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Combating **child poverty**
through measures promoting the socio-
cultural participation of clients of the Public
Centres for Social Welfare

SYNTHESIS REPORT

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participation of clients of the Public Centres for
Social Welfare

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SYNTHESIS REPORT

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Summary

The Peer Review addressed the topic of participation in socio-cultural activities as part of a strategy to address child poverty. Held in Brussels on 20-21 September 2012, the Peer Review was hosted by the Belgian federal Public Planning Service for Social Integration (PPS Social Integration). In addition to the host country, ten peer countries were represented: Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway and Spain. The stakeholder representatives were Eurochild and COFACE. Taking part for the European Commission were staff members of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

The host country showcased a number of initiatives. These centre on a series of measures which provide resources to enable those on low income to participate in socio-cultural activities. In particular, since 2003 federal funds have been made available to the Public Centres for Social Action/Welfare (PCSA/W) to promote social and cultural participation on the part of the clients who use their services. In 2010 a specific funding stream was instituted to enable the Centres to focus on the socio-cultural participation of children. A further strand gives a small amount of funding for clients to purchase second-hand computers. There are a number of things that make these measures interesting: the specific focus on socio-cultural participation in an anti-poverty context; the use of measures to address both adults and children; the fact that the monies expended while small may have a leverage effect. In a broader EU context, socio-cultural participation policies are the least developed domain of policy addressing child poverty in Member States (income services and child/family related services being far more developed). The contribution of diminished access to socio-cultural participation as a factor in child or adult poverty was therefore at the centre of the Peer Review along with discussions about how such participation can be brought about. The over-riding challenge and opportunity of the Peer Review was to put policy substance and concrete meaning on 'participation in socio-cultural activities' in the context of child poverty.

The specificity if not the uniqueness of the Belgian measures was clear from both the country papers and the discussions at the Peer Review. While many countries have locality-based welfare institutions that deal with those in need and many also have some measures in place to enable access to socio-cultural activities on the part of children and adults in the low-income sectors of the population, none has exactly the kind of scheme in place as the Socio-Cultural Participation (SCP) measure.

The different papers as well as the presentations led to wide-ranging discussions. These focused on five main themes. The first was the meaning of socio-cultural participation. This is not only a very general term but it is also a rather vague one. In the interests of building a common understanding of concepts and challenges, the participants felt that placing both socio-cultural and participation on a continuum would help clarify the different resonances of the two terms for policy. The former ranges from education and learning activities at one end to activities that are more broadly developmental on the other whereas 'participation' can mean access or a more profound engagement whereby people have a say in the decision making and design of provisions.

A second theme was the links between socio-cultural participation and child poverty. In this regard, a number of points were made about how such participation can counteract children's poverty and social exclusion, by, for example, engendering a sense of belonging,



reducing the social isolation of poor children, allowing children to mix with children from other backgrounds, and creating and disseminating social innovation.

The barriers to socio-cultural participation by children was another prominent theme. Those identified included financial barriers, cultural barriers, spatial barriers, technological barriers, administrative barriers, and barriers relating to self-esteem, confidence and personal skills.

There was also a broad-ranging discussion relating to issues of policy design and delivery. Among the points made here were the following: that socio-cultural participation should be developed as part of a constellation of policies to counter child poverty and social exclusion and that to be effective it should be made part of the strategic documents concerning children. The need for a holistic approach was stressed as was the necessity of networking across service providers. There was considerable discussion of the state's role (and its limits) in regard to participation. Peer reviewers also agreed that more attention should be dedicated to research on the consequences of socio-cultural participation or its absence on children.

Finally, a number of key points were made about the SCP measure itself. First, it was pointed out that, as well as being a form of activation, it aims at stimulating creativity, rather than imposing any particular approach at the local level. Some argued that, while the Belgian SCP scheme is driven by client demand, a supply-led approach could also be tried, i.e., SCP would be offered and promoted by the PCSA/Ws. Consideration should also be given to the possibility to build mobilisation options into the Belgian policy whereby the clients would not simply access something that exists but would create something or be resourced to set up their own participatory activity.

Overall, the potential of the SCP measure, in its own right and in regard to Europe 2020 and the forthcoming Recommendation on child poverty, was emphasised.



A. Policy context at European level

According to the latest available data, one child in five across the EU is living in a household with income below the national at-risk-of-poverty threshold. In Belgium, 18.3% of children are in such households. Moreover, in 2009 12.5% of the EU's children were living in households which cannot afford a regular leisure activity (such as swimming, playing an instrument or participating in a youth organisation) for them (European Commission 2011). In addition, the families of 15% of children in the EU cannot afford an outdoor space for the children to play; 39% are unable to afford the children's participation in school events; and 34% say they cannot afford to invite their children's friends to the house.

The fight against child poverty is a major focus of EU social policy and was a key theme of the Belgian EU presidency in 2010 and the Cyprus presidency in 2012. Matters relating to child poverty are present in a transversal manner in a number of EU policy areas. These include the EU Agenda on the Rights of the Child; policy on poverty and social ex/inclusion; education and training policies (in particular in relation to early school leaving and early childhood education); measures for the reconciliation of work and family life; cohesion policy (through the development of childcare and/or housing infrastructures and support for deinstitutionalisation).

There are five key elements to the policy and institutional framework at EU level.

- The focus on children's rights and the living conditions of children, in particular the recognition of children as rights' holders in the Charter of Fundamental Human Rights and the measures proposed in the 2006 Communication 'Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child'.
- Child poverty has been prioritised in EU cooperation on social issues - in particular through the Social Open Method of Coordination and now the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion. Child poverty was the subject of a number of Council Conclusions (especially December 2010 and June 2011) and both the European Economic and Social Committee and the Regional Committee have issued Opinions on it. Furthermore, the presidency trio Spain-Belgium-Hungary in 2010 adopted a Common Declaration on the issue. The Social Protection Committee has also focused rather intensively on the matter of child poverty. Furthermore, a commitment to a Recommendation on child poverty is made as part of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion.
- Socio-cultural participation links also with the emphasis placed by the EU on the importance of access to quality services in the context of the fight against poverty and joblessness (especially as articulated in the 2008 Recommendation *Active Inclusion of People Excluded from the Labour Market*). This involves ensuring the quality, accessibility and affordability of a whole range of fundamental services. The EU's consistent support for and promotion of childcare and early education measures is another important part of the context here.
- EU engagement with the matter of participation of young people is also of relevance. Among the relevant EU measures here have been the 'Youth in Action' Programme



(2007-2013) and the Commission Communication *'Promoting Young People's Full Participation in Education, Employment and Society'*.

- Another pertinent element of the EU framework is the support of stakeholder and civil society networks and organisations operating in the field of child welfare and child well-being. These include the European Alliance for Families, Eurochild, the European Social Platform and EAPN.

The broad field, viewed from the perspective of the EU, is defined, then, at one end by the increasing importance given to child poverty and well-being and on the other by the growth of a rights culture in relation to children. Children's participation in socio-cultural activities is an important bridge or link between these two.

Turning to Member States, there are three common policy objectives to be found in their approach to child poverty (Frazer and Marlier 2007). The first is to ensure that children grow up in families with sufficient resources to meet their essential needs. The second is to give children access to the services and opportunities that will enhance their present and future well-being and enable them to reach their full potential. The third objective, which is especially close to the subject of this Peer Review, is to promote the participation of children in society and in particular in social, recreational, sporting and cultural life. This, however, is much less common as a policy objective in comparison to the other two. In addition to these, Frazer and Marlier identify two themes which cut across most policy areas on child poverty. These are, first, the importance of early intervention and ensuring that children have a good start in life; and, second, the need to improve delivery of policies at regional and local levels.

Taking an overview of Member State policy on child poverty, there are two outstanding challenges, both of which dovetail closely with the subject of the Peer Review. The first is the difficulty of implementing a multi-dimensional approach which integrates activities across different policy areas. According to TARKI (2010) only a few Member States have a coherent package of measures to combat child poverty. Moreover, mainstreaming policies to promote the inclusion of children is still at an early stage in most Member States. A second outstanding challenge is to bring about the participation of children. While almost everyone agrees with the philosophy of children's rights, arrangements to involve children in the development of policies and programmes are still rudimentary. Two main barriers seem to exist here: first the difficulty of specifying the meaning of children's 'participation' in concrete terms and second the reform challenge that is posed to highly patriarchal and family-oriented systems to treat children as rights holders who should be listened to.



B. The Belgian policy on socio-cultural participation

Socio-cultural participation is regarded as a fundamental civil right in Belgium and has been defined as such in the country's constitution since 1994. Each Belgian municipality has a Public Centre for Social Action/Welfare (PCSA/W), which caters for individuals and families with insufficient means of income from work or welfare benefits and also operates as a general resource for people in need of assistance with a range of problems.

Three interlinked federal subsidy measures are available for the PCSA/Ws' work in the field of socio-cultural participation:

- **A general Socio-Cultural Participation (SCP) measure.** This dates from 2003 and makes provision for all PCSA/W centres to receive a grant to promote participation by their clients in social, cultural or sporting activities. There is discretion as to how the resources can be expended but generally the measure functions to render individual support to clients (e.g., contributing to membership fees and costs for clubs or associations in one of the fields). Actions can be undertaken directly by the Centres or can be organised through cooperation with other organisations. The budget for the measure was EUR 6.6 million in 2010 (an annual funding level more or less sustained since the measure was introduced in 2003). Evaluation of the measure shows that the PCSA/Ws draw widely upon it and that demand is increasing, although recourse to and use of the funding varies from one municipality to another (Vermeersch et al 2011).
- **A measure for combating poverty among the children of PCSA/W clients.** In 2010-2011, the federal government provided a new stream of funding specific to the socio-cultural participation of children (funding: EUR 4.2 million). The measure focuses on all minor clients of the PCSA/Ws, with enabling participation by minors in social, recreational, cultural, sporting, and civic activities as the main objective. The range of 'participation' is very broad, including in social programmes, educational support, psychological or paramedical support or support for buying games and pedagogical materials. The evaluation suggests that in practice most of the funding is used for educational support (for example on paying unpaid school bills, school meals, books, bus passes, excursions, preschool/after school care and paramedical support such as speech therapy, medication or baby formula, orthodontist or optician bills) (Vermeersch et al 2011).
- **A "PC recuperation" measure.** Since 2007, PCSA/Ws have been able to draw on federal resources to purchase second-hand PCs for their clients. Only a limited number of centres make use of this measure and take-up is continuing to fall. This is mainly due to the low federal contribution per computer (EUR 100 maximum) and the fact that other ICT-related costs (internet connections, printers etc.) cannot be covered with these resources.

In addition to the federally funded measures, a number of regional and local initiatives are being undertaken in Belgium to promote socio-cultural participation by children from im-



poverished households. Among the good practice examples described to the peer reviewers is a 'children's rights plan' adopted by the Flemish municipality of Zottegem to ensure that all its children enjoy four fundamental rights: a safe home, health, education and leisure. And in the Walloon municipality of Hensies, a Children's Council elected by school students enables children to propose and implement their own activities to promote social inclusion.

The general measure was evaluated in 2011 (Vermeersch et al 2011). The measure was found to be well-integrated in the PCSA/W activities with grant applications increasing over time. However, the degree and use of the resources was often quite dependent on local policy decisions, and thereby on the importance that is attributed to socio-cultural participation by the management of the Centres. The research also pointed out the need to be aware of potential hidden barriers on the part of potential users (e.g., fear of participating, shame, low self-esteem) as well as hidden costs (clothing, equipment, social events connected to membership). Under-use is another problem with the measure, especially for the second and third elements (which are also admittedly much newer). One potential gap was also identified by the researchers: poor children whose parents are not clients of the PCSA/W. Overall, the research recommended that the administrative separation between the general measure and that for children be eliminated and that the resource system be made more flexible, allowing for 'supernumerary requests for resources', i.e., requests for spending beyond the resources provided for the individual Centre, but by transfer of unused subsidies (from other Centres and/or across budget years).

The SCP provision is interesting and innovative and helps to flesh out how the priorities of the Europe 2020 strategy and those of individual Member States might be further developed and applied.

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First, it implies a broad approach to and understanding of 'participation' and 'activation' - supporting opportunities for people experiencing poverty to get out and mix with other people in a range of cultural and social outlets. The locus of integration is 'normal' social life, rather than market or economic activity and the overall measure is aimed at helping people to develop resilience and self-confidence (empowerment) in a range of settings.

In relation to children, the SCP places the matter of children's access to and participation in socio-cultural activities in the context of early learning and subsequent development. In this and other ways, the provision has a strong orientation to prevention and social investment.

In the context of Europe 2020, measures like the SCP have added value due to the way they seek to intervene in the inter-generational transmission of poverty. Moreover, they understand such transmission not in the usual sense of family failure but as missing opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to get involved socially and culturally. Among other relevant pointers in the SCP for Europe 2020 are, first, that it is in essence a service approach to child poverty; second that it is a local service; third that it is a relatively inexpensive measure.



C. Policies and experiences in the Member States

In **Croatia** policy against poverty is embodied in a number of systems and instruments, but especially in a minimum income programme that is organised through the social welfare centre which grants financial support to individuals and households in need and provides care and other forms of professional assistance. However, as opposed to Belgium, Croatia does not provide for a special right of the social welfare beneficiary to financial support for socio-cultural and sports activities, and no special funds from the state or local budget are allocated for this purpose. Social welfare beneficiaries may satisfy those needs (sports, cultural, social) through one-off assistance, although such assistance is intended for more basic needs. Nor is there special support for socio-cultural and sports activities on the part of children. However, the Social Welfare Act does foresee the right to support for education, which includes the costs of accommodation in student homes, transport costs, text books and full-time studying. In addition, the National Action Plan for the Rights and Interests of Children 2006-2012 includes a special area of activity, entitled 'children's leisure-time and culture'. For children whose development is in jeopardy as a result of inadequate parental care there is a programme of group work with children as part of 'small creative socialisation groups' active within social welfare centres and primary schools, which are intended for work with children from at risk families.

In **Finland**, local authorities are responsible for children's basic growth environments (day care centres and schools), services aimed to support growth (child health clinics and school health care) as well as overseeing sports and leisure facilities and activities. Access to these services is mostly free of charge or the price is low. While general income transfers to families with children are funded by state taxation, municipalities pay the basic income support to people or families entitled to it and make decisions on which expenses can be covered through discretionary support. Some municipalities offer 'a culture passport' to varying age groups of children to support their attendance at cultural activities (theatre, concerts, movies, art galleries, museums etc.). This kind of voucher model has similarities with the Belgian model. Early childhood education is a very strong element of Finnish policy. Finnish children have a universal entitlement to day care services after the parental leave has ended (when the child is approximately 10 months old). Fees are progressive with a maximum of EUR 264 a month and a 0-class for lowest income families. However, a possibility to establish a state grant or state subsidised measure to ensure children's right to socio-cultural participation has not been on the political agenda in Finland.

From a public administrative perspective **France** is highly decentralised which means that the County Council manages key services at county ('*département*') level relating to education, child welfare, assistance to disabled adults and the elderly, health protection for families and child, the fight against social problems. Many responsibilities are carried out at a local level (municipalities), where the borough social action centre (CCAS) is a key actor (and the closest equivalent to the PCSA/W). Its mission is also to fight against exclusion but neither the municipality nor County Council makes specific provision for the socio-cultural participation of children or adults. 'Participation' in a more general meaning is receiving increased attention in France, though, with the idea of people becoming involved in public policy making and assessment now considered an important part of democracy, comple-

mentary to parliamentary democracy. In the field of active inclusion policies, many efforts have been made since 2004 to put participation into practice.

In **Germany**, Jobcentres are the closest equivalent to the Belgian PCSA/W, being responsible for working-age people who are able to work and who are in need because their income or assets are too low. The German system favours both lump-sum monetary payments (to increase beneficiaries' personal responsibility for dealing with their resources) and also benefits in kind and services. The latter have become an important distribution mechanism for children and juveniles following a judgment of the Federal Constitutional Court of 9 February 2010. The Court ruled (among other things) that access to education and participation on the part of disadvantaged children had to be expanded, and gave a legal right to such benefits for roughly 2.5 million children, juveniles and young adults in Germany. This constitutes a major difference to the Belgian approach, in which the granting of individual allowances for participation is at the discretion of the PCSA/W. Another difference vis-à-vis Belgium is that in Germany the 'list' of educational and participation-related services is defined by law and includes, for example, help with fees for culture, sports and leisure activities, the costs of taking part in excursions or trips, appropriate learning support, transportation to school, the purchase of school materials. The latter two benefits are granted in the form of monetary payments, the others as benefits in kind and services (e.g. vouchers or payments directly to the providers of the services in question).

Italy has no local service that has the same responsibilities as the PCSA/W. Nor is the socio-cultural participation of children or adults specifically supported at national or regional level. In Italy, the social service functions performed by the PCSA/W in Belgium come under the responsibility of two different institutions: the local health authorities and the municipalities. The possibility of fragmentation and large regional variation make it difficult to provide comprehensive care for children/adolescents. A new programme funded by the national government, still in its early stages, seeks to strengthen children's and parents' participation and promote professional debate and the exchange of best practices. P.I.P.P.I. (*Programma di Intervento Per la Prevenzione dell'Istituzionalizzazione* – action plan for the prevention of institutionalisation) provides a comprehensive system of care for vulnerable families, in which the participation of families themselves is integrated as an operating principle. During 2011 and 2012, the action plan has been put in place on a pilot basis in ten Italian cities. The programme has been designed as a research-action initiative and its main goal is to prevent child placement out-of-home. The activities promoted are aimed at empowering and improving parental skills, promoting full involvement in children's school life and strengthening social networks (environmental and family-related factors). Parents' groups are organised and there is also a procedure to match each target family with a supporting family, in order to provide the former with support in daily routines and life, both at a practical and an emotional level.

Lithuania has centres for social assistance and services (CSAS) operating under the local authorities which are equivalent to the Belgian PCSA/Ws. While these perform the functions delegated by both central government and the local authorities, they are not engaged in subsidising or directly promoting the socio-cultural development or participation of children. Matters relating to children's participation in cultural and sports activities fall within the competence of the Ministry of Culture, the Physical Culture and Sports Department, and a range of relevant divisions of local authorities. Given the spread of responsibilities, resource shortages and the fact that socio-cultural participation of children tends to be viewed as a



luxury, the possibility of children from the more vulnerable sectors to be engaged in socio-cultural activities is highly constrained. Furthermore, there is a significant lack of sports and active leisure facilities, especially in the rural areas. Early childhood education and care is the predominant concern of policy on children at the present time, with the establishment of a universal pre-school 'education basket', for children aged 4 to 6 years and strong government commitments to improve provision. While still at an early stage, socio-cultural participation on the part of children is being developed in Lithuania – since 2011, a 'non-formal education basket' for children aged from 4 to 19 years has been implemented on a pilot basis. It is aimed at promoting the development of and access to cultural, sports and other non-formal development services but concentrates on provision rather than enabling access of disadvantaged children through a designated funding stream.

Luxembourg has no legal right to socio-cultural participation but has a range of other measures in place for children from low-income families which include socio-cultural participation. Such children benefit from 25 hours education and care per week free of charge. Moreover, for hours of care exceeding the 25 free hours, reduced tariffs are charged. Vouchers, which can be claimed by parents for all resident children aged 0-12 years, can be used to access services. Of particular importance are *Maisons Relais* (a new type of service introduced as part of reforms in 2005) which offer a broader range of services than conventional daycare such as support for homework, restaurants, holiday activities, out of school activities, informal education activities. Childcare vouchers are part of a broader attempt in Luxembourg to expand and invest in extracurricular education, and are designed to ensure access to such services for all children, irrespective of their social and economic background and to promote equal opportunities and gender equality for all. Of relevance also is the 'cultural passport', which was introduced in 2010 (as part of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion). Targeting those who are considered socially disadvantaged, the card allows free access to museums and provides discounts for theatres and cultural events.

Malta shares some common elements with the Belgian case. These include the idea of a one-stop shop for the provision of different social welfare services. Malta's ACCESS Community and Resource Centres operate as a platform providing a wide array of social support services for individuals and families. Such services include the provision of child-care facilities for children below the age of three years and day services for persons with a disability. However, while individual providers may offer free or subsidised participation in socio-cultural activities for low-income sectors of the population, this varies and no national scheme exists to subsidise and enable socio-cultural participation by low income people and their children. However, the National Strategy Report for Social Protection and Social Inclusion, Malta's main policy document in the field of child poverty, has as one of its three strategic actions to enhance the personal development of children (mentioning educational attainment, employability, informal learning, active citizenship and engagement in sports and creativity).

The right to socio-cultural participation is not codified in the relevant Act in **Norway** (Law on Social Services in the Labour and Welfare Administration, 2009), but the comments on the law state that expenses relating to normal leisure activities are to be considered as part of a person's ordinary living expenses. Children's right to participate in leisure and school activities which are normal for their age group is especially emphasised by policy in Norway. The PCSA/Ws appear to have many of the same functions as the joint Labour and Welfare



offices (NAV-offices) in Norway. These manage social security and labour market services. In addition, Norway too has grant schemes as part of its action plan against poverty. The two most relevant such schemes are grants for children and youth in larger urban areas (which typically fund holiday and leisure activities designed to promote inclusion) and grants to prevent and reduce poverty among children, youth and families which are in contact with the social services in the NAV-offices (which typically focus on competence- and co-operation-building in the social services, and includes some funding for support for school-related activities). However in Norway, the grants are not used for the support of individuals necessarily – they have both a systemic element and are guided by a principle of universalism which means that the funded activities have to be open and available for all children and youth, in order to avoid stigmatisation.

In **Spain**, education, social service and family provision is highly decentralised. There is no specific strategy for combating child poverty but child poverty is addressed through other strategies. One relevant strategy in the context of this Peer Review is the *Strategic National Plan for Children and Adolescents* (PENIA) which establishes a cooperation framework for the provision of health, education, family policies and those relating to physical, social, cultural and political environment. One of the strategic objectives is to encourage a physical, ecological, social, cultural and political environment which allows the proper development of the capabilities of children while another seeks to guarantee effective participation by children and adolescents as citizens. Participation in socio-cultural, sporting and recreational activities is not covered by a national scheme as in Belgium though, although the local councils and NGOs may offer assistance to poor families for these purposes. Hence, this kind of support is subject to variations in availability and access. Moreover, the current economic crisis and the need to cut the public deficit is acting to reduce the resources expended for these purposes.

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At European level, COFACE emphasises the link between child poverty and family poverty. It sees poverty as diverse which means that a ‘one size fits all’ approach will not work. COFACE is lobbying for 2014 to be designated the European Year for Reconciling Work and Family Life. It emphasises the need for an integrated approach to children’s SCP. Activities should be accessible to all and particular groups of children should not be singled out. COFACE favours partnerships between regional and local authorities, schools, family organisations and civil society. In the current climate, budget cuts and austerity measures – especially in the countries of Southern, Central and Eastern Europe – can have devastating effects.

Eurochild welcomed the Belgian policy for its multidimensional perspective, as well as its focus on social inclusion and equality of opportunity for children who face marginalisation. Eurochild’s policy approach revolves around ensuring that early childhood services focus on children’s broader educational development, including education in non-formal settings. The promotion of learning hubs, already used in some places, can help here. These are tool-boxes for involving children in decisions that impact on their lives. Eurochild recommends the adoption of an integrated, outcome-based budget process that emphasises positive impacts on human development for children in families. It should provide for the involvement of stakeholders, including civil society. In the view of Eurochild, European leadership on this issue is needed more than ever now and there are possibilities, under the Europe 2020 targets, the upcoming Recommendation and the new regulations on how the structural funds should be spent, to make significant advances in child poverty.



D. Key issues discussed during the meeting

The very rich discussion can be summarised in terms of five main themes.

A major topic was the **precise meaning** of ‘socio-cultural participation’. The term has many references. Moreover, because it is not that widely used, it has the potential to be vague in meaning. Taking the ‘socio-cultural’ bit of the term, it can include activities that are cultural, social, sporting and educational in nature. In the interests of clarifying its meaning, it was suggested that ‘socio-cultural’ could be understood by situating it on a continuum. At one end are activities that are educational and learning oriented (including civic learning) – this set of references connects socio-cultural participation of children with their educational development. At the other end are activities that are more generally developmental (such as cultural and sports engagement) oriented to socialisation and development of a range of capacities and social aptitudes. Another way of representing these two is as formal and informal education.

The meaning of ‘participation’ too is diverse and disputed and the discussion underlined the need to view ‘participation’ in a relatively complex way. In the first interpretation, participation is mainly seen as access to socio-cultural and welfare services. A very different interpretation of the term ‘participation’ focuses on the involvement of stakeholders in the decision-making processes. This draws upon ideas of democratic functioning, and citizenship education. These levels are linked in a continuum, but they need to be distinguished, since the tools to be used to achieve them are different. To realise participation as access, for example, funding can be made available for the local or national institutions to finance vouchers, special discount cards or economic benefits or ‘passports’ of some kind. An underlying principle here should be equal access. To realise participation in decision-making, a much more profound set of actions is needed, including the creation of opportunities to become participants and develop the skills needed for such participation. And of course it needs to be acknowledged that we are still at a very early stage of understanding and enabling the participation of children.

A second broad issue discussed was the **linkages between socio-cultural participation and child poverty**. One can represent the discussion here in terms of different rationales for having a policy on socio-cultural participation. One such rationale is the prevention of social isolation of poor children. For certain groups of children, especially those from minority groups that have their own preschool institutions or attend classes with only members of their own ethnic group (which is sometimes the case for Roma children), the integration which can be achieved through socio-cultural participation is extremely important (mingling and contacts with members of the majority group). Secondly, an emphasis on user participation can be a means of promoting integrated and coordinated approaches. Placing the user at the centre, and listening to what the user has to say, facilitates better cooperation between different agencies, and also increases the chances of designing interventions that are relevant for the client. Marginalised users, however, often have little capacity to be actively involved, and may not articulate needs that go beyond the immediate situation. A third rationale is that the development of social, educational, cultural and sports services can be viewed (and promoted) as the creation and dissemination of social innovation. Fourthly, socio-cultural participation addresses exclusion in that it can generate a sense of belonging, recognition and acknowledgement, especially on the part of those from minority



groups or cultures (provided of course that there is respect for the cultural backgrounds and starting situations of all those taking part).

A third major point of discussion was the **barriers to socio-cultural participation facing children**, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The discussion here can be synthesised by saying that the main barriers were seen to be of six main types.

- Financial barriers are among the most obvious, arising from shortages of money in families and low prioritisation of socio-cultural participation when money is scarce. It is important also to recognise that lack of participation in socio-cultural activities may be associated with a host of 'triggers' such as parents' losing their jobs, the substitution of funds to meet more basic needs, and so forth.
- Cultural barriers to participation may arise either because of blockages stemming from the cultural background of children and adults, or 'cultural blindness' or lack of multi-culturalism on the part of the services. Sometimes, these barriers are related to language difficulties or lack of information: newly arrived immigrants, and minority families who are isolated, may not be aware of the possibilities for participation or may lack the necessary 'cultural resources' (like language) to participate. In other cases, there might be resistance on the grounds of cultural principles: families may resist letting children participate in majority organisations out of fear that children will be offered "unclean" food, or be encouraged to interact with persons of the other sex in ways that are culturally unacceptable. And then there is the matter of services not being sufficiently open to different cultures or sub-sectors of the population. Such barriers are obviously not easily overcome, but awareness of the issue makes it easier to find solutions that are acceptable to all.
- Spatial barriers may take the form of significant differences among regions or areas as regards the availability of or access to socio-cultural facilities. Think of the differences between urban and rural settings for example. A related problem may be that certain activities of socio-cultural participation are funded from local sources, so that poorer units of local self-government have no funds to finance them. In addition, the presence of non-governmental organisations that might contribute to socio-cultural participation by children varies from area to area. A further barrier arises from lack of access to transport. In rural areas, this is linked to long distances and limited public transport, in urban areas it can be due to unaffordable or unsafe public transport.
- Technological barriers may arise when children and youth who do not have access to a computer, and/or reasonably high-speed internet, are excluded from activities that are now part and parcel of child and youth culture (social networking, computer games, etc). The Belgian scheme, helping low-income families to acquire a computer, helps to address this problem.
- Another type of barrier is administrative in nature and pertains to the difficulties of reaching people who are most in need. This is one of the weaknesses of a targeted approach as embodied in the SCP measure, another is possible stigmatisation. One way to reach all families and avoid stigmatisation is to combine a universal approach with a more specific one. A related factor is the lack of skills and knowledge



among professionals about how to empower children in the running of activities. There is also the fact that many institutions and those who work for or in them are not particularly well-disposed to engaging with the poorer sections of the population. Class and cultural issues often prevail.

- Along with such barriers the discussion drew attention to what may be called ‘internal barriers’ to children’s socio-cultural participation. These include feelings of lack of self-respect and sense of self-worth as well as lack of ‘social skills’ and confidence, all of which may have the effect of stopping children from participating. Children who are ‘different’ in some respect – for example being from a minority background, having a disability – are especially likely to experience this kind of barrier.

Issues relating to **policy design and delivery** were a subject of considerable discussion. A broad range of factors was raised here.

The feeling was widespread that policies on socio-cultural participation cannot replace other policies on poverty but should be developed as part of a constellation of policies to counter child poverty and social exclusion. The suggestion was also made that in order to improve socio-cultural participation it would be useful to have it made part of the strategic documents concerning children.

- The need for a holistic approach was stressed. Such a holistic strategy would seek to improve children’s development and education in a fashion which considers integrated socio-cultural participation as normal. This would help to turn socio-cultural participation into an important and positive story. In order to create an integrated and coordinated approach to socio-cultural participation, it is also necessary to network institutions (at both an official and unofficial level) from several fields: education, sports, culture, social welfare, and to ensure partnership between state institutions, local authorities and non-governmental organisations. The role of NGOs in promoting participation was especially emphasised. Buddy systems and anchorpersons in institutions offer a cost-efficient opportunity to overcome barriers and involve children from various backgrounds. Volunteers play an important role in this respect. Tackling children’s problems via the places that children go to – notably schools, youth clubs and so forth – should be an accepted part of a policy approach.
- Peer reviewers were generally agreed on the principle of children being involved in making decisions about their development. It was felt that this policy message should be retained in the upcoming EU Recommendation and that policy makers would benefit from information about how this can be achieved in practice. In the latter regard, the Peer Review was informed that the Council of Europe is currently discussing a self-assessment tool for Member States on the implementation of child and youth participation as described in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The tool will be launched in 2014.
- The question of how to incentivise participation was also discussed. Some good practice examples mentioned were schemes in France and Romania under which children receive points for achievement at school, and can then spend these points on activities such as summer camps. Also, socially useful activities such as cleaning up neighbourhoods can be part of children’s participation. It was suggested that,



rather than treating children's SCP as an appendix to schooling, we should perhaps make a paradigm shift and use SCP as a way of leading into schooling. A number of European countries already have forms of civic participation for children, such as the election of children's councils at the municipal level.

- It was pointed out that the availability of parents or guardians for supervision is an important condition for participation by children, particularly young children. Time poverty is a growing issue across Europe and so scarcity of parental time may also act to limit children's participation.
- There was considerable discussion of the state's role (and its limits) in regard to participation. Some speakers supported the view that participation should be seen as a continuum that includes education. Others argued that any definition should strictly limit the state's role to that of social investment. There is also the fact that in some countries the role of the state is circumscribed by law or practice. In Germany for example, the principal right to decide over children's education lies with the parents and is guaranteed by the Basic Law (article 6 of Basic Law). This 'parental priority principle' is the reason why many programmes in Germany are aimed at strengthening parents' ability to support their children. This taken more broadly as a principle suggests that efforts must always be made to bring parents along with services and activities for children as much as possible (either directly or indirectly). It also means, among other things, that making participation an individual right of children may encounter legal and other difficulties. And yet if SCP is not codified in some manner, there is the risk that municipal, regional and national authorities will not maintain its budgets at times of austerity.
- Peer reviewers also agreed that more attention should be dedicated to research on the consequences for children of socio-cultural participation or its absence. More research on the outcomes of children's SCP could help to strengthen the social investment case. Furthermore, it might also be useful to include socio-cultural participation as one of the indicators of material deprivation in the EU.
- It is also necessary to devote attention to raising awareness of the importance of socio-cultural participation for poor children as this is not that widely recognised as an issue and may be low on the list of priorities of parents and governments that view themselves as relatively poor.

Finally, a number of key points were made about **the SCP measure**. First, it was pointed out that it aims at stimulating creativity, rather than imposing any particular approach at the local level. Some argued that, while the Belgian SCP scheme is driven by client demand, a supply-led approach could also be tried – i.e., SCP would be offered and promoted by the PCSA/Ws. There is also the possibility to build mobilisation options into the Belgian policy. So the clients would not simply access something that exists, they would create something or be resourced to set up their own participatory activity. The risk here would be that poor children might end up interacting only with other poor children, but the measure is in principle broad enough to accommodate the notion of children (or adults) creating something themselves.



E. Key learning elements

- **Poverty is a matter not only of money but also of access** to education, health care, childcare, family support etc. So to tackle the social exclusion arising from poverty, a **multidimensional approach** is needed.
- In most European countries, **more children than adults are at risk of poverty**. In times of austerity, **the number of children at risk is likely to increase**. This is particularly serious because, in addition to its short-term **effects on children, poverty has longer-lasting impacts that play out** over the course of **their lives**.
- **In the current economic climate especially**, it may be necessary to argue the case for SCP measures in terms of **social investment**. However, it should be remembered that for the children concerned, these measures may also produce **important benefits to which no economic value can be assigned** (such as self-esteem, belonging, friendship and happiness).
- It is of crucial importance to **listen carefully to children's needs** and to offer them appropriate opportunities to develop and have their voice heard. This entails actively involving children, parents and families in designing SCP measures.
- The Belgian scheme is a good example of a **small-scale, relatively inexpensive measure targeting the most vulnerable that has leverage effects** by generating other activities and commitments.
- The Belgian policy is a good example of **interaction between the local level and a strong national framework**. In particular, the Belgian scheme incorporates **flexible funding arrangements** that can accommodate varying local conditions and priorities.
- By using the **PCSA/Ws as a channel for SCP measures**, Belgium has taken an important step forward in **targeting** those measures.
- However, there are **"leakages"**, given that a considerable number of children who ought to benefit from such measures have no connection with PCSA/W clients. Moreover non-take-up of SCP measures represents a significant concern and the various reasons (e.g. lack of information, stigmatisation) should be considered in the development and implementation.
- The use of the PCSA/Ws implies a **risk of exclusion** of some households from the SCP measures, even if they are clients of a centre. In service organisations that exist primarily to provide means-tested social support staff members tend to think in terms of 'worthy' and 'unworthy' clients.
- The **stigmatisation** of those receiving SCP support is a real risk. However, there are ways around this. For example, a municipality may decide to issue all of its children with passes for a sports facility. Either these are issued free of charge to all or else



the passes should be so designed that it is impossible to distinguish between those who have paid for them and those who have received them for free.

- Buddy systems and anchorpersons in institutions offer a cost-efficient opportunity to overcome barriers and involve children from various backgrounds. Volunteers play an important role in this respect.
- Promotion of SCP for children from poorer households should also take place in **schools**, some peer reviewers argued. For example, in some European countries, increasing numbers of children are, for financial reasons, unable to take part in school excursions and field trips. Means of discreetly funding their participation should be provided.
- Children from a **migrant background/Roma communities** are in some cases less likely to participate in local socio-cultural activities. In some migrant communities, a **gender** element is involved here: boys from these communities find it easier to participate than do girls.



F. Relation/Contribution of the Peer Review to Europe 2020

The European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion is part of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The Platform emphasises the need to identify best practices and promote mutual learning. This Peer Review clearly contributed to that process on a core issue: child poverty and well-being. Notably SCP measures support the Europe 2020 targets on education – to reduce school drop-out rates below 10% – and poverty/social exclusion – at least 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The local activities and services seek to intervene in the inter-generational transmission of poverty and so on in a relatively inexpensive way.

A forthcoming Recommendation from the European Commission on combating child poverty and promoting child well-being is an important part of the EU's inclusion agenda. Peer reviewers called for that Recommendation to be completed and implemented rapidly. It was suggested that the promotion of children's socio-cultural participation should be one of the priorities highlighted in the Recommendation, as part of a commitment to increasing opportunities and social mobility and reducing poverty and social exclusion. At the same time, the diversity of children's needs should be taken into account. Children are not an undifferentiated group – differences of age, background, gender among other factors distinguish them. Regarding participation, EU policy should also reflect the need for all professionals who work with children to listen to the children. The discussions also emphasised bridges and linkages across policy levels (vertical) and areas (horizontal, such as parenting support).



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Combating child poverty through measures promoting the socio-cultural participation of clients of the Public Centres for Social Welfare

Host country: **Belgium**

Peer countries: **Croatia - Finland - France - Germany - Italy - Lithuania - Luxembourg - Malta - Norway - Spain**

Stakeholders: **Eurochild, COFACE**

In the European Union, one in five children lives in a household which is at risk of poverty. As families are forced to economise on all but the most basic needs, spending on educational and recreational activities, among other things, tends to be restricted. This is potentially damaging for children's future prospects; experiences in early childhood have a significant impact on outcomes in later life and are thus crucial for social inclusion in adulthood. In order to tackle those issues, a multidimensional, long-term strategy which addresses the deficit in socio-cultural participation is needed.

In Belgium, each municipality has a Public Centre for Social Welfare (PCSW) which provides various kinds of support and assistance (e.g. income support, legal and medical help) to those in need. PCSWs receive EUR 6.7 million from the Federal Government to promote the participation of young people in social and cultural activities. Subsidies (of EUR 4.2 million in total) are also available to address substandard living conditions of minors. These can be used for a range of measures, such as support for parents, educational support (e.g. homework classes) and help to meet healthcare needs (e.g. to help cover the costs of hearing aids or glasses). The effectiveness of the Belgian system owes much to successful collaboration between local authorities and central government.

The efforts aimed at combating child poverty and social exclusion as well as preventing the inter-generational transmission of disadvantages are crucial investments in future and present direct contribution to the Europe 2020 Strategy.

