

Peer Review Children First – pilot local consultation platforms on child poverty (Belgium, 13-14 January 2015)

Discussion paper¹

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Introduction: background and context

This Peer Review will examine the Belgian local consultation platforms for the prevention and identification of child poverty launched by the Children First programme. Although Belgium has many years of experience with consultation platforms², this is a new and innovative initiative, started on 1st of May 2014. Children First was launched by the Belgian government to offer a more specific response to the European Commission's Recommendation on 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage'³ (as part of the Social Investment Package), with special regards to the recommendations that Member States strengthen coordination between the different actors involved; streamline their policies in all relevant areas; and promote stakeholder participation and exchange of best practices.

The Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs) are appointed to play a leading role on the local level in the fight against child poverty through local consultation platforms⁴. Operating in every municipality in Belgium, the PCSWs have a number of tools at their disposal (including income support, employment and career guidance, emergency medical assistance, rent guarantees, etc.) to help the socially and economically underprivileged to fully participate in society. It has been found that despite the wide range of instruments and the necessary expertise to fight child poverty, PCSWs sometimes become involved in a problem situation (too) late. This can be traced back to the insufficient information flow and weak coordination between actors working with children (i.e. the different actors working with children do not always know each other and the services they provide, and do not always share their expertise and experience). Via local consultation platforms, the PCSWs are now expected to take a proactive approach to poverty and risk situations.

This Peer Review aims to contribute to the assessment of the effectiveness of the Children First programme and of its transferability to other Member States. However, Children First should be discussed in the wider context of the Belgian

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² Goris (2014): Peer Review Host country report on the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020, Belgium 2014.

³ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/c_2013_778_en.pdf

⁴ See Action 126 of the National Child Poverty Reduction Plan (2013) as well as Action 53 of the second Federal Poverty Reduction Plan (2012).



strategy to reduce child poverty. Belgium, as a federal state as well as its regions, has been putting forward strategies to prevent and alleviate (child) poverty and social exclusion. Belgium has a complex institutional model being a federal parliamentary state, made up of communities and regions that have their own governments and competences. This results in competences related to child poverty being spread across these policy levels. This complexity in competences requires coordination and a strongly integrated approach towards common goals, such as is needed in the fight against child poverty⁵.

Reducing child poverty constitutes one of the key priorities of Belgium's overall social inclusion policy. In addition to the attention devoted to the issue at the federal level, child poverty is given extensive consideration in the policy of the federated entities: Flanders has developed its Flemish Action Programme on Child Poverty and actively encourages provincial and municipal initiatives, the Walloon Region and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation have formulated a plan on children's rights, and the Brussels-Capital Region is focusing on future parents (Schepers and Nicaise 2014:9).

The conviction that tackling poverty needs to be addressed through a multidimensional and multilevel policy framework has grown and found solid ground at different policy levels in Belgium over the recent decades. The multidimensional approach means that child poverty and social exclusion are addressed in the life domains where they appear: in income, work, housing, health, education and family life as well as in participation in different kinds of social, cultural and sporting activities (De Boyser 2012).

Belgium translated the Europe 2020 target of fight against poverty and social exclusion into a national target and committed itself to reducing the number of people at risk of poverty by at least 380,000 by 2020 (compared to 2008) (NRP 2012⁶). In June 2013, a National Plan to Combat Child Poverty, based on the recommendation of the European Commission, was approved. To attain the global poverty objective, a proportionate reduction would imply that at least 82,000 children have to be helped out of poverty or social exclusion. In December 2013, the Federal Government made EUR 2 million available to support the PCSWs in initiating local consultation platforms with e.g. schools, nurseries and poverty associations. The purpose is to preventively and proactively detect hidden child poverty and to find remedies together (NRP 2014⁷).

The paper is organised as follows. The first section outlines the policy framework at European level and the approaches taken by European countries in tackling child poverty. Also, it aims to identify the main policy links to earlier policy debate and research. The second section examines the Children First programme and provides a preliminary assessment of the strength and weaknesses as well as of the transferability of the Belgian approach.

⁵ De Boyser (2012): Peer Review Host country report on combating child poverty through measures promoting the socio-cultural participation of clients of the Public Centres of Social Action/Welfare, Belgium 2012.

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/nd/nrp2012_belgium_en.pdf

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2014/nrp2014_belgium_en.pdf



1. Setting the scene - overview of the related policy developments at European level

1.1 The policy framework at European level

The key documents that set the policy framework for this Peer Review are partly those that made child mainstreaming⁸ and the fight against child poverty and social exclusion a key theme in the EU; and partly those that put the mainstreaming of social inclusion through stakeholder involvement at the heart of EU policy making. Although some of the relevant documents have made progress in both fields of policy, it is important to discuss the two issues separately.

Child mainstreaming

The promotion and protection of the rights of the child is one of the objectives of the EU on which the Treaty of Lisbon has put further emphasis. The EU explicitly recognised children's rights in Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (Article 24)⁹. One of the first initiatives that explicitly called for the mainstreaming of children was a 2005 report 'Taking Forward the EU Social Inclusion Process' commissioned by the Luxembourg Presidency. The purpose of the report was to explore the general issues of poverty and social exclusion from the perspective of children (and not to single out children as a priority group). In March 2006, the European Council asked Member States to take decisive steps "to rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty, giving all children equal opportunities, regardless of their social background" (European Council 2006)¹⁰. In its 2006 Communication 'Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child' (European Commission 2006)¹¹, the Commission proposed to establish a comprehensive EU strategy to effectively promote and safeguard the rights of the child in the EU's policies and to support Member States' efforts in this field. This resulted in bringing stakeholders together in a European Forum for the Rights of the Child – a platform for the promotion of children's rights and well-being in the EU's internal and external actions. In its 2011 Communication 'An EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child' (European Commission 2011)¹², the Commission reaffirmed "the strong commitment of all EU institutions and of all Member States to promoting, protecting and fulfilling the rights of the child in all relevant EU policies and to turn it into concrete results". It was also declared that "in the future, EU policies that directly or indirectly affect children should be designed, implemented, and monitored taking into account the principle of the best interests of the child". Further, the Commission committed itself to addressing the needs of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in a Recommendation on child poverty, which would outline common principles and propose effective monitoring tools to prevent and combat child poverty within the framework of the Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Since the 2006 Council Conclusion child poverty has been the subject of a number of Council Summits. In 2010, the Belgian presidency also made the fight against child poverty a key theme. It organised a major conference and published a 'Roadmap for a Recommendation to fight child poverty' (Belgian Presidency 2010).

⁸ *Child mainstreaming* can be understood as a process involving "viewing social inclusion from a child's perspective and implies integrating a concern with the well-being and social inclusion of children into all areas of policy making" (Marlier et al. 2007).

⁹ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf

¹⁰ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/89013.pdf

¹¹ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2006:0367:FIN:EN:PDF>

¹² http://ec.europa.eu/justice/policies/children/docs/com_2011_60_en.pdf



A background paper 'Child well-being in the European Union – Better monitoring instruments for better policies' was prepared for the Hungarian Presidency (TÁRKI 2011). The Social Protection Committee (SPC) also put this issue at the forefront. As a result, in 2008, the EU Task-Force on Child Poverty and Child Well-Being prepared a major report on child poverty 'Child Poverty and Well-Being in the EU – Current status and way forward' (Social Protection Committee 2008), which was carried on by the TÁRKI-Applica (2010) report. In 2012, the SPC adopted an advisory report to the European Commission on 'Tackling and preventing child poverty, promoting child well-being' (Social Protection Committee 2012).

The long-awaited Commission Recommendation on child poverty 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (European Commission 2013b), was adopted on 20 February 2013 as part of the Social Investment Package for Growth and Cohesion¹³ (SIP). In the SIP, special attention is paid to children, taking into account the broad consensus that tackling disadvantage early is one of the best ways to help children to live up to their full potential (European Commission 2013a). In this key document, which is closely related to the preceding SPC Advisory Report, the Commission recommends that Member States organise and implement policies to address child poverty and social exclusion, promoting children's well-being through multidimensional strategies, in accordance with the following horizontal guidelines: *i*) tackle child poverty and social exclusion through integrated strategies that go beyond ensuring children's material security and promote equal opportunity; *ii*) address child poverty and social exclusion from a children's rights approach; *iii*) always take the child's best interest as a primary consideration and recognise children as independent rights-holders; whilst fully acknowledging the importance of supporting families as primary carers; *iv*) maintain an appropriate balance between universal policies and targeted approaches; *v*) ensure a focus on children who face an increased risk due to multiple disadvantage; and *vi*) sustain investment in children and families (2013b:4-5). The Commission also reinforces the recommendation that Member States work towards mainstreaming children's policies and rights into key policies (2013b:10).

Mainstreaming Social Inclusion through stakeholder involvement¹⁴

The Europe 2020 Strategy¹⁵ (European Commission 2010) puts social inclusion at the centre of EU policymaking, at least in theory (Frazer 2014:14). Inclusive growth, that is fostering a high-employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion, is one of the key priorities put forward by the Europe 2020 Strategy, alongside smart and sustainable growth. Europe 2020 sets five headline targets including one on social inclusion, according to which at least 20 million people should be lifted out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion by 2020. One of the seven flagship initiatives of the Europe 2020 Strategy is the creation of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion. It is designed to help EU Member States reach the headline target on social inclusion. In addition, and importantly for this Peer Review, the formation of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion provides an important context for work on social inclusion issues and the involvement of stakeholders (Frazer 2014:14).

¹³ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2013:0083:FIN:EN:PDF>

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion, see Frazer (2014): Peer Review on the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020, Belgium 2014.

¹⁵ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:2020:FIN:EN:PDF>



From 2001 the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (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 made. Social inclusion was originally one of the three main strands of Social OMC but in 2006, the three strands (social inclusion, pensions, and healthcare and long-term care) were streamlined into one integrated Social OMC. The 2006 Communication 'Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child' (European Commission 2006) states that the Commission and the Member States have given a high priority to the issue of child poverty under the Social OMC. More importantly, the Communication stresses that to maximise the value of EU action on children's rights, better cooperation is needed with key stakeholders, including children (2006: 6-7).

Its 2008 Communication on reinforcing the Social OMC¹⁶, the Commission put significant emphasis on enhancing the involvement of both lower levels of government and stakeholders: "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." (European Commission 2008:9). Similarly, in its 2011 opinion on reinvigorating the Social OCM, the Social Protection Committee underlines the importance of enhancing the involvement of social partners, NGOs, regional and local authorities with a view to increase the ownership and effectiveness of the policies developed in the context of the Social OMC (2011: para. 15).

The emphasis on stakeholder involvement was reaffirmed in 2013 with the Commission's launch of the Social Investment Package (SIP). This urges Member States "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 2013a:22). More specifically, in the accompanying 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage', the Commission encourages Member States 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:10). Further, the Commission urges Member States to "put in place mechanisms that promote children's participation in decision making that affects their lives". This is equally important from the point of view of children's rights and of stakeholder involvement (i.e. children are considered in this context as primary stakeholders).

The January 2015 Peer Review on the Belgian local consultation platforms on child poverty has the potential to significantly contribute to the Social Investment Package. The Children First project, in the context of which local platforms have been launched, aims to combat child poverty and social exclusion of children in a preventive and proactive way. The local consultation platforms can be considered as a policy innovation aiming to improve information flow and coordination among

¹⁶ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52008DC0418&from=EN>



different actors working with children (e.g. anti-poverty associations, child day care centres, schools, sports clubs, etc.). Since platforms bring together civil society organisations, they have the potential to strengthen synergies between players in different fields, to promote cooperation between local public authorities, civil society organisations and local communities, and finally to support the involvement of parents/children experiencing poverty. The Children First project was launched explicitly to offer a specific response to the Commission Recommendation on Investing in children¹⁷. In the light of these aspects, by discussing and assessing this policy innovation, this Peer Review may strengthen the link between the policy and research community and promote the exchange of good practice, and thereby promote the use of evidence based policies – which are among the key recommendations provided by the Commission.

1.2 Approaches taken by European countries in tackling child poverty

To provide an overview of the national policy responses to the problem of child poverty, we turn to two studies: the first gives a more general EU-wide comparison, while the second places the issue in the context of the Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children.

A recent study, using the analytical framework set up by the EU Task-Force on Child Poverty and Well-being (2008), evaluated the relative performance of 27 EU Member States in the field of child poverty (Gábos 2013).¹⁸ The main conclusion of the paper is that best performances to effectively tackle child poverty are the results of a combination of three main factors: strong labour market attachment of parents, low in-work poverty and an effective income support system. For analytical purpose, child poverty outcomes included the at-risk-of-poverty rate and the poverty gap. The report identified four country clusters based on child poverty outcomes and its main determinants (i.e. labour market participation of parents and effectiveness of government intervention).¹⁹ The country clusters can be characterised as follows.

Group A includes countries with good child poverty outcomes and with good performance along all determinant-side dimensions (FI, DK, SE, SI, NL, AT, DE, FR, CZ). High labour-market participation of both parents is the key factor behind good outcomes in most of these countries. In some Member States (FI, DK, SE, FR, SI), childcare provisions are a great help to parents participating in the labour market. Social transfers in this grouping are not specifically targeted at children (with the exceptions of FR and AT, where they are preferred by the benefit systems); however, their effectiveness is generally high.

Group B contains countries with high numbers of children in jobless households and low in-work poverty (BE, EE, HU, UK). Within this group, some countries (BE, EE, UK) have above-average child poverty outcomes, though no country performs really poorly in this respect. One explanation could be that relatively effective income supports in these Member States result not only in a considerable reduction in the extent of poverty, but also in narrower-than-average relative median poverty

¹⁷ Martijn (2014): Peer Review Host country report on Children First – pilot local consultation platforms on child poverty, Belgium 2015.

¹⁸ Besides the report of the EU Task-Force, the paper relies on the TÁRKI-Applica (2010) and TÁRKI (2011) reports.

¹⁹ The analysis is based on the EU-LFS and EU-SILC data from 2005-2010, which means that the effect of crisis is captured only partially.



gaps. Also, some countries (BE, EE, HU) perform really well in the field of in-work poverty, resulting in levels of poverty incidence that are lower than the EU average.

Group C consists of Member States with below-average performance in all dimensions (BG, LT, SK). Poor outcomes are rooted mainly in the inadequate labour market participation of families with children. Also, income support in these countries fails to prevent children from living in poverty. It has to be added, however, that Group C is the most unstable group out of the four identified by the analytical framework in the period from 2005 to 2010.

In the countries of Group D, child poverty outcomes are poor, in-work poverty is high, but the share of children living in jobless households is low (GR, ES, IT, PT, LV, LU, PL, RO). In these Member States, not only is the extent of poverty high, but also the poverty gap is wide. High levels of in-work poverty can be attributed to the high share of children in single-breadwinner households and to the high risk of poverty among them. Group D proved to be by far the most stable cluster.

A more recent report, produced by the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion on the basis of independent experts' reports covering 28 EU Member States, assesses the countries' overall approach to tackling child poverty and social exclusion and their governance arrangements in light of the Commission's Recommendation on Investing in children (Frazer and Marlier 2014). For the purpose of the evaluation, countries are grouped into four categories based on the percentage of children living in a household at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE).²⁰ In general, it has been found that Member States with a high (31-35%, i.e. UK, LT, ES, HR, IT, IE, EL) or very high (40-52%, i.e. LV, HU, RO, BG) proportion of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion face the biggest challenges in reforming their overall approach and strengthening their governance arrangements. However, even Member States with a low (15-21%, i.e. FI, DK, SI, NL, DE, CZ, SE, AT) or medium (22-30%, i.e. EE, FR, BE, LU, SK, CY, PT, PL, MT) proportion of children at risk have areas in which improvements could be made.

The overall approaches taken by Member States in tackling child poverty and social exclusion are assessed in the report along the following five dimensions. The Commission stresses the importance of countries having *i*) a comprehensive set of policies and integrated multi-dimensional strategies, *ii*) a children's rights approach which leads to effective mainstreaming of children's policies and rights, *iii*) an effective balance between universal and more targeted policies, *iv*) the involvement of stakeholders (including children themselves) and *v*) an evidence-based approach to policy making.

Integrated multidimensional strategies

The Commission's Recommendation on Investing in children puts significant emphasis on developing integrated and multidimensional strategies (at both national and sub national levels) to promote the well-being of children. Given the multidimensional nature of the problem, no single policy is sufficient to ensure the social inclusion of children. Statistical evidence shows that the Member States who are most successful in preventing child poverty and social exclusion are those that develop policy frameworks which combine increasing access to adequately paid

²⁰ This combines the following three indicators: at risk of poverty, severe material deprivation, and living in a household with very low work intensity. Data are derived from EU-SILC (2011 and 2012, depending on the individual indicator). For further details, see Frazer and Marlier (2014:27).



work for parents at risk of poverty, ensuring effective income support schemes for all families with children and increasing access to key services (particularly child care, education, housing, health and social services) and services which support their active participation in society (Frazer and Marlier 2007:10).

The report (Frazer and Marlier 2014) states that in general, countries with the lowest rates of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion already have a quite comprehensive set of policies in place that help to promote the well-being of children. More specifically, an integrated and multidimensional strategy is more evident in four countries (FI, DK, SI, SE), whereas in the other four countries (NL, DE, CZ, AT) it is less developed and could be strengthened. Most of the medium risk countries also have a quite wide range of policies in place to promote the well-being of children. Some countries (BE, EE, FR, MT) are taking important steps to increase their efforts. In Belgium, the recently published National Plan to Combat Child Poverty makes explicit mention of the need for a high degree of synergy between the different relevant policy levels and policy areas. Alongside the three policy areas that are fundamental in the fight against poverty (i.e. access to adequate resources, access to quality services and opportunities for an active participation of children in society), a fourth strategic objective of the plan involves the negotiation of horizontal and vertical partnerships between different policy areas and different levels of government (Schepers and Nicaise 2014:9). In the other countries with medium levels of child poverty or social exclusion (e.g. LU, CY, FR, PL, PT), the approach to combating child poverty and social inclusion should be better integrated. Among the high risk countries, several (e.g. ES, HR, IE, IT, UK) have quite developed policies to address child poverty and social exclusion but these are often not well coordinated and there are weaknesses in implementation. For some countries, attaining an appropriate balance between national and sub-national levels and effective integration at local level is a particular challenge. There are two countries (LT, EL) in this group whose policies fall a long way short of an integrated and multidimensional approach. The same statement applies to countries with very high rates of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (with the exception of HU) (Frazer and Marlier 2014:10).

Children's rights and mainstreaming

Promoting children's rights is at the heart of the Recommendation on Investing in children. The Commission encourages Member States to "address child poverty and social exclusion from a children's rights approach", and to "always take the child's best interests as a primary consideration and recognise children as independent right-holders" (European Commission 2013b:4). Further, the Commission also recommends that Member States "work towards mainstreaming children's policies and rights into key policies" (European Commission 2013b:10).

A children's rights approach and an effective mainstreaming of children's policies and rights are evident in many of the countries with low rates of child poverty and social exclusion. Among the medium risk countries two (CY, EE) also have a relatively strong children's rights focus which takes into account key social inclusion issues (such as housing, education and the integration of migrants). In five of the medium risk countries (BE, LU, PL, PT, SK), although they recognise children's rights, in practice they do not sufficiently inform the making and delivery of policies for children. In Belgium, the National Plan states that consideration must be given to the views of children. It recognises the primary responsibility of parents for the raising of children and that they must be given the necessary support so that they are able to bear this responsibility. At a sub-national level, the federated entities also give priority to children's rights. However, as the Belgian national experts point



out, “the reference to these rights is primarily an end in itself. In the course of undertaking measures which have a direct or indirect impact on children, the extent to which these actions are compatible with the rights of children is not always explicitly examined” (Schepers and Nicaise 2014:9-10). The high and very high risk countries (with the exception of HR in the former group) have laid a clear foundation of children’s rights on which to build, but their actual impact on policy making has been limited (Frazer and Marlier 2014:10).

Universal versus targeted policies

The Commission recommends that Member States “maintain an appropriate balance between universal policies, aimed at promoting the well-being of children, and targeted approaches, aimed at supporting the most disadvantaged”, and “ensure a focus on children who face an increased risk due to multiple disadvantage such as Roma children, some migrant or ethnic minority children, children with special needs or disabilities, children in alternative care and street children, children of imprisoned parents, as well as children within households at particular risk of poverty, such as single parent or large families” (European Commission 2013b:4).

The evidence from those countries with the lowest levels of poverty and social exclusion is that the most effective approach over time involves developing effective policies for all children backed up by more specific policies targeted at children at high risk who face particular difficulties (Frazer and Marlier 2007:11). In line with this, the recent report (Frazer and Marlier 2014) concludes that the majority of countries with low child poverty and social exclusion rates generally have fairly universal policies for all children (SE, DK, FI, NL, AT). Others of this group of countries (DE, CZ) have more mixed approaches with a greater emphasis on supplementing universal policies with more targeted ones. Medium risk countries show a varied picture with regard to the balance between universal and targeted initiatives. A predominantly universal approach is found in two of them (LU, FR). Three medium risk countries (BE, EE, MT) seem to favour an approach that is essentially “progressive universalism”. In Belgium, the approach taken by policymakers, based on progressive universalism, implies that, in addition to overall measures that are designed to benefit all children, supplementary initiatives are also undertaken in order to provide extra support for certain (vulnerable) sub-groups. This prioritisation can be seen in the Belgian National Plan to Combat Child Poverty: the target group of the plan consists of children between the ages of 0 and 18, but special attention is paid to children living in extreme poverty, to the early childhood years (0 to 3 years) and to adolescents (Schepers and Nicaise 2013:10). Finally, in two of the medium risk group of countries (CY, PT) there has been a move to more targeting (Frazer and Marlier 2014:11). In most of the countries with a high rate of child poverty or social exclusion the balance between universal and targeted policies seems problematic. In some countries (e.g. EL, HR, IT, UK), there has been a move away from universal programmes, partly as a response to the economic crisis. The problem of achieving an appropriate balance between universal and targeted policies is even more apparent among the very high risk countries, especially since the economic crisis (Frazer and Marlier 2014:11).

Involvement of stakeholders

The Commission Recommendation places great emphasis on the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. Member States are recommended to “promote close cooperation and regular dialogue between public authorities at all levels, social partners, local communities and civil society organisations” as well as to “support the further develop the involvement of children” (European Commission 2013a:10).



The involvement of relevant stakeholders is found to be fairly widespread amongst the countries with low or medium levels of child poverty or social exclusion (Frazer and Marlier 2014). However, efforts to support the involvement of children are found to be quite limited. Belgium was one of the few countries (alongside CY, PL, SK) that provided positive examples of involving stakeholders. In the Belgian National Plan to Combat Child Poverty a direct appeal is made to children and young people in an attempt to draw them into a dialogue with policymakers (Scheepers and Nicaise 2014:11). Amongst the countries with high and very high levels of child poverty or social exclusion, the picture often tends to be more negative. Apart from a few positive developments in some countries (e.g. ES, LV), the involvement of stakeholders in this group of countries remained at a low level.

Evidence-based approach to policy making

The Commission Recommendation on Investing in children pays special attention to the use of evidence-based approaches. Member States are encouraged to “strengthen evidence-based policy development and social policy innovation, making sure to take due account of the potential impact of policies and children” (European Commission 2014:10).

In most of the countries with low levels of child poverty or social exclusion (e.g. DE, DK and CZ), evidence-based policy making is quite well established. However, even in these countries there is room for improvement, particularly in the area of using impact assessments. Several of the medium risk countries (e.g. EE, LU, PL) also have quite a strong emphasis on evidence-based policy development. In other countries in this group, however, evidence-based policy making needs further development. Even amongst the high risk countries, there are some (ES, UK) with a fairly strong tradition of evidence-based policy making. In countries with very high levels of child poverty or social exclusion, evidence-based policy making is weak and needs to be significantly developed (Frazer and Marlier 2014:11-12).

1.3 Thematic links to earlier policy debate and research

With regard to Children First in general, and the Belgian local consultation platforms for the prevention and identification of child poverty in particular, the following three elements seem to be worth noting: *i*) addressing poverty in early childhood; *ii*) combating child poverty at lower levels of government; *iii*) promoting stakeholder involvement, and in relation to this, strengthening coordination between different actors. This section focuses on the earlier research and policy debates concerning these themes.

Addressing poverty in early childhood – some research findings

Over the last few decades, a large body of knowledge has been accumulated by proponents of many different disciplines on the short and long term risks of growing up in poverty for the individual child (and future adult) and for society.²¹ Growing up in poverty affects both children’s short-term well-being and long-term outcomes, not only in material terms, but also considering non-material consequences of inadequate resources of parental family, as low educational attainment, poor health status, mental illness or social isolation. The effects of child poverty on child outcomes, especially on educational attainment is well-known in the literature (e.g. Duncan et al. 1998; Ermisch and Francesconi 2000; McCulloch and Joshi 2000, 2002; Corak, Lipps and Zhao 2005; Corak 2006). Analyses pointing to the

²¹ In this section, we relied on De Boyser (2012).



intergenerational transmission of poverty using panel data are also present in the literature, although their scope is still restricted due to the limitations in the data infrastructure. A Swedish analysis on longitudinal data shows that lack of resources during childhood has long-term effects on the risk of social exclusion (Bäckmann and Nillson 2011 for Sweden). Two main theoretical frameworks may be noted here that make attempts to explain mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of poverty, being complementary to each other in many respects. According to the human capital framework (e.g. Becker 1981, Becker and Tomes 1986; Mulligan 1997), poor parents not only possess themselves low level of human capital, but also have inadequate financial resources to invest in their children's human capital. Institutions (from family to government) can provide a supportive infrastructure to families and children to promote human capital accumulation, but the established institutions or mechanisms could be destructive, albeit rational as well (Fang and Loury 2005). Based on the family stress model (e.g. McLoyd 1990, Conger et al. 1993), low income or the loss of job affects the development of the child via the mental health status of parents (parent-child relationship, educational methods). The most important mechanisms of the poverty transmission process are health and nutrition, mental health status of parents, parental abilities, parent-child relationship and home environment (Brooks-Gunn, Britto and Brady 1999; Bradley and Corwyn 2002).

There is also an increasing consensus on that early childhood experiences are especially important for later cognitive and behavioural outcomes. As developmental research shows, a highly complex process of cognitive, social and emotional development takes place in the early life stage. In the past few decades results of neuro- and developmental psychology (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000; Mustard 2007; Johnson 2005), economic research and social policy analysis (Heckman and Masterov 2007; OECD 2006) have proven the significance of interventions in early childhood fields. Economic research also has confirmed that the societal investments into educational fields of early years are essential for improving later development and social success (Lamb and Ahnert 2006; Carnerio and Heckman 2003; Doyle et al. 2009). The effects of deprivation on social mobility have also been found to be significantly stronger when occurring in the earliest life stage than later on in childhood (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997). Moreover, the effects of early interventions on later development are not simply linear, but early advantages cumulate and so do early disadvantages (Heckman and Masterov 2007, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997).

These findings imply important policy consequences. Early interventions do not act only directly, but may have effects through intermediary routes as well, for example by strengthening parental support at critical periods. On the other hand, one might notice that different outcomes are relevant at different ages and may not be a single critical point in time for all significant outcomes, so subsequent events might undermine the early gains of such programmes (Plewis et al. 2001). Also, Layard et al. (2013) found that it is not cognitive outcomes and family income that predicts life satisfaction in adulthood in the first place, but emotional, mental and physical health in childhood.

Combating child poverty at local level – an earlier Peer Review

Moving on to the policy debate, Belgium has already provided some good practices/policy innovations that were discussed in the framework of the Peer Review of Social Protection and Social Inclusion programme. One of them was a



scheme to promote the socio-cultural participation of clients of the PCSWs. This 2012 Peer Review²² focused on a local level policy initiative aimed to combat child poverty and social exclusion in the implementation of which the main actors are the same as in the case of the present Discussion Paper (i.e. the PCSWs), thus it is highly relevant from the point of view of local consultation platforms.

It became clear from Peer Review that the Belgian Socio-Cultural Participation (hereafter: SCP) scheme is quite specific; while many countries have local level initiatives to help those in need, none has exactly the kind of scheme in place as the SCP measure. The measure in question consists of three types of subsidy for socio-cultural participation: a general SCP measure, a child-specific SCP measure, and a personal computer recuperation measure. As their names suggest, the general SCP measure, introduced in 2003, makes provision for all PCSW centres to receive a grant to promote participation by their clients (i.e. those in need) in social, cultural or sporting activities, while the child-specific SCP, developed in 2010, promotes the socio-cultural participation of children in client families. The measure focuses on all minor clients of the PCSWs, with special attention for children and young children (0-3 years). All actions can be undertaken directly by the PCSWs or can be organised through cooperation with other organisations. Both in case of the general and child specific SCP measures, PCSWs have the choice of opting for individual or collective actions.

An evaluation study found the SPC measures well integrated in the PCSWs activities (Vermeersch et al. 2011). The degree and use of the resources was often dependent on local policy decisions, and thereby hinges on the importance that is given to socio-cultural participation by the management of the Centres rather than reflecting the interests or requests of the clients. The 2012 Peer Review meeting pointed out that in order to create a coordinated approach to socio-cultural participation it is necessary to network institutions (at both an official and an unofficial level) from different fields (education, sports, culture, social welfare), and to ensure partnership between state institutions, local authorities and NGOs. That is, this is also a field in which local consultation platforms can play an additional role.

Stakeholder involvement – an earlier Peer Review

Another recent Peer Review was devoted to the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion²³, that is, to the issue of involving stakeholders in developing policies to combat child poverty and social exclusion. Although, this Peer Review analysed *stakeholder involvement* as regards to the NRP and the NSR in particular, it provides important lessons for a local level analysis too.

The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion (BPAPSE) forms the central consultation body for the preparation and monitoring of European and Belgian policy in the area of fighting 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. The overall goal of the Platform is to enhance the development and monitoring of policies to combat poverty and social exclusion by

²² Peer Review on combating child poverty through measures promoting the socio-cultural participation of clients of the Public Centres of Social Action/Welfare, Belgium 2012. See at <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1024&langId=en>

²³ Peer Review on the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020, Belgium 2014. See at <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1024&langId=en>



involving as many stakeholders as relevant from all levels of governance and a broad range of public and private organisations.

The Synthesis Report concludes that the BPAPSE has been successful in involving a wide range of actors, particularly from civil society and people experiencing poverty. BPAPSE has also proved to be an important source of information and an effective mechanism for information exchange on EU developments in relation to poverty and social exclusion. However, the Synthesis Report notes that many participants are concerned that its effect on the policy making process is very limited. In order to enhance its impact on social inclusion policy in general and on the content of the NRPs and NSRs in particular, there are a number of key challenges it will need to address. These include: increasing its formal status as a consultative body on social inclusion policies; developing a clearer link between discussions at Platform meetings on specific policy issues and the formulation or review of concrete policies; making its work more visible; providing more feedback to participants on the results of its work; further improving its efforts to involve people experiencing poverty; and broadening its engagement with officials and policy makers to include those not directly involved with social policies but responsible for the fields of economic policy, employment and labour market related issues.

The Synthesis Report identifies a number of reasons for developing structures to promote stakeholder involvement. Considering the subject of this Peer Review the following four seem to be highly relevant. Firstly, involving a broad range of stakeholders leads to better, more evidence based policies. This is due to the followings: a wider pool of knowledge to draw on, detailed and specific evidence from the ground on the impact of existing policies, early identification of new issues and emerging social inclusion challenges, and to the increased vertical and horizontal coordination of policies. Secondly, stakeholder involvement leads to more consensual policies. Thirdly, stakeholder involvement is a matter of people's fundamental rights and is a key tool in empowering people. Fourthly, involving stakeholders helps to create greater awareness of EU social inclusion policies.

Additionally, the Peer Review meeting called attention to some issues that can be relevant for the assessment of the Belgian local consultation platforms too. One of them was the definition of stakeholder involvement. Participants of the meeting found it helpful to think in terms of a continuum of stakeholder involvement which can range from information provision, through consultation, to developing joint policy proposals and ultimately to joint-decision making or co-determination. Looking at stakeholder involvement from a wider perspective, stakeholder involvement may occur in different phases of the policy cycle (i.e. the breadth of stakeholder involvement): preparation and design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation (Inbas and Engender 2010).

A study on stakeholders' involvement in the context of the Social OMC identifies three types of stakeholders: decision-makers in charge of policy decisions (e.g. government ministers, national civil servants, regional and local authorities); secondary stakeholders who are intermediaries in the policy process (e.g. service providers, representative organisations of vulnerable groups, social partners, experts, media); and primary stakeholders being ultimately affected by the policy (i.e. those experiencing poverty and social exclusion) (Inbas and Engender 2010). We recommend using the above definitions as a starting point to the discussion on the Belgian local consultation platforms.



2. Assessment of the policy under review

2.1 Assessment of the Children First programme

Brief summary of the programme

The 2013 Belgian National Plan to Combat Child Poverty, in line with the Commission's Recommendation on Investing in children, was shaped around three policy areas that are fundamental in the fight against child poverty and the promotion of child wellbeing: access to adequate resources, access to quality services, and opportunities for and active participation of children in society. In addition, the plan makes explicit mention of the need for a high degree of synergy between the different relevant policy levels and policy areas. Therefore, a fourth strategic goal, to set up horizontal and vertical partnerships between different policy areas and policy levels, completes the plan. The target group consists of children between the ages of 0 and 18, but the plan puts emphasis on children living in extreme poverty, on the early childhood years (0 to 3 years) and on adolescents (Schepers and Nicaise 2014:10).

The scope of the document is not restricted to Belgium's federal government and its federated entities; it also recognises the importance of offering an integrated range of services via the full coordination of the various service providers, and as such the plan focuses on organisations that operate at the lower policy levels. More specifically, the Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs) are encouraged to establish local consultation platforms where PCSWs, schools and childcare centres, poverty associations and other local associations can come together to discuss child poverty issues and explore possibilities for specialised solutions (Schepers and Nicaise 2014:9). Either way, the PCSWs, operating in each municipality, play an important role in enabling the socially and economically underprivileged to fully participate in society. To this end, they have a number of tools at their disposal, including income support (e.g. means-tested financial assistance in active age or old-age), in-kind support (e.g. culture and sport vouchers, etc.) and assistance (e.g. medical assistance in emergency, employment and career guidance, etc.).

Through the Children First programme, the federal government supports PCSWs in playing a leading role on the local level in the fight against childhood poverty through the launch of local consultation platforms (in 2013, EUR 2 million was allocated to this initiative). The intention is to ensure that child poverty is detected in a preventive and proactive manner and to look for joint remedies. More specifically, local consultation platforms strive for the following objectives: *i)* proactive detection and prevention of childhood poverty, *ii)* sensitising local partners about poverty, *iii)* stimulation of cooperation (uniting those actors that receive the signals of poverty, but do not have the knowledge and/or resources to take action and those that have all of these but do not come into contact with children and their families, and *iv)* stimulating local support and projects in the case of acute emergency situations (both at individual and collective levels). This latter, however, is supposed to be a short-term objective.

The local consultation platforms are expected to assume the following tasks: *i)* to sensitise local actors about poverty and informing them of the existing channels of aid, *ii)* to provide general support through social workers to local actors (e.g. child care workers, teachers, etc.), and *iii)* to provide concrete support including collective and individual level support (the latter acts as a supplement to and not a substitute for individual support provided by the PCSWs).



The target group of the consultation platforms, as described in the call for proposals, are children aged 12 and under, in poverty or at risk for poverty. Special attention is paid to early childhood (0-5 years). The main motivation behind this is not only that the risk of poverty in Belgium is the highest among the youngest children, but also that early childhood is crucial in proactively preventing and fighting poverty.

The results and achievements

In total, 57 pilot projects started on 1 May 2014. The selection was based on a call for proposals, which was open for PCSWs as well as for non-profit organisations. Of the 57 projects, 50 are managed by a PCSW and seven by an NGO. However, the PCSWs also play a prominent role in these seven consultation platforms. All pilot projects will run for 12 months.

The maximum financing per consultation platform depends on the population size of the settlement of the submitting organisation, ranging from EUR 25,000 to 75,000 (for a period of 12 months). Data show that the most frequently awarded amount was EUR 25,000. The resources can be used for staffing costs (via application or exemption) and operational costs. A maximum of 10% of the subsidy can be used to cover costs which arise within the framework of the platform activities for individual or collective needs and which contribute to the support of children. This can involve individual actions (e.g. intervention for an unpaid school bill or registration fees, etc.) or collective actions (e.g. training session for teachers and childcare workers on sensitivity issues and in certain areas, support for early development, etc.).

A study is being prepared on the consultation platforms with three specific aims: to describe and analyse the platforms, to create a best practices guide, and to formulate federal policy recommendations. At the time of preparing this paper, only some interim findings are available which are based on the project applications that were selected for funding. This first phase of the study contains information on the local needs, the target groups and the local partners, as well as on the functioning and the activities of the platforms.

The study identified the following common elements in the local needs as described by the platforms:

- optimising resources/working in a more efficient way;
- better ways to reach the target group and especially the hard-to-reach groups;
- better content-support: though professionals in different settings may be confronted with child poverty, they do not always know how to deal with it;
- more collaboration with partners of different kinds or with new partners.

In addition, a couple of conclusions were drawn by the size of settlement in which the consultation platform operates. One of them is to be mentioned here, a need to involve the target group itself in the category with population between 30,000 to 130,000 inhabitants²⁴.

The preliminary study also examined the representation of the different kinds of actors in the local consultation platforms. It states that childcare institutions and schools are well represented in all three regions. Beyond this similarity, there are substantial differences between the regions. In Flanders, for example, a majority of

²⁴ For further details on this, see Martijn (2014).



platforms cooperate with poverty associations, while as for the platforms operating in Wallonia this cooperation is not even mentioned.

An important finding of the ongoing evaluation study refers to the target group (as it is indicated in the applications). According to the call for proposals, the target group should consist of children aged 12 and under and their parents. This is indeed something that is described by virtually all platforms. However, the requirement to also involve the youngest children aged 5 and under, was not always described in the applications.

Finally, some findings are provided on the tasks and activities of the platforms. A general conclusion is that providing support for professional care workers is the activity that most platforms focus on. Besides this, support to the target group and providing care in the case of acute emergency situations, as well as enabling the information exchange are also activities that the vast majority of platforms perform. However, there are some differences across the regions²⁵.

Added value and remaining challenges

The launching of the Belgian local consultation platforms is an important innovation that is worth being examined thoroughly. However, relatively little time has passed since the outset of the programme (May of 2014), and we should not lose sight of this fact when assessing this policy initiative.

Breaking the recurring cycle of poverty and social exclusion requires early intervention to support children at risk and their families at the earliest opportunity. Such interventions appear to work best when they are delivered at a local level, in a comprehensive and integrated manner, and involve a wide range of actors (Frazer and Marlier 2007:11).

In the 2014 Belgian NRP, considerable attention was paid to the initiatives to combat child poverty at *lower levels of government*. To implement this strategy, the municipal PCSWs were appointed as key actors in creating local consultation platforms. This approach permits flexibility in response to local needs. The local PCSWs are not only important actors in launching consultation platforms, but also responsible for the provision of all three strands of the active inclusion strategy: adequate income protection (through the living wage), integration to the labour market (through employment and the individualised pathways) and access to quality services (Schepers and Nicaise 2013:11). The PCSWs provide a very wide range of services from housing support through childcare, health care and long-term care to network services (Schepers and Nicaise 2013:20-23). This integrated service provision, coupled with the discretionary competence, allows the PCSWs to provide a tailored response to the problem of child poverty and social exclusion. In practice, this can well be seen from the differing tasks and activities undertaken by the consultation platforms operating in the three regions. But there is the other side of the coin too. Not only can the local needs affect the operation of the consultation platform, but also the political vision of the PCSW. This was pointed out by an earlier evaluation study on the Belgian socio-cultural participation measure, designed for the clients of the PCSW.²⁶ Therefore, the effectiveness of the local

²⁵ For further information, see the Figures in Martijn (2014:13).

²⁶ Daly (2012): Peer Review on combating child poverty through measures promoting the socio-cultural participation of clients of the Public Centres of Social Action/Welfare, Belgium 2012.



consultation platforms in combating child poverty may vary strongly between centres, making an overall assessment of this policy initiative difficult.

We recall here that early childhood is not “a” but “the” crucial stage in children’s development and education (Frazer 2010:29). The early childhood period is given special attention in the Children First Programme and in the call for applications too. However, as the preliminary findings of the ongoing evaluation study suggest, this focus is not reflected in the applications. It remains to be seen to what extent the consultation platforms will put emphasis on early childhood.

The success of local consultation platforms in combating child poverty and exclusion will, to a large extent, depend on the involvement of a wide range of actors. It is especially so since the consultation platforms were initiated because of the insufficient information flow and weak coordination between actors working with children. However, the involvement of children experiencing poverty and of their parents is not given much attention in the programme. (As for the applications, this was mentioned only by the participating municipalities of Brussels and Wallonia). Further, and related to the issue of early childhood intervention, it is welcomed that Children First intends to involve childcare organisations as partners. However, in the follow-up of the implementation, childcare organisations are not separated from educational institutions. This should be important to assess to what extent early childhood is given emphasis in the implementation of the programme.

When assessing this policy measure, we should not neglect the wider context of which it is part. The first element that should be highlighted is Belgium’s complex institutional model that leads to complexity in competences related to child poverty being spread across the different policy levels (i.e. federal, regional, community and local). This complexity in itself requires a high level of coordination and a strongly integrated approach in combating child poverty. The country’s many years of experience with consultation platforms is also an element of the wider context, the significance of which should not be underestimated when assessing the transferability of the policy measure to other Member States. It is an open question that without a strong tradition of cooperation between actors from different levels and sectors how such a measure can be implemented successfully.

2.2 Assessment of the policy in relation to the priorities of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Social Investment Package

In general, the Belgian Children First programme has the potential to significantly contribute to the goals of Europe 2020 and the SIP (and especially the Commission Recommendation on Investing in children). First, it seeks to prevent the intergeneration transmission of poverty which is a direct contribution to the Europe 2020 Strategy. Second, Children First has a strong orientation to early intervention and prevention which are essential for developing effective and efficient policies. Third and closely related to this last point, the PCSWs, key players in creating the local consultation platforms, provide integrated services to their clients, and through this integrated strategy prevention is better achieved. Beyond these, the Children First programme was planned to strengthen coordination between the different actors. Through bringing together actors from different policy levels and sectors, the consultation platforms have the potential both to strengthen synergies between different fields/sectors (e.g. childcare, education, sports, etc.) and to promote cooperation between public authorities, local communities and civil society organisations.



Questions/issues for debate

Local programmes detecting child poverty

- What forms of child poverty can be best tackled by improving local coordination and cooperation between actors? Should the present well-being of children be considered first or should these programmes focus primarily on factors affecting the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of poverty?
- In what ways can the preventive and proactive detection of hidden poverty among children be achieved at local level? What forms of local level coordination and cooperation other than consultation platforms can be effective? What systemic and local conditions does the effectiveness of one or another form depend on?
- What outcomes related to poverty reduction can be expected from programmes aiming at developing processes (e.g. coordination, cooperation, sensitisation) in the first place instead of case-based direct interventions? How can these outcomes be operationalised?
- How can local programmes aiming at preventing childhood poverty be monitored and evaluated? What indicators should be used to overstep input-side evaluation? Given the diversity of activities covered by this type of programmes, how is an overall assessment possible (for the purpose of upscaling)?
- In what ways can poverty detection in early childhood be prioritised at local level? What is the role of early childhood education and care institutions? Given that children's development takes place in many (e.g. cognitive, emotional, social) life domains, what other institutions should be involved in the process?
- How can collective and individual level activities/support be mixed in the best way?

Involvement of all stakeholders

- What processes should relevant stakeholders be involved in (developing, implementing, monitoring policies)? What would be the barriers to involving them in all these processes? And how could they be overcome.
- Specifically, to what extent can children be involved in the different processes? What would be the barriers to involving them? How would it be possible to increase their involvement?
- Specifically, to what extent can parents be involved in the different processes? What would be the barriers to involving them? How would it be possible to increase their involvement?
- Should non-local level actors (experts, policy makers) be involved in the process? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of involving them?
- What results/outcomes can be expected from improving the involvement of stakeholders?



Transferability of the Belgian local consultation platforms to other Member States

- What conclusions can be drawn from the Belgian policy initiative for countries with a less complex institutional model?
- What conclusions can be drawn for countries that have no equivalent to the Belgian PCSWs?
- What conclusions can be drawn for those countries that lack a tradition of stakeholder involvement?
- What would be the barriers to launching local consultation platforms in other Member States?
- How can the EU better support poverty reduction among children via the Social Investment Package?

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