminars and focus groups to contribute to the policy making process and to give voice to the views of people experiencing

⁵ Participants were divided into 5 theme-based workshops on the 4 Nice Objectives and asked to present recommendations within the context of their particular topic.

⁶ The survey consisted of 3 main questions based on a multi-policy approach across 9 categories of groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

⁷ The adopted questionnaire was similar to the one used in the 5th European Meeting Persons Experiencing Poverty.

⁸ Malta's sister Island.



poverty and social exclusion. In 2013, APF Malta organised two conferences, focussing on poverty amongst children and elderly people with the aim of engaging stakeholders on these issues and influencing national and EU level policy and practice, including amendments to legislative provisions.

Despite the institutionalisation of stakeholder involvement during the last number of years, such that consultation is now the norm prior to the publication of national policy documents, it is observed that in line with the trend observed across other EU Member States (as also acknowledged in Frazer's discussion paper), the supercedance of the National Reform Programmes over the National Strategy Reports as a result of the Europe2020 strategy, has to some extent reduced the participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion from the consultative policy context. Moreover, despite recognition of the various positive aspects arising from the conjoined coordination of economic, environmental and social policies under the Europe2020 strategy, the sentiment prevails that social issues continue to be side-lined by the economic dimension. This underlines the need for consolidating further the relevant structures aimed at facilitating the dialogue and involvement of all stakeholders within the policy process, particularly people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

Apart from the above, Malta also has a number of consultative and advisory bodies, such as the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD) and the recently appointed National Consultative Committee for the South of Malta. The MCESD engages in social dialogue on socio-economic issues with the aim of providing opinions and recommendations to the Maltese Government. The National Consultative Committee for the South of Malta brings together experts from diverse fields, such as the environment, culture, health, industry and social development, with the aim of identifying and better understanding the problems found in the targeted areas. Such insight would in turn generate suggestions as to how these realities can be addressed. For this purpose, the Committee is currently developing a vertical and horizontal public consultation strategy.

4. Comparability and Transferability

The Belgian consultative platform provides a good practice example of an effective mechanism for engaging relevant stakeholders in the development and coordination of social policies. Through its 'Actions Working Group' and 'Indicators Working Group', the platform addresses both the policy dimension as well as the monitoring of poverty and social exclusion trends. Moreover, through its 'Open Platform Days', it also provides a good opportunity for enabling all stakeholders to participate in the policy making process, whilst enhancing the visibility of social protection policies.

As observed from the above discussion, Malta provides a somewhat similar consultative structure through MEUSAC's Employment, Social Policy and Health sectoral committee. However, as was pointed out earlier, this structure tends to be limited to issues being dealt with at the EU level and does not specifically endorse the participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, though their views are aptly addressed by the represented voluntary organisations working in the field. Despite this, as presented by the above-mentioned examples, Malta has had quite a valuable, though ad hoc experience in the involvement of stakeholders, including people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in the social inclusion policy process.

The policy framework at EU level can help to influence the nature and extent of stakeholder involvement at the national level. Increased EU focus on good governance, as well as EU level acknowledgement and support to the efforts made in the area of stakeholder involvement by Member States, should thus help to



further the nature and extent of social dialogue at the national level. Indeed, for example, the designation of European Years such as the 2010 European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, are seen as providing a good opportunity for encouraging the mobilisation of stakeholders in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. Thus, attention to the governance aspects of the Europe2020 Strategy is fundamental for sustaining and building on the developments and experiences of the framework of the Social OMC, whilst making the most of its potential. Although Member States have aptly utilised the OMC to modernise their social protection systems, it is also acknowledged that in-depth collaboration with stakeholders at all stages of the process remains a significant challenge.

The EU2020 strategy, with its focus on implementation through a commonly agreed policy agenda and with its advanced governance arrangements of partnership between Member States and EU bodies, provides a key reference for the reinforcement of stakeholder collaboration. Indeed, the European Platform against Poverty and Exclusion marked the start of a new phase in European policies for social inclusion and social cohesion. In this regard, the European Platform is observed to provide an important framework for promoting the social dimension of the European Union and for consolidating its core objectives founded on the values of respect for human dignity and solidarity in close collaboration with stakeholders.

The establishment of similarly oriented 'National Platforms against Poverty' taking due consideration of the specific realities of Member States and consonant with the subsidiarity principle, should help to continue to raise awareness and recognise the fundamental rights of people experiencing poverty and exclusion, thus contributing towards greater economic, social and territorial cohesion. Such 'Platforms against Poverty' should also help to act as a framework for co-operation and mutual learning and to foster greater collective responsibility and commitment in the fight against poverty. However, it is also recognised that the setting up of formal consultative structures within Member States is only an initial step and in itself will not be sufficient to achieve the projected goals of poverty reduction and social inclusion, unless accompanied by sincere political will and a commitment to constructively consider the suggestions raised by the relevant stakeholders.

