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Assessment of progress towards the Europe 2020 social inclusion objectives: Main findings and suggestions on the way forward

A Study of National Policies

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Assessment of progress towards the Europe 2020 social inclusion objectives: **Main findings and suggestions on the way forward**

A Study of National Policies

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SHORT REPORT

European Commission

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1. Preface

In April 2013, Member States submitted to the European Commission their third Europe 2020 National Reform Programmes (NRPs). They were also asked to submit Strategic Social Reports (SSRs) updating their 2012 National Social Reports (NSRs). The NRPs are the means whereby Member States set out their plans each year to achieve the Europe 2020 Strategy's five EU targets. The NSRs/SSRs are intended to underpin the social dimension of the Europe 2020 process by covering the fields of social inclusion, pensions, healthcare and long-term care in more depth than is possible in the NRPs.

The first 2013 reports of the European Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion assessed the main strengths and weaknesses of the 2013 NRPs and SSRs from a social inclusion perspective¹. The experts' assessments focussed in particular on the extent to which the measures outlined in the NRPs and SSRs are likely to ensure progress towards the achievement of the Europe 2020's social inclusion objectives and target. Their assessments have contributed to the European Commission's evaluation of these reports.

This short report provides a concise overview of the main findings from the 27 EU expert's reports. It is based on a more detailed synthesis report which was prepared for the European Commission by the Network Core Team's (NCT's), hereafter the NCT Synthesis Report. At the request of the Commission, it focuses particularly on three issues: in-work poverty, poverty risk for people living in very low work intensity households (i.e. [quasi-]jobless households) and homelessness. However, it begins with an overall assessment of the NRPs and SSRs. Drawing on both the independent experts' country analyses and the NCT's overall independent assessment, it also puts forward concrete suggestions for improvements. Thus, the views expressed in this report are those of the independent experts and the NCT and may not necessarily reflect those of either the Commission or the Member States.

The 27 experts' assessments and the NCT Synthesis Report are intended as contributions to the qualitative assessment foreseen in the Joint Assessment Framework (JAF)² agreed upon between the Social Protection Committee (SPC), the Employment Committee (EMCO) and the European Commission³. They are also intended to be a contribution to the development of the social dimension of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

¹ Only thirteen countries produced SSRs in time for them to be included in the experts' full assessment reports.

² The JAF is an indicator-based assessment system, covering both general and specific policy areas under the Europe 2020 Employment Guidelines (i.e. Integrated Guidelines No. 7 to 10). It should facilitate the identification of key challenges in these areas thus supporting Member States in establishing their priorities, and it should contribute to an overall assessment of progress at EU level carried during the European Semester exercise. The SPC and EMCO are committed to using the JAF as an analytical tool that can underpin multi-lateral surveillance and evidence-based policy-making, and also support Member States in establishing their reform priorities, benefiting from mutual learning and identifying good practices. For more information on the JAF, see: <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/10/st16/st16984.en10.pdf> and <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=fr&catId=89&newsId=972&furtherNews=yes>

³ The SPC and EMCO are EU advisory policy committees established by the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (articles 150 and 160), with representatives from each Member State and the European Commission.

2. Assessment

2.1. Overall assessment

The overall impression of the 2013 NRPs is that there has been somewhat more attention given to social inclusion issues than in the NRPs prepared in 2012 and 2011. However, in most countries the improvement is only slight and not commensurate with the increasing scale of poverty and social exclusion. In most countries, the NRPs are still dominated by concerns to balance budgets and increase competitiveness. Overall, it seems that the social inclusion priorities outlined in the Social Investment Package (SIP) put forward by the European Commission in February 2013 did not (yet) impact significantly on the preparation of the NRPs or the SSRs.

In a quarter of Member States, experts are quite positive and report significant, though in many cases not sufficient, policy efforts to address key social inclusion challenges in their countries' NRPs. In four cases experts comment that the NRP has a stronger and more coherent social inclusion focus but are still very critical of the adequacy of the response on many key issues. Several experts give fairly mixed assessments of the NRPs. They find that there is a certain amount, but not sufficient, attention being given to social inclusion issues with some issues being quite well addressed but others poorly. However, in many cases experts consider that social inclusion issues are not given appropriate attention and several are particularly critical. As a result, many experts consider that key challenges are insufficiently well addressed to make significant progress towards national Europe 2020 social inclusion targets.

Only thirteen SSRs were submitted in time for them to be included in the experts' assessment. Several experts were relatively positive and did see the SSRs as either adding depth to the social inclusion issues mentioned in the NRPs or else addressing issues not covered in the NRP, even if in some cases there were also significant room for improvement. However, in over half of cases, experts found the SSRs to be a very limited reporting exercise.

2.2. Key social inclusion challenges

Developing more inclusive labour markets and breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty (child poverty) emerge as the key social inclusion challenges that recur most frequently across Member States. Within inclusive labour markets, two particular challenges stand out: high unemployment (including long-term unemployment) and in-work poverty (including low pay). In relation to child poverty, the two key challenges are: a) lack of adequate income support for families and children; and b) early school leaving and leaving with no/low qualifications. The next most urgent challenge highlighted by experts is the need to ensure adequate and sustainable social protection systems and, in particular, to address the inadequacy of benefits.

Overall, in the NRPs and SSRs experts assess that the key social challenges in their countries are much more frequently not well addressed than well addressed (75 to 51 in NRPs and 32 to 20 in SSRs).

2.3. Key targets

The groups of people at risk of severe poverty and social exclusion that are most often identified by experts are homeless people, the Roma, migrants and people from a migrant background, and disadvantaged children. Experts assess that policy responses to these groups of people in the NRPs and SSRs are far more frequently not appropriate or not at all appropriate than they are appropriate or perfectly appropriate (43 to 21 in NRPs and 16 to 9 in SSRs).

2.4. Synergies with other Europe 2020 targets

Overall, as in 2011 and 2012, experts consider that synergies between the social inclusion target and the other Europe 2020 targets are quite limited in the NRPs. However, several experts assess that there has been some small improvement in over a quarter of Member States in making interconnections between the social inclusion target and the employment and school drop-out targets.

2.5. Governance

One third of experts consider that the NRPs are well integrated into national policy making. However, there remain seven countries where, as far as social inclusion issues are concerned, the NRPs are not well integrated and remain quite peripheral to the policy process as they do not impact on or relate to national policy making processes. Stakeholder involvement is assessed positively in the case of only five NRPs and two SSRs. While in most other countries there is some degree of stakeholder involvement there is considerable room for improvement. Four Member States for the NRPs and four for the SSRs lack any significant stakeholder involvement.

2.6. Working poor / in-work poverty

Many experts identify in-work poverty as a significant and increasing problem in many countries. However, only one expert considers that this issue is well addressed in the NRP and SSR whereas the majority consider that it is not well or not at all addressed.

Key factors leading to the growth in in-work poverty identified regularly by experts include: low hourly wages, lack of or freezing of minimum wages, increase in part-time and precarious work and short-term contracts, low incomes of self-employed, low education levels, cuts in in-work benefits, living in a household with very low work intensity, presence of children in families, lack of affordable child care and being from a migrant background. It is clear that the balance between these factors varies from country to country. So, several experts highlight measures taken in response to the current economic and financial crisis which increase the risk of in-work poverty such as freezing or reducing wages, encouraging more part-time and low paid jobs and introducing more flexible forms of employment. However, experts also highlight a number of actions or proposals in the NRPs which aim to combat in-work poverty. These include increasing low wages, enhancing employment protection, improving in-work and child benefits, increasing the participation of parents (especially women) in employment, and reducing taxation on low incomes.

2.7. Poverty risk for people living in (quasi-)jobless households

The issue of poverty risk for people living in very low work intensity households (i.e. [quasi-] jobless households) is not often specifically addressed in the NRPs or SSRs. However, related areas such as unemployment (including long-term unemployment) and inadequate income support for children are key areas of concern. Of the 13 experts who specifically identify high unemployment (and long-term unemployment) as one of the six key social inclusion challenges facing their country five consider that this issue is dealt with well in the NRP (two in the SSR) compared to four who consider it to be not well addressed (three in the SSR). Several experts particularly stress the link between child poverty and children living in (quasi-)jobless households. However, only one of these experts considers the policy response in the NRP and SSR to be appropriate.

Several experts identify a number of specific policy weaknesses or developments that contribute to the poverty risk levels of people living in (quasi-)jobless households. In the area of income support, a major area of concern for many experts is the lack of adequate income support for families and children and cuts in benefits and services. This clearly has a particular impact on (quasi-)jobless households with children. Eleven experts identify this as one of the six key social inclusion challenges facing their country but only 2 of these experts consider that this challenge is addressed well or very well in the NRP and/or SSR.

Key factors trapping people in (quasi-)jobless households at risk of poverty include: lack of child care and poor access to employment, reduction in activation programmes, inadequate targeting of those furthest away from the labour market, and badly paid public works schemes. Experts stress that to address the issue requires a comprehensive range of measures. Measures in the NRPs and/or SSRs which are highlighted by experts to deal with the problem of (quasi-)jobless households at risk of poverty essentially divide into those to promote employment and those aimed at ensuring adequate income support. Measures aimed at increasing access to employment include: reducing disincentives to work, enhanced targeting of those most at risk, improving child care and flexible working, and increasing labour market participation of older workers.

2.8. Homelessness

Homeless people are those who are most often identified by experts as being at risk of severe poverty and social exclusion. Many Member States recognise the issue of homelessness in their NRPs and/or SSRs and some report significant developments. However, in many cases experts consider the response in the NRP or SSR to be quite weak. Of the 15 experts who identified the homeless as one of the three key target groups of people at risk of severe poverty and social exclusion in their country, 11 consider that policy responses in the NRP are not at all appropriate or not appropriate and only three consider that they are appropriate or perfectly appropriate. As to the policy responses in the 13 SSRs that could be assessed by the Network, they are considered appropriate or perfectly appropriate by two experts.

Experts document a range of developments that can all impact negatively on the homeless and increase the risk of homelessness. These include rising poverty and unemployment, cut backs in income support and services due to austerity measures, and turbulence in housing markets with increased risk of evictions. Several experts identify specific weaknesses in

existing policies that hinder tackling homelessness or recent policy developments that increase the risk of homelessness. These include: a fragmented approach which leads to significant regional variations in efforts to tackle homelessness, cuts in benefits and rent subsidies, criminalisation of homelessness, discriminatory restrictions against homeless people (as well as immigrants and ethnic minorities), and the allocation of inadequate resources to prevention through developing appropriate housing initiatives such as social housing.

Several experts highlight positive developments in relation to addressing homelessness in their countries' NRPs and/or SSRs. Some measures are essentially emergency responses to increasing numbers of homeless and others involve the development or consolidation of more strategic approaches. The increasing trend to develop national strategies on homelessness is reflected in several NRPs and/or SSRs.

3. Recommendations

It is encouraging that (slightly) more attention has been given to social inclusion issues in the 2013 NRPs and SSRs than in the previous two years. However, the degree of attention falls very far short of what is needed in many countries given the worsening trends on poverty and social exclusion and the lack of progress towards the Europe 2020 poverty and social exclusion target.⁴ A balanced approach to the Europe 2020 agenda, whereby the poverty and social exclusion target and the objective of inclusive growth should achieve the same amount of attention as the other objectives of Europe 2020, has still to be achieved. Also, it is clear that, because it was only launched in February 2013, the European Commission's Social Investment Package (SIP) (i.e. the Communication on Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion together with the accompanying Recommendation on investing in children and a number of Staff Working Documents) did not have a significant impact on the 2013 NRPs or SSRs. Thus, the social inclusion priorities and objectives set out in the European Commission's SIP have still to be mainstreamed into the Europe 2020 process. In the light of this, we would recommend the following.

3.1. Operationalising the Social Investment Package (SIP)

The key challenge for the next period will be to ensure that the agenda spelled out in the SIP is effectively built into the Europe 2020 governance process. This will require Member States to give more attention to spending more effectively and efficiently to ensure adequate and sustainable social protection; to invest more in developing people's skills and capacities so as to improve their opportunities to integrate in society and the labour market; and to ensure that social protection systems respond adequately to people's needs at critical moments during their lives. Areas that will require particular attention include ensuring that Member States: develop active inclusion approaches that effectively integrate three stands (access to the labour market, access to quality services and access to adequate social protection); develop comprehensive strategies to promote the inclusion of children; develop and implement integrated, housing-led and preventative homelessness strategies; and make full use of the EU Structural Funds to promote social inclusion.

This is most likely to happen if:

- the Commission, in conjunction with the Social Protection Committee, develop very clear and transparent **work programmes** with clear timelines for the implementation and monitoring of the different strands of the SIP. In particular, we would suggest that there should be distinct work programmes developed in relation to:
 - ensuring the adequacy of **universal social protection systems**;

⁴ See for example the following EU reports:

European Commission (2013), *Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2012*, Luxembourg: Office for official Publications of the European Communities. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=7315>

Social Protection Committee (2013), *Social Europe: current challenges and the way forward*, Annual Report of the Social Protection Committee (2012), Luxembourg: Office for official Publications of the European Communities. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=9760&langId=en>

- promoting the development of integrated and comprehensive **active inclusion strategies** in line with the 2008 Recommendation, endorsed in 2008 by the EU Council of Ministers – and within these:
 - establishing clear principles for ensuring adequate levels of income support in all the Member States – as highlighted in the SIP, the use of reference budgets can be particularly helpful in this regard;
 - ensuring that the issues of in-work poverty and poverty risk of people living in very low work intensity households (i.e. [quasi-]jobless households) are addressed;
 - following up the 2013 Commission’s Recommendation **on investing in children**;
 - preventing and combating **homelessness**;
- the coverage of social inclusion issues is further expanded in the **Annual Growth Survey (AGS)** with distinct sub-sections on the adequacy of social protection systems, active inclusion, child poverty and social exclusion, and homelessness. Increased emphasis should also be put on the critical role that is played by social services both in preventing poverty and social exclusion and in responding to the impact of the economic and financial crisis. This would allow for much stronger and more specific guidelines being issued to Member States on their coverage of social inclusion issues in their NRPs;
- the welcome (but insufficient) increase in social inclusion **Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs)** evident this year is further developed so that in future social inclusion issues are treated more systematically and are given equal attention with the other strands of the Europe 2020 process. Each country should be assessed for the progress it is making in relation to each of the key themes of the SIP. In any area where performance is particularly weak or in any country which is not progressing in meeting its contribution to the Europe 2020 social inclusion target an appropriate CSR should be considered;
- the social inclusion objectives of the SIP are mainstreamed into Europe 2020 and are fully taken on board in the development of the EU’s macro-economic policies – this will be much easier if, as a result of the current discussions on Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), there is agreement on a strong **social dimension of the EMU** which requires that economic and monetary policies contribute to the achievement of the EU social objectives and to combating poverty and social exclusion. In relation to this, it will be important to adopt a set of indicators to monitor progress on the social dimension of EMU on a regular basis. The key social inclusion challenges which have been identified in this report could provide a useful basis for developing such a scoreboard. The 2013 Commission Communication on the social dimension of the EMU can play a very important role in developing this debate.

3.2. Increasing the use of Social Impact Assessments (SIAs)

The evident weakness in mainstreaming social inclusion goals in many Member States and the lack of synergies being developed between the Europe 2020 social inclusion agenda and the other Europe 2020 targets highlight once again the need to intensify the use of social impact assessments (SIAs). Thus:

- as we have suggested in previous Synthesis Reports, in order to ensure that the NRPs, NSRs, SSRs and financial consolidation programmes are “socially inclusive” and, as far as possible, do not increase inequalities and worsen poverty and social exclusion, Member States should carry out much more systematically **ex-ante SIAs of the measures included in their NRPs/ NSRs/ SSRs and in financial consolidation packages**. This will help to mitigate the worst effects on those most at risk of poverty or social exclusion and to ensure that the Europe 2020 goal of inclusive growth is fully taken on board in the national decision-making process;
- the Commission should consider developing a programme of work to help Member States in the use of SIAs and, in the context of the SPC, to agree **SIA guidelines** that will assist Member States in the use of SIAs - important material and experience on this have already been gathered by the Commission (reports and peer review) and provide a very useful starting basis;
- *Ex ante* (and then *ex post*) SIAs of measures being considered as part of **bail out packages** are essential to ensure that they will not (and then that measures actually taken did not) result in increased poverty, social exclusion and/or inequalities.

3.3. Increasing the contribution of EU Structural Funds

The weakness of social inclusion policies in many Member States highlights the critical role that EU Structural Funds can play in supporting the development of social inclusion policies, especially for those most at risk such as homeless people, Roma, people with a disability, and people from a migrant background. Thus:

- in line with the SIP, it will be important to ensure that there is **increased use of EU Structural Funds** to support social inclusion and poverty reduction policies – in this regard, support by Member States for the Commission proposal for 25% funding for the European Social Fund (ESF) and 20% on poverty reduction will be very important;
- in order to ensure that in future EU Structural Funds resources that could be used for promoting social inclusion do not go unused, greater efforts should be invested in **training** which would build the capacity of local authorities and NGOs to use these funds.

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3.4. Strengthening the Social OMC and the NSRs/SSRs

The continued relative weakness of the social dimension of Europe 2020 and the lack of in-depth attention given to social inclusion issues in many NRPs highlight the vital role to be played by the Social Open Method of Coordination in underpinning the social dimension of Europe 2020. In particular:

- the underdeveloped nature of the NSRs and SSRs in many countries needs to be rectified. The role of NSRs and SSRs needs to be **reviewed and enhanced** so that they can truly underpin the social dimension of the European Union.

3.5. Increasing stakeholder participation

The continued limited involvement of social inclusion stakeholders (including people experiencing poverty and the organisations that work with them as well as regional and

local governments) in the development, implementation and monitoring of the 2013 NRPs highlights once again the need to provide much clearer guidance to Member States on this issue and to ensure much more rigorous monitoring and reporting. Thus:

- the Commission and Member states should develop a programme of **exchange and learning on stakeholder involvement** in the Europe 2020 process;
- the SPC and the European Commission should **agree guidelines for the involvement of stakeholders** which would be used to monitor and report on the involvement of stakeholders in the Europe 2020 process, particularly the NRPs.

3.6. Combating homelessness

It is clear from the analysis in this report that in many countries there is an increased risk of homelessness as a result of the current economic and financial crisis and austerity measures. Thus, there is a need to further intensify efforts both to prevent homelessness arising and to help those who are homeless. There are positive developments to report in many countries on which to build. Also, as a result of recent work in this area, there is no clarity as to the types of measures that are needed. Thus, as well as developing a clear **work programme** for following up the recommendations on homelessness in the SIP (see above: Operationalising the SIP) and where appropriate making CSRs in relation to homelessness (see above), we would suggest the following:

- in future, all Member States should be required to **report regularly** on the situation in relation to homelessness in their NRPs/NSRs/SSRs and to outline the steps they are taking to combat it;
- countries that do not yet have **national (or sub-national) integrated, housing-led and preventative homelessness strategies** should, in line with the SIP, be urged to develop one and those that already have a strategy should regularly and rigorously assess its implementation and report on its impact. In elaborating and developing their strategies, it will be important for Member States to ensure a coordinated approach between national, regional and local level actors;
- to prevent homelessness, much more attention should be given by Member States **to investing in affordable housing, including in an increase in social housing stock** or promoting access to housing for those most at risk;
- Member States should give particular attention to addressing some of the factors that are increasing the risk of homelessness during the current crisis such as unemployment and loss of income, over-indebtedness and increased evictions or repossessions. They should take particular care not to make cut backs in areas that will increase the risk of homelessness;

Member States should be urged to make greater use of Structural Funds to support their efforts to combat homelessness and should develop an integrated use of European Social Fund (ESF) and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for social housing purposes. They should also make use of the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) to assist the homeless.

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Assessment of progress towards the Europe 2020 social inclusion objectives: Main findings and suggestions on the way forward

With its objective of inclusive as well as smart and sustainable growth, and with its (first ever) EU poverty and social exclusion target, the Europe 2020 Strategy (potentially) increases the importance of the EU's social objectives and integrates them with the EU's economic, employment and environmental objectives.

The National Reform Programmes (NRPs) are the means by which Member States are expected to translate the Europe 2020 objectives and targets into national policies. In April 2013, countries submitted their third Europe 2020 NRPs to the European Commission. At the same time, they were also asked to submit Strategic Social Reports (SSRs) updating their 2012 National Social Reports (NSRs). The NSRs/SSRs are a new development introduced in 2012. NSRs/SSRs are intended to underpin the social dimension of the Europe 2020 process by covering the fields of social inclusion, pensions, healthcare and long-term care in more depth than is possible in the NRPs.

Members of the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion assessed, from a social inclusion perspective, their countries' NRPs and -when available- SSRs. In particular, they assessed the extent to which the measures outlined in the NRPs (and SSRs) are likely to ensure progress towards the achievement of the Europe 2020's social inclusion objectives and target.

This short report, prepared by the Network Core Team, summarises the main findings of the independent experts' country analyses. It also puts forward concrete suggestions for strengthening the social inclusion dimension of the NRP process in future.

