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and Social Inclusion

The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020

SYNTHESIS REPORT

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The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020

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SYNTHESIS REPORT

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Executive Summary

The Peer Review of the Belgian Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 (BPAPSE) was held in Brussels on the 14th and 15th January 2014. It was hosted by the Federal Public Planning Service Social Integration and brought together government officials, NGO representatives, people experiencing poverty and experts from the host country and from eight peer countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, and Malta. Also participating were stakeholder representatives from the European Anti-Poverty Network and the Social Platform together with representatives of the European Commission's DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and ÖSB Consulting.

The focus of the Peer Review was on the involvement of stakeholders in the social inclusion dimension of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (Social OMC) and the Social Investment Package (SIP). The Peer Review examined the BPAPSE, which is an innovative initiative to gather together all stakeholders to monitor and make recommendations in relation to the current European situation in the area of poverty and social exclusion. The BPAPSE was found to be an important initiative that has been successful in involving a wide range of stakeholders, especially from the different regions and from civil society, including people experiencing poverty. It has also proved an important source of information and awareness-raising about EU social inclusion processes. However, several participants felt that its impact on Belgium policies to combat poverty and social exclusion in general and the Europe 2020 and Social OMC has, to date, been quite limited. In order to enhance its impact in the future, in particular on the content of the National Reform Programmes (NRPs), National Social Reports (NSRs) and Country Specific Recommendations (CSR), there are a number of key challenges it will need to address. These include: increasing its formal status as a consultative body within Belgium policy making and strengthening high level political support; making its work more visible; providing more feedback to participants on the results of its work; further improving its positive efforts to involve people experiencing poverty; expanding the issues it addresses to include economic areas within the NRP which have a direct impact on social outcomes; 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.

More broadly the Peer Review highlighted that there is a strong policy framework for stakeholder involvement in EU social inclusion policies. It is a key element of the Lisbon Treaty, the Europe 2020 Strategy, the EU's social protection and social inclusion objectives and the Social OMC, the SIP and the Commission Recommendation on investing in children and the EU Structural Funds. However, in many Member States efforts to involve stakeholders in the European processes have been disappointing. This was identified as a key factor in the lack of progress towards the EU's poverty and social exclusion target and urgently needs to be rectified. At the same time the Peer Review also highlighted that there is much good practice on which to draw and over a decade of experience of involving stakeholders, particularly in relation to the Social OMC since 2001.

Key issues that were discussed included: how should stakeholder involvement be defined; why is stakeholder involvement necessary for good policy making; who are (or should be) stakeholders and how should they be selected; are formal (legal) and representative or

more open structures better; what is needed to ensure participation of people experiencing poverty; how can one manage expectations so as not to lead to stakeholder disillusionment; how can (and why should) stakeholder involvement be increased in Europe 2020 and the SIP?

In addition to the specific conclusions about the BPAPSE the main overall conclusions were that:

1. stakeholder involvement is vital to address the growing democratic deficit, to ensure greater social inclusion across the EU and to achieve the EU's poverty and social exclusion target;
2. political leadership is essential to ensure that stakeholder involvement has an impact;
3. stakeholder involvement in European processes needs to be built on a culture of involvement at all levels of governance starting at the local level;
4. stakeholders must come from a broad range of policy domains (economic as well as social), all levels of governance (national, regional, local), and all sectors;
5. it is essential to define clearly at the outset what the status and purpose of stakeholder involvement is and to ensure that it has a meaningful and transparent impact on national policy making;
6. the participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion is essential and must be adequately supported and resourced;
7. EU support and advocacy for greater stakeholder involvement (particularly in the context of the European Semester, the NRPs, the NSRs, the Annual Growth Survey, Country Specific Recommendations, the implementation of the SIP and the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion) should be continued and enhanced;
8. there should be enhanced support from the Commission and SPC including through enhanced exchange of learning, the development of guidelines for good practice, enhanced monitoring and increased support from EU Structural Funds).



A. Policy context at European level

The European policy framework for this Peer Review was set by the Lisbon Treaty, the Europe 2020 Strategy, the EU's social objectives underpinning the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (Social OMC) and the Social Investment Package (SIP). These important policy initiatives aim to mainstream efforts to tackle poverty and social exclusion at the heart of EU and national policy making. In doing so each stresses the importance of Member States involving all relevant stakeholders and all levels of governance in the process of developing, implementing and monitoring policies to promote social inclusion.

Lisbon Treaty

Article 9 TFEU of the Lisbon Treaty mainstreams the struggle against poverty and social exclusion as a central concern of the European Union. It states that “In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health”.¹ Article 11 TUE of the Treaty stresses the importance of stakeholder involvement. It talks about giving “citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action” and maintaining “an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society”.

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Europe 2020

The *Europe 2020 Strategy* (European Commission 2010), at least in theory, puts social inclusion at the heart of the EU's current priorities. It emphasises enhanced socio-economic coordination and the incorporation of inclusive growth as one of the EU's three key priorities, alongside smart and sustainable growth. It includes, for the first time an EU headline target on for the reduction of poverty and social inclusion.² The creation of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EPAPSE) as one of the seven flagship initiatives which were established as core elements of the *Europe 2020* strategy also provides an important context for work on social inclusion issues and the involvement of stakeholders.

The *Europe 2020 Strategy* also emphasises consultation and involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of the Strategy. The Commission Communication which underpins the Strategy emphasises a partnership approach which “should extend to EU committees, to national parliaments and national, local and regional authorities, to social partners and to stakeholders and civil society so that everyone is involved in delivering on the vision.” (European Commission 2010) This is then reflected in the arrangements for delivering the strategy. In particular, the **National Reform Programmes** (NRPs), which set out and

¹ The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has elaborated on the potential of Article 9 for mainstreaming social inclusion in EU and national policy making. (See EESC 2011).

² Two of the other Europe 2020 targets (raising the employment rate for women and men and reducing school drop outs) are also very significant from a social inclusion perspective.



report on how Member States are implementing the strategy, are prepared in line with the Integrated Guidelines³ and with the general guidance to Member States issued by the Commission (in the Annual Growth Survey) and the European Council at the beginning of the annual cycle of surveillance. Guideline 10 is on promoting social inclusion and combating poverty.

The importance of involving a broad range of stakeholders in the development of policies which impact on poverty and social exclusion is stressed in the guidance notes for the preparation of the NRPs.⁴ In its 2014 Annual Growth Survey the Commission “continues to recommend that the National Reform Programmes (NRP) and Stability or Convergence Programmes (SCP) be discussed with national parliaments and all relevant parties, notably social partners and sub-national actors.” (European Commission 2013d).

EU Social Objectives and the Social OMC

The EU’s Common Objectives for Social Protection and Social Inclusion, which were originally adopted in March 2006 and re-affirmed in June 2011, as well as prioritising the struggle against poverty and social exclusion, put significant emphasis on the involvement of stakeholders. For instance, one of the three overarching common objectives is “to promote good governance, transparency and the involvement of stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring of policy.” Specifically in relation to social inclusion there is an objective emphasising that, in order to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion, it is necessary to ensure “that social inclusion policies are well-coordinated and involve all levels of government and relevant actors, including people experiencing poverty, that they are efficient and effective and mainstreamed into all relevant public policies, including economic, budgetary, education and training policies and structural fund (notably ESF) programmes.”

These objectives are pursued through the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (Social OMC).⁵ This has led to the social dimension of the NRPs now being complemented by National Social Reports (NSRs) covering the three strands of the EU cooperation in the social field (social inclusion, pensions as well as healthcare and long-term care). These are currently submitted bi-annually with an update (Strategic Social Reporting) in intervening years. The importance of stakeholder involvement in the preparation of NSRs

³ Europe 2020: Integrated Guidelines for the economic and employment policies of the Member States, available at <http://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/Brochure%20Integrated%20Guidelines.pdf>

⁴ “In line with the Europe 2020 Integrated Guidelines and the conclusions of the European Council of 24–25 March 2011, the Europe 2020 strategy should be developed in close partnership with all national, regional and local authorities, closely associating parliaments. Depending on the division of competencies in individual Member States, regional and local authorities also play an important role in implementing the strategy. When reporting on implementation of the NRPs, Member States are invited to refer to any good practice at regional or local level. Social partners and representatives of civil society shall also be consulted in the preparation of the NRPs and involved in the follow-up, as relevant and in line with national practices. All NRPs should continue reporting on how concerned parties are involved in the process.” (European Commission 2012)

⁵ The Social OMC began in 2001, was modified in 2005 and then in June 2011 the EPSCO Council, on the recommendation of the SPC, concluded that the social dimension of Europe 2020 would benefit from being underpinned by continuing and “reinvigorating” the Social OMC.



is stressed in the guidance given to Member States.⁶ Again in 2013 the guidance note to Member States on Strategic Social Reporting stressed that “Member States are invited to consult the national stakeholders according to their national practice before submitting their Strategic Social Reporting by 30 April 2013.” It is likely that the guidance note for the 2014 NSRs will contain similar encouragement.

Social Investment Package

The emphasis on involvement of all relevant stakeholders which is evident in the *Europe 2020 Strategy* and the Social OMC was reinforced in February 2013 with the Commission’s launch of the Social Investment Package (SIP) (i.e. the Commission Communication on Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion, the accompanying Recommendation on investing in children and the various staff working papers). This is an important initiative to reinforce and underpin the social dimension of Europe 2020. The SIP 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 2013, p.22) Also, when emphasising the key role that can be played by EU Funds, the SIP stresses the importance of involving stakeholders: “Involve stakeholders, particularly civil society organisations close to the target groups for social interventions, in programming and implementation and facilitate their access to funds.” (European Commission 2013, p.18) The accompanying Commission Recommendation on investing in children emphasises the need 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) In addition the staff working paper on active inclusion which accompanies the SIP is very critical of the limited involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of active inclusion policies to date. It recommends that Member States “Engage relevant actors more vigorously in the development, implementation, and assessment of policies. Active inclusion is a joint responsibility in European societies. Efforts to engage the relevant actors need a boost. The actors include those affected by poverty and social exclusion, civil society organisations, nongovernmental organisations, local administrations and the private sector.” (European Commission 2013c, p.56)

Limited stakeholder involvement to date

In spite of the significant emphasis at EU level on the importance of involving stakeholders, a key part of the policy context for the Peer Review was the limited involvement of social

⁶ “In line with the Europe 2020 Integrated Guidelines, the conclusions of the European Council of 24-25 March 2011, Europe 2020 should be developed in close partnership with all national, regional, local authorities as they play a key-role in implementing the strategy. In accordance with the SPC opinion (§ 15) and the OMC overarching objectives, it is also important to improve the involvement of social partners and NGOs with a view to increasing the ownership and effectiveness of the policies in the context of the Social OMC. The NSRs should report on how the stakeholders are involved in the process of policy design, implementation and monitoring. Member States are also invited to consult with the relevant stakeholders as part of the preparation of the NSR.” (Guidance note for the preparation of the 2012 NSRs)



inclusion stakeholders in the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy and the Social OMC in many Member States since 2010.

Evidence from the first three rounds of the NRPs is that, from a social inclusion perspective, the involvement of key stakeholders in the process has, in many countries, been limited and of poor quality. This has been highlighted by the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion in their assessments of the 2011, 2012 and 2013 NRPs for the European Commission. For instance, in 2011, “The extent of stakeholder involvement in the preparation process was quite varied. In many cases, consultation seems to have been quite limited and certainly less extensive on social inclusion issues than was the case with the National Strategy Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. Also, in many cases the consultations that did take place on social inclusion issues seem to have had little impact on the final version of the NRPs. Experts highlight that quite often the limited or absent consultation with NGOs reflects the predominantly economic and labour market focus of the NRPs.” (Frazer and Marlier, 2011, p. 11) Again in 2012 the overall conclusion from the experts’ assessments was that “Stakeholder involvement is only rated as being well addressed in two NRPs and two NSRs. There is significant criticism that consultation with stakeholders was still too limited and one-sided, and in several countries experts point to a weakening in consultation.” (Frazer and Marlier, 2012, p. 10) In 2013 “Stakeholder involvement is assessed positively in the case of only five NRPs and two Strategic Social Reports (SSRs). While in most other countries there is some degree of stakeholder involvement there is considerable room for improvement.” (Frazer and Marlier, 2013, p.8)

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In its Annual Report for 2012 the Social Protection Committee (SPC), while reiterating the importance of stakeholder involvement and noting that measures can be identified in a number of Member States, reported that “No involvement or very limited involvement of relevant actors (including those affected by poverty and social exclusion, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and service providers) in the development, implementation and evaluation of active inclusion strategies is reported by larger civil society organisations (such as EAPN, Eurodiaconia, Eurocities).” (Social Protection Committee 2013, para. 4.2.6)

The lack of meaningful involvement of people experiencing poverty in the NRP process has been highlighted repeatedly by the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN). In its 2013 assessment of the NRPs it reported “an overall lack of progress towards implementing meaningful participation in the NRPs processes at national level” and went on to state that “Organisations start to question the value of engagement. Organisations working with and for people experiencing poverty have been demanding and have been prepared to input into the NRP process at national level since it was launched. But given the lack of engagement and room for influencing the actual content of the NRPs they are about to put this engagement under question.” (EAPN 2013, p.10) A similar criticism can be found from organisations working on child poverty and well-being. For instance, Eurochild’s assessment of the 2013 NRPs concludes that “Civil society organisations in general and organisations working with children in particular, were rarely consulted on the preparation and implementation of NRPs (and consultation with children themselves is completely absent).” (Eurochild 2013, p.4) According to the European Social Network (ESN), senior officials involved in delivering social services were not much involved in the development of the NRPs in 2012 even though the issue of “adequate and affordable social services” had been highlighted as an important issue by the Commission in the Annual Growth Survey 2012. Thus ESN concluded that “Even



if the NRPs (and NSRs) are unlikely to produce new policy initiatives, greater stakeholder involvement could at least close various reporting gaps.” (ESN 2012, p.6)

Much accumulated learning

Although the overall development of stakeholder involvement has been disappointing over the last few years, an important part of the EU policy context that informed discussions at the Peer Review was the considerable body of learning on stakeholder involvement that has been build up at EU level over the last decade and more.

Over the course of the Social OMC from 2001-2010 and even before that with the three EU poverty programmes in the 1970s, 80s, 90s (see for instance European Commission 1999) a considerable emphasis was put on the involvement of all levels of governance and all stakeholders in the development of policies to combat poverty and promote greater social inclusion in the key EU initiatives. This has generated a considerable body of learning and many examples of good practice have been identified that are readily available. For instance, from the outset of the Social OMC this was a topic that featured regularly in Commission reports on the process and Member States were encouraged to report on stakeholder involvement every two years in their National Action Plans on Inclusion and then in the social inclusion strand of their National Strategy Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (NSRSPSIs). Their approach to involving and mobilising all relevant bodies and actors, including those experiencing poverty, was then analysed each time by the Commission and reported on in Joint Reports on Social Inclusion (see for instance European Commission 2002, pp 68-74 and European Commission 2004, pp 112-125). In addition there have been a whole series of initiatives to document and highlight good (and bad) practice in this area. For instance there have been transnational exchange projects (e.g. on mainstreaming social inclusion, see Combat Poverty Agency 2006), Peer Reviews (e.g. on the NAP Inclusion Social Inclusion Forum, Swinnen 2007), research studies (e.g. Inbas and Engender 2010 and Frazer, Marlier and Nicaise 2010), reports from civil society organisations (e.g. EAPN, 2012), the Annual European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty⁷ and regular assessments of the NSRSPSIs and NRPs by the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion⁸.

⁷ Readers can find out more about the 12 European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty at <http://www.eapn.eu/en/what-we-do/issues-we-focus-on/the-european-meetings-of-people-experiencing-poverty-history>

⁸ The reports of the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion can be found at: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1025&langId=en>



B. The Belgium Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020

B.1. Origins and Role

Origins

The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 (BPAPSE) builds on a long tradition of dialogue with people experiencing poverty and other relevant actors involved in poverty and social exclusion issues which goes back to the General Report on Poverty in 1994. More particularly it builds on the experience of Belgium's involvement in the Social OMC in the period 2001-2010. During this period innovative processes were developed in which all stakeholders were involved in the formation (specifying priorities and targets), monitoring and evaluation of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (NAP Incl.). An Actions Working Group and an Indicators Working Group were established for this purpose by mandate of the Interministerial Conference 'Integration in Society' whose members are the ministers in charge of the coordination of poverty policies at different governmental levels.

The Actions Working Group had an open structure and attributed a key role to stakeholder dialogue concerning policy measures whereas the Indicators Working Group concerned itself with statistical indicators. The Actions Working Group gathered all the stakeholders around the table: the federated entities, social partners, people living in poverty and their associations, local administrations, private and public actors, social workers, research institutions... The working group reported to the Interministerial Conference and came together 3 to 4 times per year.

With the advent of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the decision to reinvigorate the Social OMC (see section A) Belgium reviewed its existing procedures and decided to transform the Actions Working Group into the Belgian Platform against poverty and social exclusion EU2020. The transformation occurred by analogy to the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Role

The overall role given to the BPAPSE is to monitor the current European situation in the area of poverty and social exclusion and to gather together all stakeholders. The concrete tasks are:

- preparing policy proposals;
- content and information exchange;
- formulating suggestions;
- exploring themes;
- proposing actions and priorities.



As was the case with the Actions Working Group, participation and an open structure are the key concepts that underpin the functioning of the BPAPSE. It also reports to the Interministerial Conference on Social Integration, in which all competent ministers for poverty reduction take part.

Participants

The meetings of the BPAPSE are attended by about 40 people with a mix of participants from all bodies identified by the Interministerial Conference. These include: the federated entities; the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service; private actors such as social services and organisations focused on combating poverty; local authorities by means of their respective umbrella bodies; social partners, research institutions; the Central Economic Council; people living in poverty and their organisations; and the Working Group on Social Indicators Europe 2020/OMC. A key feature of the Platform is its flexibility and openness: open to any stakeholder that comes forward.

Activities

Since it started in 2011 there have been eight regular meetings of the BPAPSE and one open Platform day. The different topics and issues that have been discussed at the regular meetings include: the preparation of the Annual Convention of the Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion; the strategic framework and priorities for the contribution on poverty and social exclusion in the National Reform Programme and National Social Report; the federal governmental declaration; the different regional plans for the fight against poverty; proposals for the federal Plan for the fight against poverty and social exclusion and its follow-up; and the evaluation of the European semester and the country specific recommendations for Belgium.

The Open Platform Day involves about 150 people from a very wide range of stakeholders (federal, regional and local authorities, administrations, bodies and advisory boards, aid organisations, social partners, civil society organisations, research institutions and universities and people who are living in poverty). The central theme of the Day (28th March 2013) was to discuss progress since the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2010) in social priority areas such as the fight against child poverty, homelessness, active inclusion and a minimum income. These themes were dealt with in separate working groups, complemented with a working group on the use of indicators and working with sub-targets. The conclusions of the working groups were considered to be those of the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 on the 2013 National Reform Programme and strategic social reporting in the framework of the Open Method of Coordination. The opinion was provided to the Belgian State Secretary for Social Integration and, via the State Secretary, to the Prime Minister. It was also published on the website of the PPS Social Integration.

Ways of working

The Federal Public Service for Social Integration is the lead government body responsible for the Platform and the secretariat of the Platform is established within the Federal Programming Service Social Integration. The secretariat, in consultation with the technical committee, determines the agenda, coordinates the preparation of content, calls the meetings, draws up the reports and is responsible for ensuring open and transparent communication with all stakeholders. The technical committee involves liaison officers from the federated entities and the federal government mandated to this end. There are no civil society organisations represented on the technical committee.

Considerable efforts are made to involve people experiencing poverty in the work of the BPAPSE. Their participation is supported by the preparatory work undertaken by the Belgian Anti-Poverty Network (BAPN) and by the ongoing and in-depth work of the Service to Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion (Service Lutte Contre la Pauvreté). Government resourcing to these organisations to support the participation of people experiencing poverty in policy discussions is an essential prerequisite for their meaningful participation.

Success factors

In developing the Platform the organisers have tried to meet a series of, what earlier experience has taught them, are pre-conditions that must be met in order to guarantee efficient and effective functioning of such a participation structure. These are: grounding the work in a European framework; guaranteeing continuity and long term processes; investing in capacity building; empowering joint ownership; providing feedback; stimulating representativeness and covering the whole spectrum of social actors; ensuring public debate and open dialogue; offering strong and high-level political commitment.⁹ These pre-conditions provided the background issues for much of the discussion during the Peer Review (see section D).

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B.2. Evaluation of the Belgian Platform

The Peer Review spent a considerable time in discussing and assessing the effectiveness of the BPAPSE. In doing so it was informed particularly by two sources: an assessment by the Belgian Anti-Poverty Network (BAPN) Europe 2020 working group and a formal evaluation by an on-line survey carried out by the PPS Social Integration in November 2013.

The main conclusions of the BAPN evaluation were:

- the Belgian Platform offers structured dialogue with different stakeholders with a wide-ranging expertise. This is extremely valuable and can be translated as an effective structure to fight poverty;
- but, the participation of people experiencing poverty demands time for preparation. The agenda sometimes arrives at the last minute; the language used at the meetings is sometimes too technical and too complicated;

⁹ How each of these pre-conditions are implemented in practice is outlined in the Host country paper for the Peer Review.



- there is a lack of visible and tangible impacts on policies. The results can be described as “soft”: capacity building, credibility of the BAPN, networking. There is the risk of becoming a powerless talking shop that serves as excuse for window-dressing.

At the meeting these views were expanded on by the BAPN, including representatives of people experiencing poverty.

The PPS Social Integration evaluation received predominantly positive reactions to many questions. Just over 80% respondents consider that the BPAPSE offers them the possibility to stay informed about the European policy processes and measures in the fight against poverty. Nearly 88% agree that the Belgian Platform covers topics that are important in the fight against poverty at the European level. 75% consider that the topics covered on the Belgian Platform are in alignment with their areas of interest and a similar percentage consider that it unites and mobilises the different stakeholders in the fight against poverty. However, only 50% of respondents consider that the activities and recommendations of the Belgian Platform have an impact on the Belgian policy in the fight against poverty while 44% disagree. Just over half consider that the documents and information that they receive from the Belgian Platform supports them in their professional life but 44% disagree.

The ensuing discussions reinforced the view that the Belgium Platform has been successful in engaging a wide range of actors, particularly from civil society and people experiencing poverty. Its emphasis on openness has been one of its great strengths. It has also proved a useful source of information and an effective mechanism for information exchange on EU developments in relation to poverty and social exclusion. However, many participants are concerned that its impact on the policy making process is very limited. However, it was noted that the BPAPSE is still at a fairly early stage of development and it is necessary for it to evolve in a pragmatic and realistic manner taking account of the existing political realities. It was also pointed out that Belgian civil servants use information from the Platform in preparing policies so there is an impact, but it is indirect, and doesn't bring immediate change for individuals.

A number of challenges for the future development of the BPAPSE were identified which could help it to increase its impact on social inclusion policy in general and the content of the NRPs and NSRs in particular. These included:

- increasing its formal status within the Belgium policy making process as a consultative body on social inclusion policies and strengthening high level political commitment so that its outputs are more likely to be taken into account;
- developing a clearer link between discussions at Platform meetings on specific policy issues and the formulation or review of concrete policies;
- ensuring that there is more visibility for its work and recommendations (e.g. by attaching its recommendations as an Annex to the NRP and NSR);
- further developing the already positive commitment to the participation of people experiencing poverty by addressing issues of timing (e.g. late arrival of agendas), use of too technical language and by introducing a more non-traditional and creative format for meetings;
- improving feedback to participants on what happens to their suggestions and why they have or have not been taken on board;



- enabling the BPAPSE to address economic areas within the NRP which have a direct impact on social outcomes;
- expanding its role in the Europe 2020 process to include contributing to the development and implementation of Country Specific Recommendations;
- broadening the engagement of officials to include officials and policy makers not directly involved with social policies but responsible for the fields of economic policy, employment and labour market related issues, etc.;
- increasing social partner participation, particularly employers.



C. Policies and experiences in peer countries and stakeholder contributions

In preparation for the Peer Review the peer countries prepared background papers commenting on the BPAPSE and giving information on stakeholder involvement in their Member States. There was also a presentation at the meeting on Ireland's Social Inclusion Forum (SIF). European stakeholders were represented by a paper and presentation by EAPN and a presentation from the Social Platform. Given limitations of space only some of the main developments relevant to stakeholder involvement in social inclusion policies are summarised here.¹⁰ However, many of the points raised in the papers informed the discussions during the Peer Review (see section D below).

In **Austria** the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (BMASK) gives a high priority to the participation of stakeholders, including NGOs and people experiencing poverty. Building on previous initiatives developed in the context of the Social OMC and the 2010 European Year Against Poverty and Social Exclusion it has created a national poverty platform, in the framework of the Europe 2020 strategy and its core target for poverty reduction (ÖPAP). It brings together representatives from: ministries, provinces, municipalities, cities and towns, Statistics Austria and selected representatives from the scientific community; social partners; Senior Citizens' Association, Senior Citizens, National Youth Council; NGOs and representatives of civil society (poverty conference, BAWO, Caritas, ÖAR, Roma organisations, etc.); and people experiencing poverty. Meetings are informed about and discuss developments in relation to the Europe 2020 Strategy and issues such as the development of national indicators to measure poverty, the implementation and interaction between the poverty and employment targets (especially the working poor) and energy poverty. Inputs were made on the content of the meetings of the Austrian platform for the monitoring of the national target regarding relative poverty in 2013. In addition, opportunities were given for the interaction of people having experienced poverty with representatives of civil society (project "be visible" 2013: training and education to strengthen self-organisation and participation of people experiencing poverty).

In **Bulgaria** in 2009 the National Council on Social Inclusion Issues to the Council of Ministers (NCSII) was established. The Council is presided by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy and includes deputy ministers from all involved ministries (Ministry of Education and Science; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Interior; Ministry of Regional Development, etc.) as well as the chairpersons of all involved institutions, representatives of the National Association of the Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria, representatives of the social partners, representatives of the organisations members of the European networks, the chairpersons of NGOs with proven experience in the field of social inclusion and representative of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The Council is the body for coordination, cooperation and consultation in the development, implementation, monitoring and assessment of the state policy in the field of social inclusion. It meets at a minimum twice a year. People experiencing poverty and social exclusion do not participate

¹⁰ The background papers and the powerpoint presentations are all available on the Peer Review in Social Protection and Social Inclusion website at: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1024&langId=en&newsId=1897&furtherNews=yes>



personally in the sessions of the NCSII but are represented by the European Anti-Poverty Network – Bulgaria.

In the **Czech Republic** the Commission on Social Inclusion is, since 2008, the standing advisory, proactive and coordinating body of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) in the area of social policy, with a focus on combating poverty and social exclusion. It facilitates the implementation of Czech and European social inclusion policies and monitors and analyses Czech strategic documents in this field, in particular fulfilling the goals of these documents. The Commission has 45 members and involves all actors that are important for the protection of interests of people facing poverty and social exclusion – delegates of public administration, self-governing bodies, non-governmental sector, academics, trade unions and employers' associations. In response to the social inclusion targets set within Europe 2020 Strategy and the National Reform Programmes the MoLSA in cooperation with the Commission on Social Inclusion is currently preparing a *Strategy for Social Inclusion 2014-2020*. This formulates priority areas for social inclusion till the year 2020 and includes concrete measures and indicators for evaluation.

In **Finland** the country's policies have been developed through close collaboration between central and local government, the labour market organisations and NGOs. Social welfare and health care organisations are major players as far as civil participation and influence and the production of services and support are concerned. Increasing emphasis is put on using ICT in listening to citizens' views and dialoguing with citizens' organisations. In preparing the National Social Report (NSR) in 2012 the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health organised a hearing for stakeholders to discuss the content of the NSR. Participants represented various governmental organs (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry of Finance, Prime Minister's Office), representatives of municipalities, the Finnish Centre for Pensions, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Finnish Pension Alliance, non-governmental organisations (the Finnish Society for Social and Health, mental health association Helmi ry, the Finnish Heart Association, the Finnish Diabetes Association, Single-Parents' Association), the Central Association of Finnish Pensioners, and labour market organisations (the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions, the Confederation of Finnish Industries, the Finnish Medical Association). There was no direct involvement of the people facing and experiencing poverty.

In **France** the National Committee of policies against poverty and social exclusion (CNLE) reports directly to the Prime Minister and is responsible for performing studies about poverty and its consequences, and for making any useful proposals to the government. In recent years, the CNLE has been consulted on the NRP and NSR. Last year, members of CNLE participated in the European anti-poverty platform. Composed of 65 members, the committee includes a wide range of stakeholders: members of Parliament, representatives from local authorities, ministries, social security organisations, NGOs etc. An important initiative, which was instigated as an experiment by the CNLE in 2012, has been the creation of a college of people experiencing poverty or social exclusion. Following a highly positive assessment this has now been generalised both for the CNLE itself and also for other consultative committees such as, for instance, the economic, social and environmental council. Members of the college are proposed by NGOs active in the field of social inclusion, and assisted by referees from the NGOs. In parallel, the CNLE has provided consultants to train those members in preparation for each CNLE plenary session. Special attention has been given to funding and logistic issues to facilitate members' participation. Members of



the college have been closely associated with the setting up and the first assessment of the national plan against poverty and for social inclusion.

In **Greece** there is little tradition/practice in social dialogue and there is no structured way to ensure the involvement of stakeholders in the fight against poverty and social exclusion and there is no structure focused on Europe 2020 or the social OMC. However there is the National Committee for Social Protection (NCSP) which is composed of representatives of governmental bodies, social partners and some times of non-governmental organisations. The role of the NCSP is to promote social dialogue on combating poverty and social exclusion and to contribute to the establishment of a Social Protection and Social Inclusion Network. It is possible that in future the NCSP, probably in cooperation with the Greek Anti-Poverty Network, could become an effective structure to fight poverty. Recently one big step was taken in Greece in the direction of establishing a mentality of participation and consultation, when open public consultation was offered by the office of the Prime Minister through the website <http://www.opengov.gr/home/> where many interested parties and citizens posted their opinions.

In **Ireland** there has been a long tradition of formal stakeholder involvement and consultation on poverty and social inclusion through the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion and its predecessors and National social partnership agreements covering macro-economic and social policy. The Social Inclusion Forum (SIF) was established by the Government as part of the structures to monitor and evaluate NAPinclusion. This annual event is part of the institutional structures put in place to underpin the implementation, monitoring and ongoing development of the Government's social inclusion agenda. The event provides a forum for wider public consultation and discussion on social inclusion issues, in particular for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and the groups that work with them. A report of this event is produced and published, which includes a summary of the proceedings and outcomes. It presents details of the key themes and policy issues raised at the event workshops. This report is submitted to the Government via its Senior Officials Group on Social Policy and the higher level Cabinet Committee on Social Policy. There is no structure specifically focused on Europe 2020 or the Social OMC and to the extent that there is consultation of EU policy, e.g. the National Reform Programme, this is done through existing structures.

In **Malta** the Malta-EU Steering and Action Committee (MEUSAC) is responsible for the coordination of consultative sessions with civil society on EU policies and other decision-making processes with the aim of engaging stakeholders and fuelling national debate on European ideals, values, objectives and long term strategies. The MEUSAC Employment, Social Policy and Health sectoral committee offers a multistakeholder representative structure to engage with different categories of stakeholders active in the social field and has been successfully utilised as a platform for consulting with stakeholders on main social inclusion policy documents, such as the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) and National Social Reports (NSRs). Despite its effectiveness and wide representation, this forum is largely limited to the EU dimension and apart from being reserved to organised social partners, tends to be relatively technical, which factors may hinder the participation of the general public, particularly people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. The good practice on participation of people experiencing poverty and service users in the drafting of the NSRs for the 2006-2008 and 2008-2010 OMC cycles, as well as the upcoming National Poverty Strategy, have not been as evident in the preparation of the NRPs and NSRs since then.

European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) members throughout the EU have continued to strive to develop and improve participation and engagement throughout the Europe 2020 process. In order to support the development of this engagement EAPN produced a Toolkit in early 2013 to support engagement in the process. The following are some of the positive examples of engagement highlighted in the Toolkit. **EAPN Germany** produced their own shadow report in 2012, on both wealth and poverty. Also in Germany stakeholders' engagement resulted in the extension of the NRP poverty section from half a page up to 3 pages. Furthermore, a discussion about the modification of the poverty reduction aim, starting from 2015, was announced. **EAPN France** has contributed to the Opinion of the National Council for the Fight against Poverty and Social Exclusion. The opinion followed the structure of the NRP. This Opinion was attached in its entirety to the 2012 National Reform Programme sent to the European Commission. **EAPN Luxembourg** reported that Caritas Europe, which is a member of EAPN, developed, together with their members, an alternative shadow National Reform Programme since 2011. Also in Luxembourg a standing Committee has been set up which is working with the Ministry of Family, and sub working groups have been created. **EAPN Denmark** represents civil society in the Government's advisory board for the Europe 2020 Strategy. There is a hearing process, including meetings, providing opportunities for input. Proposals have no effect immediately, but might have some impact on upcoming plans and reports. The Network proposed to the Government to support a stronger OMC, including shadow reports, awareness programmes, local and national activities.



D. Main issues discussed during the meeting

During the course of the meeting seven key, often interrelated, issues were the main focus of discussion. These were:

1. how should stakeholder involvement be defined;
2. why is stakeholder involvement necessary for good policy making;
3. who are (or should be) stakeholders and how should they be selected;
4. are formal (legal) and representative or more open structures better;
5. what is needed to ensure participation of people experiencing poverty;
6. how can one manage expectations so as not to lead to stakeholder disillusionment;
7. how can (and why should) stakeholder involvement be increased in Europe 2020 and the SIP?

Defining stakeholder involvement

Early in the meeting it became clear that there are different types or levels of stakeholder involvement in policy making. Confusion and unrealistic expectations can arise when it is unclear what type and degree of involvement is intended. As was apparent from the various national inputs at the meeting the extent and nature of stakeholder involvement varies widely across Member States and from issue to issue and policy area to policy area. There is also great variation in the extent to which social inclusion stakeholders are involved in the Europe 2020 processes. In the light of this participants 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.¹¹

It was stressed that the appropriate point of the continuum at which to pitch stakeholder involvement can vary in different situations. It can also be influenced by countries' different cultures and political traditions. Representatives of civil society at the meeting stressed that stakeholder involvement is often only at the first step of the continuum. Normally it should aim to go well beyond information and consultation and stakeholders should be actively encouraged and enabled to participate in the formation of policies on an equal basis. The **Social Platform** representative said that there are three types of involvement: cooperative policy-making, starting with a blank paper; consultative policy-making, starting with a proposal; or confirmative policy-making, where people are merely asked to agree with the policy. The Platform wants the cooperative model. On the other hand, several representatives from Member States emphasised that there are often limits to how far along the participation continuum it is possible to go. While consulting stakeholders during the development of policy proposals is often possible, developing joint proposals can be more problematic. Also, when final decisions are being taken this becomes a political process. This means that joint decision making or co-determination is often not realistic, particularly in an area that is politically contentious.

¹¹ See Inbas GmbH and Engender 2010, p.10 and Combat Poverty Agency 2006 pp 153-154 for more detailed descriptions of different types of stakeholder involvement.



The case for stakeholder involvement

Underpinning much of the discussion was the question of why go to the trouble of creating structures to involve stakeholders in the development (and the implementation and monitoring) of policies to combat poverty and social exclusion generally and policies to achieve national Europe 2020 social inclusion targets in particular. Involvement can be a time consuming and lengthy process requiring considerable resources when there is already a political process for making policy decisions. Essentially four main reasons for developing structures to promote stakeholder involvement emerged from the discussion.

First and foremost, involving a broad range of stakeholders leads to **better, more evidence based and more consensual policies**. It ensures that there is a wider pool of knowledge to draw on when developing policies. It provides detailed and specific evidence from the ground on the impact of existing policies that is often not available to policy makers at national level and contributes to the early identification of new and emerging issues. It brings new energy, ideas and creativity into the policy making process. This can lead to new solutions that might not be found by officials and policy makers working in isolation. Also, by involving stakeholders from different policy domains and different levels of governance, social inclusion goals are mainstreamed across all areas. This in turn helps to avoid policy segmentation and fragmentation of policy in different silos. It thus becomes more possible to ensure horizontal and vertical coordination of policies so that they are coordinated and mutually reinforcing. The process of dialogue and exchange in developing policies helps to build consensus and increase the legitimacy of policies as a broader range of people “own” the policy.

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Secondly, stakeholder involvement is a matter people’s **fundamental rights** and is a key tool in empowering people. Inclusion of those affected by policies in their development is a recognition of people’s right to be consulted about the decisions that affect them and empowers them as active citizens. As one French participant remarked: “People have to be involved in every decision taken on their behalf”. For people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, participation in policy making is a means of empowerment and an important step towards social inclusion and full citizenship.

Thirdly, **rising poverty and social exclusion** as result of the economic crisis and austerity measures means that the Europe 2020 target of reducing poverty or social exclusion by 20 million is becoming more distant. Thus it is more necessary than ever to mobilise all stakeholders if the EU is to have any chance of achieving its Europe 2020 target.

Fourthly, greater stakeholder involvement is a necessary step in **addressing the democratic deficit** which increasing numbers of people believe is at the heart of the EU. Particularly as a result of the economic crisis and austerity policies there is a perception that decisions are being taken that affect people without their being consulted. Thus the legitimacy of EU policies and programmes is increasingly being questioned and alienation from the EU is growing. To enhance the legitimacy of EU policy making (and thus the long term survival of the EU) it is necessary to complement representative with participatory democracy. In particular, involving social inclusion stakeholders in the European semester can help to create greater awareness of EU social inclusion processes. This can help to build support for EU involvement in social inclusion issues.



Stakeholder Involvement and Democratic Legitimacy

“Involvement and close association of parliaments, social partners and representatives of civil society is essential to ensure ownership and facilitate progress on the implementation of policy recommendations, objectives and targets. Insufficient levels of involvement of such actors is one factor behind increasing criticism regarding the lack of democratic legitimacy of the European Semester. Member States are invited to use the opportunity of the NRPs to encourage such involvement and to report on the process as regards the preparation of the NRPs and the implementation of past guidance and commitments.”

Catherine Day, Secretary General of the European Commission, quoted at the Peer Review by Commission representative, Frederik Lamberty

Defining and selecting stakeholders

A key challenge that was identified is to define **the range of stakeholders who should be involved**. First, there was a general recognition that because of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion many different policy areas and interests play a role and one needs involvement across the policy spectrum. Thus it is important to involve economic as well as social policy makers. Secondly, one needs to ensure that stakeholders from the different levels of governance (national, regional and local) are involved. Thirdly, it is important to involve the different sectors – i.e. the statutory sector (government ministers and advisers, civil servants), those responsible for delivering policies on the ground, social partners, civil society organisations, academics and researchers and those affected by the policies (i.e. people experiencing poverty and social exclusion). One definition of stakeholders that was highlighted is that they are “those people and organisations that are affected by something – for instance a policy, programme, action or organisation – literally, those who have a stake in it” (Inbas and Engender 2010, p.8). Another point that was made is that, depending on the particular policies under discussion, one should also take account of age. Thus when discussing the social inclusion of older people they should be involved and when discussing child poverty children affected should be consulted.

A second issue that arose was **how**, given the very wide range of potential stakeholders, **to decide who to involve from the different sectors**. In Belgium flexibility and openness to any stakeholder that comes forward is a very important principle for the Belgian Platform and people are never excluded. This is very helpful in engaging key parts of civil society and particularly people experiencing poverty. On the other hand, some felt that if you want to get a balance of interests across different stakeholders and achieve more in depth dialogue it can be useful to have more structured representation from different sectors. However, a problem that can arise with this is that some sectors, such as social partners, often have well established procedures for selecting representatives whereas in many countries civil society is often not so well organised and a more pragmatic approach is needed.

When the involvement of stakeholders is on a consultation basis rather than a decision-making basis the importance of the representativeness of participants is a less important concern. There is also a risk that if you set up more formal representative structures you risk killing the social dynamism. The main conclusion that can be reached from this discussion

is that choosing what are the most appropriate arrangements to make for involving stakeholders needs to take account of what the particular objective of the exercise is and which stakeholders are being prioritised.

One particular problem in several countries has been that it can be difficult to engage social partners in discussions with other stakeholders on social inclusion issues. This can be because they already have their own structures for inputting into policy and therefore do not feel the need to engage.

Status of structures: formal (legal) and representative or more open

A key issue in the discussion was how to ensure that arrangements to involve stakeholders in policy making, such as the Belgian Platform, have sufficient **political status** to have an impact. Several participants stressed that, if stakeholder involvement is to be fully effective in contributing to the development of social inclusion policies, it is important to move beyond once-off and ad hoc consultations. Impact is likely to be greatest when there is regular and continuous structured dialogue on the planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of EU and national policies across the whole range of areas which impact on people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

It was suggested that one way of achieving this is to give a formal, or sometimes even legal, basis to stakeholder involvement in social inclusion policy making. This helps to ensure that the views of stakeholders are taken into account when decisions are made. For instance, it was suggested that the Belgian Platform's impact could be enhanced by giving it a formal consultative status in the policy making process on a par with that currently enjoyed by the consultative bodies involving social partners. However, at present the Belgian Platform does at least have the formal status to make recommendations which are forwarded to the political level. However, in many countries the involvement of stakeholders is merely consultative and does not involve making recommendations. For instance one participant pointed that in Austria there is a national platform on Europe 2020, but it is part of the Ministry and is not used to formulate resolutions to go to the political level, though it is interesting to note that there are some other platforms, e.g. for elderly people or voluntary services, that do have the power to put recommendations to government.

It was noted that in many countries, as in Belgium, negotiations with social partners which lead to agreements often do have a formal place in the policy making process and a formal structure and it was suggested that discussions on social inclusion issues should have at least the same status. Less formal arrangements can be useful in being more flexible and open. However, they run the risk that, unless they are integrated into the policy making process, they will have little impact. It was generally agreed that there is a place for both formal and informal arrangements for stakeholder involvement as they can be mutually reinforcing.

There was a general agreement that, whatever the formal status of arrangements for involving stakeholders, **political commitment and leadership** are really critical. It is when Ministers are committed to listening to and taking into account the views of stakeholders that the outcomes of discussions can have an impact on policies. The problem in many countries in relation to Europe 2020 processes (in particular the preparation of National



Reform Programmes) is that there has been limited political commitment to involving stakeholders in the process.

Many participants stressed that formal structures like the Belgian Platform should be the tip of the iceberg of a **culture of participation**. Consultation of stakeholders should routinely be built into policy making at all levels of governance. To achieve this it is probably useful to envisage having a mix of both informal and formal arrangements for involving stakeholders. One participant pointed out that in France, participation is a cross-cutting principle, which has to be implemented at all levels. People have to be involved in every decision taken on their behalf. But there are different levels and people need different skills. Stakeholders who take part in national consultative bodies need training. Efforts are underway to connect participants at local, regional and national level. Local groups propose people to take part at national level. However France has not found the perfect solution and national reports are still largely focused on economic, not social issues.

Ensuring the participation of people experiencing poverty

Inspired by the Belgium experience there was general acceptance that people experiencing poverty should be consulted as stakeholders. However, how best to achieve this was an important subject of discussion.

It was stressed that inviting people experiencing poverty to participate into formal structures without proper support, encouragement and resources is ineffective and can be perceived as window-dressing or tokenism. Enabling people living in poverty to participate has to start at grass-roots level and be built up over time. Key elements for developing their effective participation were:

- long-term resourcing and support for people experiencing poverty and the organisations working with them;
- ensuring that people have all the information they need to participate as equals;
- allowing sufficient time to prepare for meetings by circulating the agenda well in advance;
- ensuring that meetings are run in ways that are open, transparent and accountable and the use of methodologies that take account of the different levels of knowledge among stakeholders and build trust and dialogue between different stakeholders, thus enabling them to participate as equals;
- fostering a culture amongst policy makers that understands and is open to stakeholder consultations – training can be a very important tool in this regard.

Some participants suggested that using the internet and on-line forms of communication can create new opportunities for participation. However, a Finnish participant said that while there is a strong belief in the effectiveness of the internet in Finland it is not certain that online discussion forums are increasing involvement. Experts suggest that it is more important to strengthen face-to-face contacts.



Ensuring impact and avoiding disillusionment

Arising from the experience of the Belgian Platform some participants felt that the actual impact on policy making had been very limited and that this risked leading to disillusionment with the process. There was a general recognition that consulting stakeholders can lead to expectations of policy developments that cannot be delivered. During the discussions a variety ways were identified of ensuring expectations are realistic and that they are delivered on. For instance:

- be clear at the outset what the remit and purpose of a consultation process is (i.e. is it about information, consultation, developing joint recommendations or co-decision-making);
- be clear about the outcomes reached, how they will be transmitted and used in the policy making process;
- make recommendations visible, for instance by publishing them. It was noted that some Member States have attached inputs from stakeholders as an annex to their NRPs and NSRs;
- make stakeholders aware of the complexities of legislation and explain that policy making can take a long time to make progress;
- give feedback on outcomes and explain what elements of a consultation process have been taken on board and which not, and if possible explain why not;
- carrying out a regular evaluation with all stakeholders involved on how the process is working and what are the results.

How to increase stakeholder involvement in Europe 2020 and SIP

Many participants felt that stakeholder involvement in the social inclusion dimension of Europe 2020, especially in the development and monitoring of NRPs and, to a lesser extent, the NSRs, has been disappointing in many countries. This is in spite of encouragement given to Member States in the Annual Growth Survey and in guidance notes to develop stakeholder involvement and in spite of the fact that stakeholder involvement in EU social inclusion processes is a binding requirement, not an optional extra. Some of the reasons that people suggested for this were: the relatively low priority that has been given so far to the social dimension of Europe 2020; the fact that NRPs have to be prepared in a very short time frame; the reality that preparation of NRPs tends to rest with economic rather than social ministries and they have no experience of stakeholder involvement; the fact that NRPs are often a detailing of existing policies rather than the development of new ones; the fact that there is a low awareness of the Europe 2020 strategy amongst civil society organisations in many countries; the lack of resources and coordinating structures for NGOs; the weak tradition of involving civil society organisations and people experiencing poverty in policy discussions in some countries.

Several participants suggested that increasing and deepening stakeholder involvement will be key to strengthening the social dimension to the Europe 2020 strategy, and especially the NRPs, in future. Many participants also stressed the importance of stakeholder involvement



in the development of National Social Reports and in the implementation of the SIP and the Recommendation on investing in children. Thus quite a lot of the discussion on the second day revolved around what more could be done at European level to support Member States in increasing stakeholder involvement.

There was a general welcome for the commitment by the Commission in its Communication on establishing the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion to elaborate **voluntary guidelines** on stakeholders' involvement in the definition and the implementation of policy actions and programmes to address poverty and exclusion, and to promote their implementation at national, regional and local level. (Commission 2010b, p.17)¹² However, in his concluding remarks, the Commission representative indicated that it is unlikely that the Commission will prioritise the development of such voluntary guidelines before the midterm review of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

Another suggestion was that, in **monitoring and reporting** on the implementation of Europe 2020 the Commission and SPC should report on the extent to which Member States have involved stakeholders in the preparation and implementation of NRPs (and NSRs). Some participants thought it would be helpful if, where stakeholder involvement is very weak or is going in the wrong direction, the Commission were to propose Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for improving such involvement. However, others felt that governance arrangements are a matter for national decision and not appropriate for a CSR.¹³

Several participants suggested that it would be helpful if Member States were encouraged to draw on the experience of countries such as Belgium, France and Ireland in involving stakeholders and to establish **national platforms against poverty and social exclusion** (or equivalent bodies) to help develop national anti-poverty strategies and feed into the Europe 2020 process. These could also become a more structured way for civil society to feed into meetings of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Several participants suggested that increasing and deepening civil society involvement in the work of the **European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion** and especially in the Annual Convention could help to enhance the status of stakeholder involvement in the Europe 2020 processes. It was suggested that meetings of the Platform should be structured so as to facilitate more active debate among stakeholders and inject greater urgency on identifying how to make progress in achieving the targets for reducing poverty and social exclusion. Also strengthening links and synergies between the Annual Convention and the Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty could be useful.

During the discussion it became clear that considerable experience has been built up over the last decade, particularly in the context of the Social OMC, on stakeholder involvement in policy development, implementation and monitoring in the field of poverty and social exclusion. Thus many participants felt that this is an area that could benefit from **enhanced exchange and learning and increased awareness raising**. Ideas suggested included:

¹² This commitment repeats a commitment in the Commission's 2008 Communication on reinforcing the Social OMC (Commission 2008, p. 8).

¹³ It was reported during the meeting that early in 2014 the European Anti Poverty Network will publish a handbook on stakeholder engagement, including common principles, which could be useful in informing any EU voluntary guidelines.



- organising more Peer Reviews highlighting good practices like the Belgian Platform;
- using the new Knowledge Bank (proposed under the SIP) to document and highlight good practice on stakeholder involvement;
- encouraging the European Social Policy network (when established) to regularly report on interesting developments in Member States and to identify weaknesses in stakeholder involvement;
- using the new European Semester Officers in the European Commission Office in Member States to raise awareness and promote the importance of stakeholder involvement.

Another way in which it was suggested that the EU level could help is through encouraging greater use of **Structural Funds** to resource participation of stakeholders and in particular to support the participation of people experiencing poverty and the organisations that work with them in the policy making process. Also it was suggested that the new partnership principle for the ESF should be adapted and implemented at national level, so that funds are used for inclusive growth.



E. Conclusions and lessons learned

Ten main conclusions and lessons learned during the Peer Review are summarised below. Many of them are elaborated in more detail in the earlier sections of this report.

Belgian Platform - a valuable initiative

The BPAPSE is an important initiative and it provides valuable lessons about how best to ensure stakeholder involvement in the Europe 2020 process and related national processes on combating poverty and social exclusion. As it is still in a relatively early stage of its evolution there are some areas requiring further development and it is important to be open to new needs and methods. The most urgent issue is to enhance its impact on policy making and the development of the Belgian NRP and NSR. This will require further enhancing its (political) status and visibility. In this regard strengthening its legal status so that its recommendations are required to be considered when developing policies could be helpful. EU recognition of the potentially key role it can play in the implementation of Europe 2020 in Belgium could also help to enhance its status. However, a key learning point is that the evolution of such a mechanism has to take account of the existing political and cultural environment and should not be overly ambitious but should be pragmatic and realistic.

Stakeholder involvement - vital for greater social inclusion

The impact of the economic crisis and austerity measures in increasing and deepening poverty and social exclusion highlights the need for greater stakeholder involvement in the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy. Greater stakeholder involvement is important for five main reasons: first, it will lead to better policies; secondly, it will increase the chance of achieving the EU poverty target; thirdly, people experiencing poverty and social exclusion have a fundamental right to be involved in the development of policies and programmes that affect them; fourthly, it will help to address the growing perception of a democratic deficit at the heart of the EU by complementing and enhancing representative democracy with increased participatory democracy; fifthly, it will enhance awareness of and support for EU involvement in social policies.

Ensure political leadership and give status to stakeholder involvement

Political commitment and leadership are fundamental to the successful involvement of stakeholders in the development of social inclusion policies. This is key to ensuring that consultative arrangements are given the necessary status and visibility within a country's established policy making process.

Develop a culture of involvement

Formal arrangements for stakeholder involvement (such as the Belgium Platform) should be the tip of the iceberg. Effective stakeholder involvement needs to be built on a culture of

participation which fosters involvement of stakeholders at all levels (national, regional and local) and all stages of policy making (preparation, delivery and monitoring). This requires building the capacity of all actors to support stakeholder involvement.

Define stakeholders broadly

Given the multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion it is important to involve stakeholders across a broad range of policy domains (economic as well as social), across all levels of governance (national, regional, local), across all sectors (public, private, social partner, NGO, academic and people experiencing poverty).

Ensure clearly defined role and clear outcomes

To avoid disillusionment it is important to define clearly at the outset what the status and purpose of stakeholder involvement is and what the status of any outcomes or recommendations is. The involvement must be seen to have an impact on policy making over time and outcomes of consultations should be made visible. Feedback should be given both when inputs are and are not taken on board in the policy process and the impact of stakeholder involvement should be regularly evaluated and discussed.

Increase support for the participation of people experiencing poverty

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The participation of people experiencing poverty as stakeholders in EU and Member States' efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion is essential. Achieving this requires balancing openness and accessibility with the development of appropriate structures, solving problems of representativeness, providing resources, support and capacity building, and allowing sufficient time to prepare their involvement.

Continue and enhance EU advocacy for greater stakeholder involvement

The EU should continue to encourage permanent dialogue as part of Europe 2020 process: e.g. through the Annual Growth Survey; by increasing its importance in the preparation and monitoring of NRPs (economic as well as social aspects); in the CSR process; in the development of NSRs. Stakeholder involvement in the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EPAPSE) should be further enhanced. Stakeholder involvement could also become a key element in monitoring the Social Dimension of EMU and the European Semester.

Enhance support from Commission and SPC

The EU can boost practical support through using EU Funds to support involvement at all levels. It can encourage the development of more national platforms to feed into the EPAPSE. It can promote more exchange and mutual learning in future, for example by



highlighting good practice through the Knowledge Bank, through the European Social Policy Network's reports, through more Peer Reviews and through social innovation initiatives. The development of guidelines of good practice on stakeholder involvement could be helpful as they can assist Member States in developing their own practice in this regard and can provide a basis for monitoring arrangements in the context of the EU Semester.

Build on good practice and continue dialogue

There is much good practice on stakeholder involvement on social inclusion issues and many opportunities for mutual learning. The dialogue inspired by this Peer Review on the Belgian Platform should be continued and deepened in the future.



F. Contribution of the Peer Review to Europe 2020 and the SIP

As the Belgian Platform has been created specifically to enhance stakeholder involvement in European social inclusion processes, particularly the Europe 2020 strategy and associated initiatives such as the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion, the Social OMC and the Social Investment Package, the Peer Review proved highly relevant.

First and foremost the Peer Review served to **reinforce the importance of stakeholder involvement** in the European process from a social inclusion perspective. It highlighted the emphasis put on stakeholder involvement in the Lisbon Treaty, the European 2020 Strategy, the EU's Social Objectives, the Social Investment Package and the Recommendation on Investing in Children. For instance, the Peer Review fleshed out the Social Investment Package's (SIP's) emphasis on stakeholder involvement, urging Member States to "engage relevant actors more vigorously in the development, implementation and assessment of policies." Promoting active inclusion is at the heart of the SIP, and is seen as a joint responsibility for all actors in society, including civil society organisations, people experiencing poverty, NGOs, local administrations and the private sector. The Peer Review thus served to emphasise that stakeholder involvement in EU social inclusion processes is a binding requirement, not an optional extra and should be at the heart of the European Semester and the implementation of the Social Investment Package.

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Secondly, the Peer Review went further than just to highlight that there should be stakeholder involvement in the Europe 2020 and SIP process. It strongly reinforced the argument that one of the reasons for the weak social dimension of Europe 2020 to date has been the failure to adequately engage with the broad range of stakeholders. This lack of engagement is part of the **growing democratic deficit** at the heart of the EU and, unless addressed, this will undermine support for initiatives like Europe 2020 and the SIP and ultimately will undermine Social Europe.

Thirdly the Peer Review highlighted many of the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches to stakeholder involvement in the Europe 2020 semester. It also focussed the spotlight on the **need for significant improvements** in stakeholder involvement in many Member States. This provides an important challenge for the future implementation of Europe 2020 and the SIP. Addressing this challenge will be vital if the social dimension of the European semester is to be strengthened. A key first step will be to enhance the monitoring and reporting on progress on stakeholder involvement in the implementation of Europe 2020 and the SIP.

Fourthly, the Peer Review demonstrated the value of mutual exchange and learning between Member States as part of the Social OMC. This served to remind and reinforce awareness of the **important role that the Social OMC** can play in underpinning the social dimension of Europe 2020 through supporting such learning as well as through initiatives such as the National Social Reports.

Fifthly, and finally, the Peer Review made a very concrete contribution to Europe 2020 and the SIP by providing a whole range of **practical learning points and suggestions** on



how Member States can improve their practice in this area. It also provided many concrete suggestions as to what the Commission and Social Protection Committee can do to enhance stakeholder involvement. These are all documented in the preceding chapters.



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The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020

Host country: **Belgium**

Peer countries: **Austria - Bulgaria - Czech Republic - Finland - France - Greece - Ireland - Malta**

Stakeholder: **the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) and the Social Platform**

The onset of the economic crisis has increased the risk of poverty across Europe making the need for action to fight poverty all the more pressing. In mid-January 2014 Peer Reviewers met in Brussels to hear about the approach in Belgium where the Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion involves a wide range of stakeholders to formulate policy recommendations.

The Belgian Platform is designed to feed into the Europe 2020 Strategy, which includes the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion as one of seven flagship initiatives. Since 2011 the Belgian Platform has brought together a wide variety of participants, including government representatives, social partners, social services, NGOs and – crucially – people experiencing poverty, for quarterly meetings. Although the Platform has no real policy making authority, it provides an important forum for open dialogue and increasing awareness of the European framework for fighting social exclusion.

