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Children First – pilot local consultation platforms on child poverty

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Children First – pilot local consultation platforms on child poverty

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Executive Summary

The Peer Review of the Belgian pilot local consultation platforms on child poverty was held in Brussels on 13–14 January 2015. It was hosted by the Federal Public Service for Social Integration (FPS SI). In addition to the host country, eight peer countries were represented: Bulgaria, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Also participating were stakeholder representatives from the Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union (COFACE) and Eurochild, and the European Commission's DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

The Peer Review examined the Belgian local consultation platforms for the prevention and identification of child poverty, a new initiative launched under the *Children First* programme in 2014. Through *Children First*, the federal government supports the Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs) in playing a leading role at the local level in the fight against childhood poverty through the launch of local consultation platforms with local actors. The intention is to ensure that child poverty is detected in a preventive and proactive manner and to seek joint remedies. More specifically, local consultation platforms strive for the following objectives: (i) to raise awareness of child poverty, (ii) to provide information about existing aid channels, (iii) to support collaboration and consultation, (iv) to sensitise local partners to poverty, (v) to stimulate local projects, and (vi) to provide specific support (at both the individual and the collective level). The target group of the consultation platforms are children aged 12 and under living in poverty (and their families, too). Special attention is to be paid to early childhood (0–5 years).

The launch of the Belgian local consultation platforms is an innovative and (not incidentally) low-cost initiative. The Belgian approach assigns the key role to the PCSWs. Focusing on the lower levels of government in combating child poverty and social exclusion, it permits flexibility in response to local needs. The case studies presented at the meeting reflected this by showing that the consultation platforms vary greatly in terms of their actual tasks and activities, in the range of local partners involved, and in their functioning. But there is another side to the coin, too: thanks to the autonomy granted to the PCSWs, the operation of the consultation platforms may be affected not only by local needs, but also by the policy visions of the PCSWs. Therefore, the effectiveness of the local consultation platforms in combating child poverty may vary greatly, making overall assessment of this policy initiative quite difficult.

During the Peer Review meeting, four main issues were discussed: (i) cooperation among services and the role of government in promoting that cooperation, (ii) involvement of primary stakeholders (children and their families) in the policy-making process, (iii) monitoring and evaluation of the policy scheme, like the *Children First* programme, and (iv) addressing poverty in early childhood.

The main conclusions of the Peer Review can be summarised as follows.

- Children are among the prime victims of poverty. In accordance with the recommendation of the European Commission on *Investing in Children*, there is a need to develop integrated and multidimensional strategies (at both the national and the sub-national level) to promote the well-being of children. Child poverty has to be tackled through a multi-level policy framework, in order to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Although action can be locally tailored, strong central government commitment to combating child poverty is also essential.
- Policies that are both preventive and proactive may be more effective in the fight against child poverty and social exclusion than reactive programmes. Among preventive and proactive policies, those focusing on early childhood are crucial. In accordance with the recommendations on *Investing in Children*, local policies should also place a stronger emphasis on this stage of childhood.
- Improving cooperation among services, as the Belgian initiative seeks to do, does not cost much money, but is essential for ensuring the effectiveness of programmes. Cooperation, however, is not a simple matter. Diverse perspectives and interests, a lack of trust between actors and poor communication may all hamper it. The Peer Review revealed some ways of overcoming the problem. Beyond establishing common objectives and a shared understanding, a key actor may contribute greatly to the success of cooperation among service providers. Capacity building in the organisations concerned may be another remedy.
- The timeframe for projects such as the Belgian platforms is a key factor. It is important to establish structures that provide sustainability of projects beyond the initial financial support.
- There was general agreement that no policy to tackle child poverty can succeed without the participation of those directly affected, and so children in poverty and their parents must certainly be involved. In practice, however, consultation platforms highlight the difficulties faced when trying to involve these people (e.g. the short timeframe of the project is itself a barrier).
- Monitoring and evaluation are indispensable for well-grounded policy decisions, such as whether to continue with or even scale up the project. However, although good initiatives exist, programmes like *Children First* are difficult to monitor and evaluate. Their outcomes are not easy to define and operationalise. The great diversity of activities, as well as the short-term horizon, can also pose problems for assessment.
- The *Children First* programme provides useful lessons, even though the transferability of the scheme may vary across countries according to the extent and depth of child poverty, the general quality of governance, the structure of social services, and the roles of local authorities, national governments and NGOs.



A. Policy context at the European level

Child mainstreaming¹ and the fight against child poverty and social exclusion, together with the mainstreaming of social inclusion, constitute the key elements of the EU policy framework for this Peer Review. Although some of the relevant documents represent progress in both fields of policy, it is important to discuss the two issues separately.

Child mainstreaming

The promotion and protection of the rights of the child constitute one of the objectives of the EU on which the Treaty of Lisbon has placed further emphasis, mirrored by the activities of both the Commission and the Council. The EU explicitly recognised children's rights in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (Article 24).² In its 2006 Communication *Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child* (European Commission 2006), the Commission proposed establishing a comprehensive EU strategy to effectively promote and safeguard the rights of the child in the EU's policies and to support Member States' efforts in this field. Stakeholders were brought together in a European Forum on the Rights of the Child – a platform for the promotion of children's rights and well-being in the EU's internal and external actions. In its 2011 Communication *An EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child* (European Commission 2011), the Commission reaffirmed this strong commitment. It was also declared that 'in the future, EU policies that directly or indirectly affect children should be designed, implemented, and monitored taking into account the principle of the best interests of the child'. The Social Protection Committee (SPC) also brought this issue to the fore. As a result, in 2008, the EU Task-Force on Child Poverty and Child Well-Being prepared a major report on child poverty (Social Protection Committee 2008), which was carried on by the TÁRKI-Applica (2010) report. On the other hand, since the 2006 Council Conclusion, child poverty has been the subject of a number of Council summits. In 2010, the Belgian presidency made the fight against child poverty a key theme; it organised a major conference and published a *Roadmap for a Recommendation to Fight Child Poverty* (Frazer 2010). As a main milestone in the child mainstreaming process, the SPC adopted an advisory report to the European Commission on *Tackling and Preventing Child Poverty, Promoting Child Well-being* (Social Protection Committee 2012).

In terms of policy strategy, an even greater emphasis was placed on combating child poverty and social exclusion by the adoption of the long-awaited Commission recommendation on child poverty *Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (European Commission 2013b), as part of the Social Investment Package for Growth and Cohesion (SIP). In the SIP, special attention is paid to children, taking account of the broad consensus that tackling disadvantage early is one of the best ways to help children live up to their

¹ Child mainstreaming can be understood as a process involving 'viewing social inclusion from a child's perspective and implies integrating a concern with the well-being and social inclusion of children into all areas of policy making' (Marlier et al. 2007).

² http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf



full potential (European Commission 2013a). In this key document, which is closely related to the earlier SPC advisory report, the Commission recommends that Member States organise and implement policies to address child poverty and social exclusion, promoting children's well-being through multidimensional strategies, in accordance with six horizontal guidelines.³

Mainstreaming social inclusion through stakeholder involvement⁴

The Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission 2010) puts social inclusion at the centre of EU policy making, at least in theory (Frazer 2014:14). Inclusive growth that fosters a high-employment economy, delivering social and territorial cohesion, is one of the key priorities put forward by the Europe 2020 Strategy, alongside smart and sustainable growth. Europe 2020 sets five headline targets, including one on social inclusion, according to which at least 20 million people should be lifted out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion by 2020. One of the seven flagship initiatives of the Europe 2020 Strategy is the creation of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion. It is designed to help EU Member States achieve the headline target on social inclusion. In addition, and importantly for this Peer Review, the formation of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion provides an important context for work on social inclusion issues and the involvement of stakeholders (Frazer 2014:14). Also, the European Commission has placed significant emphasis on enhancing the involvement of both lower levels of government and stakeholders (European Commission 2008:9), as well as on the involvement of social partners, NGOs, and regional and local authorities, with a view to increasing the ownership and effectiveness of the policies developed in the context of the Social Open Method of Coordination.

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The emphasis on stakeholder involvement was reaffirmed in 2013 with the launch of the SIP. This urges Member States to strengthen the involvement of relevant stakeholders at all levels (European Commission 2013a:22). More specifically, in the accompanying *Investing in Children*, the Commission encourages Member States to 'promote close cooperation and regular dialogue between public authorities at all levels, social partners, local communities and civil society organisations' and to 'support and further develop the involvement of children, including in the implementation of the present Recommendation' (European Commission 2013b:10). Furthermore, the Commission urges Member States to 'put in place mechanisms that promote children's participation in decision-making that affects their lives' (European Commission 2013b:9). This is equally important from the point of view of children's rights and of stakeholder involvement (i.e. children are considered in this context as primary stakeholders).

³ These are the following: (i) tackle child poverty and social exclusion through integrated strategies that go beyond ensuring children's material security and promote equal opportunity, (ii) address child poverty and social exclusion from a children's rights approach, (iii) always take the child's best interest as a primary consideration and recognise children as independent rights-holders, whilst fully acknowledging the importance of supporting families as primary carers, (iv) maintain an appropriate balance between universal policies and targeted approaches, (v) ensure a focus on children who face an increased risk due to multiple disadvantage, and (vi) sustain investment in children and families (European Commission 2013b:4–5).

⁴ For a more detailed discussion, see Frazer (2014).



B. Host country policy/good practice under review

The Belgian approach to combating child poverty

Reducing child poverty constitutes one of the key priorities of Belgium's overall social inclusion policy. Both Belgium as a federal state and its separate regions have put forward strategies to prevent and alleviate child poverty and social exclusion. Being a federal parliamentary state, the country has a complex institutional model that is made up of communities and regions with their own governments and competences. Thus responsibility for child poverty is spread across these policy levels. This complexity requires coordination and a strongly integrated approach to common goals, such as is needed in the fight against child poverty (De Boyser 2012).

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

Belgium translated the Europe 2020 target to combat poverty and social exclusion into a national target and committed itself to reducing the number of people at risk of poverty by at least 380,000 by 2020 (compared to 2008).⁵ In June 2013, a National Child Poverty Reduction Plan, based on the recommendation of the European Commission, was approved. To attain the global poverty objective, a proportionate reduction would imply that at least 82,000 children have to be helped out of poverty or social exclusion.

The 2013 National Child Poverty Reduction Plan, in line with the Commission's recommendation on *Investing in Children*, was shaped around three policy areas that are fundamental in the fight against child poverty and the promotion of child well-being: (i) access to adequate resources, (ii) access to quality services, and (iii) opportunities for children to participate actively in society. In addition, the plan makes explicit mention of the need for a high degree of synergy between the different relevant policy levels and policy areas. Therefore, a fourth strategic goal – to set up horizontal and vertical partnerships between different policy areas and policy levels – completes the plan.

The role of Public Centres for Social Welfare

The Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs) are appointed to play a leading role at the local level in the fight against child poverty, by launching consultation platforms with local actors. Operating in every municipality in Belgium, the PCSWs have a number of tools at their disposal (including income support, employment and career guidance, emergency medical assistance, rent guarantees, etc.) to help the socially and economically underprivileged to participate fully in society. It has been found that despite the wide range of instruments and the necessary expertise to combat child poverty, PCSWs sometimes become involved in a problem situation (too) late. This can be traced back to insufficient information flow and

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/nd/nrp2012_belgium_en.pdf



weak coordination between actors working with children (i.e. the different actors working with children do not always know each other and the services they provide, and do not always share their expertise and experience). Via local consultation platforms, the PCSWs are now expected to take a proactive approach to poverty and risk situations.

The Children First programme

Within the framework of *Children First*, in December 2013 the federal government made EUR 2 million available to support the PCSWs in initiating local consultation platforms with schools, nurseries, poverty associations, etc. The purpose is to preventively and proactively detect hidden child poverty and to find remedies together.⁶ More specifically, local consultation platforms strive for the following objectives: (i) to raise awareness of child poverty, (ii) to provide information about existing aid channels, (iii) to support collaboration and consultation, (iv) to sensitise local partners to poverty, (v) to stimulate local projects, and (vi) to provide specific support (at both the individual and the collective level).

The target group of the consultation platforms constitutes children aged 12 and under living in poverty or at risk of poverty (and their families, too). Special attention is paid to early childhood (0–5 years). The main motivation behind this is not only the fact that the risk of poverty in Belgium is at its highest among the youngest children, but also that early childhood is crucial in proactively preventing and combating poverty.

In total, 57 pilot projects started on 1 May 2014. The selection was based on a call for proposals, which was open to PCSWs, as well as to non-profit organisations. Of the 57 projects, 50 are managed by a PCSW and seven by an NGO. However, the PCSWs also play a prominent role in those seven consultation platforms. All pilot projects run for 12 months. A study is being prepared by a consulting firm on the local consultation platforms, with three specific aims: (i) to describe and analyse the platforms, (ii) to create a best practices guide, and (iii) to formulate federal policy recommendations. It will cover a period of 15 months, beginning from May 2014. The findings and recommendations of the study will feed into the decision-making process on the future and further financing of the *Children First* programme.

Preliminary assessment of the programme

At the time of the Peer Review meeting (January 2015), only some interim findings of the evaluation study were available. These are based on an analysis of the local consultation platforms that were selected for funding. The findings provide insight into the local needs, the target groups and the local partners, as well as into the functioning and activities of the platforms.

- *The local needs:* Many platforms highlight the facts that (i) available resources should be optimised, (ii) better ways are needed to reach the target group (it is often the case that help is available but is not offered for some reason, or else help is often provided to the same people), (iii) better content-support and more information is needed on how to deal with poverty, (iv) more collaboration is necessary among the partners (sometimes the partners work next to each other rather than with one another).

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2014/nrp2014_belgium_en.pdf



- *The target group:* Virtually all platforms identify children aged 12 and under (and their parents) as the target group. However, not all platforms involve children aged 5 or under. Some platforms are even considering expanding the upper age bracket to 18, while others intend to focus on specific subgroups (e.g. single-parent families, families with members suffering from psychiatric problems, etc.).
- *Local partners:* Childcare and educational institutions (taking these as a single group) are generally well represented on the platforms. However, the representation of other types of local actors, such as poverty associations, neighbourhood groups, cooperatives, etc., varies across the regions.
- *The functioning of the platforms:* The consultation platforms often raise the need for an extra member of staff. In Flanders, for example, a number of platforms choose to call in an 'expert by experience' as a response to the problem.
- *Actual tasks and activities of the platforms:* The most common tasks that platforms undertake are (i) enabling the exchange of information, (ii) providing support for professional care workers, (iii) general support for the target group, (iv) concrete, specific support for the target group, and (v) activities that promote the sustainability of the project.

The launch of the Belgian local consultation platforms is an important and (not incidentally) low-cost initiative that is worth examining. However, relatively little time has elapsed since the start of the programme (May 2014), and we should not lose sight of this fact when assessing this policy initiative.

The Belgian approach, which focuses on the lower levels of government in combating child poverty and social exclusion, permits flexibility in response to local needs. The PCSWs are not only important actors in launching consultation platforms, but are also responsible for the provision of all three strands of the active inclusion strategy: adequate income protection (through the living wage), integration into the labour market (through employment and individualised pathways), and access to quality services (Schepers and Nicaise 2013). The PCSWs provide a very wide range of services – from housing support through childcare, health care and long-term care, to network services (Schepers and Nicaise 2013). This integrated service provision, coupled with their discretionary competence, allows the PCSWs to provide a tailored response to the problem of child poverty and social exclusion. In practice, this can be seen clearly from the differing tasks and activities undertaken by the local consultation platforms.

As the interim findings of the evaluation study (and the three case studies presented at the Peer Review meeting) demonstrate, the consultation platforms vary greatly across the regions of the country (and probably across the municipalities) in terms of actual tasks and activities, local partners involved, and their functioning. For example, the consultation platform operating in the municipality of Boom (Flanders) focuses primarily on individual case management (i.e. providing individual-level support for children experiencing poverty or social exclusion), while the consultation platform launched in Andenne (Wallonia) concentrates mainly on collective-level support for the target group (e.g. one of the platform's goals is to make parents more aware of the issue of healthy food by various means, such as preparing a healthy food calendar). Another difference is that the Boom platform seems to address primarily acute emergency situations, while the Andenne platform pursues a more proactive approach.

But there is another side to the coin: thanks to the autonomy granted to the PCSWs, the operation of the consultation platforms may be affected not only by local needs, but also by the policy visions of the PCSWs. Therefore, the effectiveness of the local consultation platforms in combating child poverty may vary greatly between centres, making overall assessment of this policy initiative quite difficult.

The early childhood period, which is *the* crucial stage in children's development (Frazer 2010), is supposed to be given special attention in the *Children First* programme and in the call for applications. However, the preliminary findings of the ongoing evaluation study suggest that this focus is not being reflected in applications. It remains to be seen to what extent the consultation platforms will place an emphasis on early childhood in practice.

The success of local consultation platforms in combating child poverty and exclusion will, to a large extent, depend on the involvement of a wide range of actors. This is especially true, since the consultation platforms were initiated because of the inadequate information flow and weak coordination between actors working with children. However, the involvement of children experiencing poverty (and of their parents) is not given much attention in the programme. (This was mentioned only in the applications from the regions of Brussels and Wallonia.) Furthermore, and related also to the issue of early childhood intervention, the fact that the *Children First* programme intends to involve childcare organisations as partners is to be welcomed. However, in the follow-up to the implementation, childcare organisations are not separated from educational institutions, thus concealing the extent to which they are effectively involved in the platforms. This is important in order to assess the extent to which early childhood is given emphasis in implementation of the programme.

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In assessing this policy scheme, we should not neglect the wider context of which it is part. The first element that should be highlighted is Belgium's complex institutional model, which leads to a situation whereby the responsibilities related to child poverty are spread across the different policy levels (i.e. federal, regional, community and local). This complexity in itself requires a high level of coordination and a strongly integrated approach to combating child poverty. The country's many years of experience with consultation platforms is also an element of the wider context. The significance of this should not be underestimated when assessing the transferability of the policy measure to other Member States. Overall, the transferability of the *Children First* programme may vary from country to country, according to the extent and depth of child poverty, the general quality of governance, the structure of social services, and the roles of local authorities, national governments and NGOs.



C. Policies and experiences in peer countries and stakeholder contributions

Ireland has some policy schemes that bear a certain similarity to the *Children First* programme. In Ireland, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People* – the first overarching national children’s policy framework – underscores the necessity of inter-agency working at the local level in order to transcend a ‘silo’ approach and create a more supportive environment for protecting and meeting the needs and rights of children and young people. The key structures for planning and coordinating services for children and young people in every county in Ireland are the Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSCs). These bring together a diverse group of agencies to engage in joint planning. All major organisations and agencies working locally on behalf of children and young people are represented on the CYPSCs. So far, 21 CYPSCs have been established across Ireland. Work will continue to expand CYPSC coverage throughout the country, in order to ensure that a CYPSC will be active in each county. The overall purpose of CYPSCs is to secure better outcomes for children through more effective integration of existing services and interventions at the local level, achieved by: (i) coordinating the implementation of national and regional policies and strategies that relate to children, young people and families, (ii) planning and coordinating services for children, (iii) eliminating fragmentation and duplication of services, (iv) influencing the allocation of resources across the area covered by the CYPSC with a view to enabling the effective use of resources at the local level, and (v) strengthening the decision-making capacity at the local level.

In addition to this, there are two other types of structures currently being established in Ireland to facilitate coordination and collaboration at the local level. One is a local collaborative network of community, voluntary and statutory providers to help ensure that families receive easily accessible support appropriate to their identified needs. This initiative is being led by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, which delivers a range of services across Ireland – from family support to child protection. The other structures are the *Local Community Development Committees*, which will be established in each local authority area to enhance strategic planning and coordination of local and community development activity.

Involving all stakeholders in decision making, but also in delivery, is now a crucial challenge in Ireland. Whereas social service provision in Belgium is mainly at the municipal level, in Ireland it is primarily a matter for central government. The *Area-Based Childhood Programme (ABC)* is a cross-departmental initiative that targets EUR 30 million of investment in interventions to improve the long-term outcomes for children and families living in areas of disadvantage between 2013 and 2017. It aims to tackle child poverty through integrated and effective services and interventions in the following areas: child development, child well-being, parenting and educational disadvantage. The programme has a strong emphasis on using evidence to inform practice, as well as on coordinated, integrated working. It is currently quite a small initiative, operating in 13 areas across Ireland. Each of the 13 ABC areas delivers a range of different services and approaches through collaborative, inter-agency working. The services have been selected because they meet the identified needs of each community and show a promising level of evidence of effectiveness. A consortium-



based approach, which favours embedding initiatives and programmes within existing local services and structures, rather than creating new ones, encourages efficient, integrated service delivery and buy-in from key stakeholders. A national evaluation will assess the outcomes achieved by the *ABC Programme*. This should be completed in 2018.

In the **Netherlands**, local authorities are deemed the most suitable for formulating and implementing policies to combat child poverty and social exclusion – based on the argument that they are closest to their citizens, and are more familiar with the family circumstances, as well as the local situation. The existing national legal framework grants municipalities significant autonomy, but at the same time places a high degree of responsibility on them. The municipalities may grant non-financial assistance and provide items in kind. For example, many municipalities have introduced ‘city cards’ for families at risk of social exclusion. These cards mostly benefit children by providing access to local sports, cultural and social activities. The monitoring and evaluation of measures to combat poverty and social exclusion do not take place at the national level, but municipalities conduct their own research and evaluate the policies.

The municipality of Deventer provides a good example. Its response to the problem of child poverty and social exclusion has two specific features. First, the local government has set up an extensive network of cooperation with local actors. About 18 stakeholders work together in close cooperation in a mainly virtual network. The local government is an equal partner in this network of cooperation. Second, the municipality believes that to achieve effective support, an integrated vision of the individual situation is needed. Therefore, the most appropriate approach to combating child poverty and social exclusion is the ‘one family, one plan, one case manager’ approach: that is, for each family there is one plan, under which the various parties work in cooperation with each other. It is coordinated by one case manager.

In the Netherlands, there is a *network of 32 cities (G32)* working closely together on different issues (e.g. economic, infrastructural and social). These issues are selected by the aldermen of cities. Poverty is one of these themes. The participating cities have also decided to share their experience and evidence of non-conventional, non-institutional solutions to child poverty over the next few years.

In the **United Kingdom**, the government recognises that centrally led action cannot, by itself, end child poverty. In order to implement its Child Poverty Strategy and meet its targets, the government works closely with other key stakeholders. The United Kingdom has an initiative which shares elements of the *Children First* programme: the *Troubled Families Programme* was introduced in December 2011. The policy has provided clear incentives for achievement, such as payment-by-results systems. Some £448 million (approximately EUR 599 million) was invested in the programme, and the plan was to turn around 120,000 families by 2015. A ‘troubled family’ is defined as any family with children or adults who are involved in youth crime or antisocial behaviour, are regularly playing truant from school, are jobless and on unemployment benefits, or are running up high costs for the taxpayer. The programme is a central government initiative, but is delivered by local authorities. It brings together social workers, employment advisers, schools, police and health workers. Each family is assigned a social worker, who visits it in the home. The social worker often finds a whole complex of health, financial, employment and other problems within one family, and is then responsible for coordinating all local services for that family.



Malta shares some elements with the Belgian case. The community development structure in Malta rests on two main pillars: the *ACCÈSS centres* and the *LEAP project*. The *ACCÈSS model* is a community one-stop shop providing multiple services (information, professional advice and support in a number of areas, such as employment, access to training, child day care, and community services). In addition to the four *ACCÈS centres*, the government is committed to improving access to, and quality of, social services through the *LEAP project*, which aims to combat poverty and social exclusion through a number of interventions, including the development of a cluster-based network system at both the regional and the local level. As part of the project, Family Resource Centres at the local level and Regional Development Centres at the regional level are currently being developed, with the aim of providing a point of reference for all families within the community through the provision of various forms of support: professional information, advice, assistance, education and holistic care. These centres also provide a range of activities to enhance family life and the abilities of parents, children and other individuals within the community, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The *LEAP project* will contribute to the promotion of local stakeholder participation.

In **Hungary**, the differences in the standards and available capacity of local services, and the fact that services are least available in those areas where they are most needed, present a major problem. The services and institutions of the child welfare and child protection care system, too, face maintenance problems, a shortage of specialists and extreme workloads, particularly in the smaller localities. In Hungary, cooperation between the various service providers is quite bad. Programmes are to be launched to enhance cooperation between the various services.

As a formalised way to improve cooperation, a ‘notification system’ exists for children at risk, including those in poverty. From different sectors, it brings together all the professionals who might be able to recognise that a child is at risk – such as doctors, teachers, district nurses and the child welfare services. While they are legally required to meet just once a year, in practice there is considerable local variation. In some places, the cooperation works well, while in others it is more of a formality. A 2009 explorative study in a medium-sized city found that doctors and district nurses formed a cluster and never really communicated with the child welfare services, while teachers with youth protection roles were not cooperating either.

The *Sure Start programme* (taking the approach of the original British model) provides another opportunity to improve cooperation between service providers, as well as to involve stakeholders. The programme serves to foster the abilities of young multiply disadvantaged children, including the Roma. The programme provides a chance for the youngest (children under 5) living in poverty to access quality services, which they could not otherwise do due to the shortage of family funds or because they live in disadvantaged regions, or for any other socio-cultural reasons. *Sure Start* relies heavily on the involvement of parents. In recent years the programme has been placed on a firm, sustainable, local financial footing, while *Sure Start Children’s Houses* are listed now even in the child protection law among the basic services for child welfare.

In **Greece**, the services involved in the fight against child poverty are provided by public (ministries, local administration authorities, hospitals, nurseries) and private bodies. Cooperation between them is satisfactory (although adversely affected by growing poverty),



but the lack of coordination and the overlapping of responsibilities limit the effectiveness and efficiency of the whole system. Greece has a limited tradition of social dialogue and consultation, despite the existence of the relevant institutional framework. For the time being, there is no structured way to ensure the involvement of stakeholders in the fight against poverty (such as the Belgian platforms). The establishment (in 2003) of the National Social Protection Committee (composed of representatives of government bodies, social partners and NGOs) was supposed to encourage the participation of all relevant stakeholders in designing and evaluating social policies. However, the Committee does not meet on a regular basis.

In **Bulgaria**, a social inclusion project was launched in 2010, funded by the World Bank. This includes the establishment of new services for children in poverty at the municipal level – notably risk prevention in early childhood, improvement of children's readiness for inclusion in the education system and improvement of the family environment. The broad range of activities includes: integration into kindergartens and preparatory classes, health consultations for children, early intervention and educational support for children with disabilities, development of parenting skills, family consultation and support, and family centres for children up to the age of 7. These services are integrated, combining social, health and educational elements. They will now be funded by the human resources development programme of the European Social Fund.

In **France**, responsibility is shared between several actors. The state intervenes in favour of poor families throughout the tax system, employment, housing, special assistance, etc. The system of social services is highly decentralised, with many responsibilities being devolved to the county or local level (municipalities), where the borough social action centre (CCAS) is a key actor (and the nearest equivalent to the PCSW) (Daly 2012). As an example of local governance, *schémas départementaux des services aux familles* can be mentioned. Their goal is to develop childcare facilities for young children and parental support services, as well as to reduce territorial inequalities. This is achieved by providing shared local diagnosis (needs analysis and mapping of existing services, such as childcare facilities and parental support services in the department) and by defining the main objectives and action plans for several years ahead. Monitoring and assessment are given an important role in the process.

For a long time, the Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union (**COFACE**) has been working on the child poverty issue, as well as on situations of temporary vulnerability that might put families at risk of poverty. For example, it has a multimedia campaign promoting a more balanced diet on a tight budget. COFACE members have pointed to the positive effects of the multigenerational services introduced in some countries – e.g. childcare linked to parenting advice or language classes. They highlighted the fact that capacity building for civil society organisations is fundamental. A safety net for families facilitates the early detection of poverty risks. Family organisations can sometimes be used as a link to get in touch with families, as these organisations are seen as less invasive.

Eurochild's vision is that every child should grow up healthy, happy, confident and respected as an individual in their own right. In its view, poverty and material deprivation is a real challenge in today's societies, creating stress in families and making it difficult for children to receive the nurture they require. Eurochild sees four main challenges related to initiatives like *Children First* in Belgium.



- The vertical coordination of power, such as the Belgian example of a federal initiative coordinated at the local level: care must be taken to avoid the 'projectisation' of such initiatives – i.e. they must be about sustainable, systemic change, not a short-term quest for funding.
- Coordination and cooperation among the sectors: in complex societies, professions each tend to look at issues from a particular perspective. Professional training should promote 'thinking outside the box'. There must also be common values, a common goal and mutual respect. However, cooperation for cooperation's sake should be avoided. There should not be too much bureaucracy or too many meetings.
- The balance between welfare and services: at the time of austerity, local organisations and institutions can ease the drop in the incomes of already vulnerable families.
- Children who are off the radar, e.g. Roma children, the children of migrants in irregular situations or children in institutional care.



D. Main issues discussed during the meeting

In the course of the Peer Review meeting four main issues were discussed: (i) improving cooperation among services, (ii) involvement of primary stakeholders (children and their families) in the policy-making process, (iii) monitoring and evaluation, and (iv) addressing poverty in early childhood.

Improving cooperation among services

The cooperation among services in the different countries and the role of the government in promoting cooperation generated a lot of discussion during the meeting. A number of key points were made about the Belgian scheme itself.

Cooperation among services in the Belgian case

The three case studies from Belgium demonstrated that the consultation platforms vary greatly across regions in terms of actual tasks, activities and functioning. As was mentioned before, individual case management (i.e. providing individual-level support) is pronounced in the case of the Boom platform, while collective-level support for the target group receives great emphasis in the case of the Andenne platform. This raised the question of whether the aim of the local consultation platforms is to change the delivery of social work from an individual basis to a community basis. It was made clear during the discussion that the goal is to pursue both approaches. On the one hand, the system of social protection is based on an individual right to guidance. People have different needs, which call for differentiated help. The Belgian system of social protection is not about minimum income, but about the right to social integration. The PCSWs are required to offer not only money, but also a pathway into society or work. On the other hand, the best way to be effective is to complement this individual guidance with joint actions.

Some peer reviewers pointed to the contradiction between the aim of stimulating cooperation and the short, one-year timespan of the project (i.e. cooperation needs time to develop). The host country representative, however, drew attention to a potential advantage that would not disappear with the closure of the programme after the one-year pilot period. Although the three case studies presented at the meeting show differences, one thing they have in common is the dynamic of cooperation. For the first time, they are attempting to map systematically who is working in a given field and how the different people might work together. So the seed of cooperation has been planted in the minds of the PCSWs and other organisations working with children.

Cooperation among services in the peer countries

Various alternative forms of cooperation among services exist in the peer countries. A couple of good practice examples were mentioned during the debate. Ireland, for example, is currently establishing an infrastructure (i.e. the afore-mentioned *Children and Young People's Services Committees*) that brings together local-level statutory stakeholders with responsibility for children and young people. The CYPSCs are seen as a way of implementing Ireland's national policy for children and young people (*Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*). Each committee places great emphasis on conducting a comprehensive needs analysis



in its community and producing a three-year plan. Considerable effort is being made to avoid duplication. Achievements to date include evidence-based parenting programmes, inter-agency literacy projects and inter-agency approaches to tackling youth mental health issues. In the United Kingdom, within the framework of the *Troubled Families Programme*, local authorities bring together actors from different fields (e.g. social workers, schools, health workers, etc.). They all work in the same office in a local authority building to identify the troubled families in the area. These examples, along with the Belgian consultation platforms, have in common the fact that in all cases there is a key player in promoting cooperation between the different service providers.

The role of government in promoting cooperation

There was considerable discussion of the government's role in regard to cooperation among services. The question was raised by the case of the Hungarian 'notification system for children at risk', which (being regulated by the law) implies compulsory cooperation between professionals from different fields who may notice that a child is at risk. In practice, however, it is often the case that they do not cooperate with one another. The lack of cooperation may occur for many different reasons: diverse perspectives and interests of the actors, or lack of trust among them. This raises the question of whether actors working with children should be legally obliged to cooperate if they do not wish to. Participants in the meeting, however, emphasised the need for a voluntary approach. There was general agreement that stakeholders will not become involved in partnerships unless they are genuinely interested. This in turn means that the action must focus on problems that they recognise as such. Trust and shared values are essential for cooperation to evolve. Placing the child at the centre of the action makes it more difficult for the actors to refuse to cooperate. Capacity building is another important means of stimulating cooperation. Without capacity building, some of the civil society organisations may find it difficult to network. While financial incentives may help, cooperation cannot ultimately be either enforced or bought. Last but not least, assigning the role of coordinator to a player may greatly contribute to successful cooperation, as the cases of peer countries also demonstrate.

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Stakeholder involvement

A second major topic was stakeholder involvement. The Commission recommendation on *Investing in Children* places great emphasis on the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. It is recommended that Member States should 'promote close cooperation and regular dialogue between public authorities at all levels, social partners, local communities and civil society organisations' as well as 'support and further develop the involvement of children' (European Commission 2013b:10). Of the different types of stakeholders (i.e. decision makers in charge of policy decisions, secondary stakeholders who are intermediaries in the policy process, and primary stakeholders), it was the involvement of primary stakeholders that generated considerable discussion. There was general agreement that no policy to tackle child poverty can succeed without the participation of those directly affected, and so children in poverty and their parents must certainly be involved.



Although the involvement of children and their families was an issue addressed in the call for projects, in practice consultation platforms do not seem to devote much attention to this. One of the platform representatives noted that the short timeframe of the project makes it difficult to involve primary stakeholders in the policy-making process. However, children experiencing poverty and their families are involved indirectly, through organisations working with them.

There was some discussion of how to involve children in the formulation of policies. A **children's ombudsman** was mentioned as a mechanism for hearing children's voices. Of the participating countries, two have children's ombudsmen. In the Netherlands, the *Children's Ombudsman* is an independent adviser to the government. In 2013, the ombudsman published a report on child poverty, a special feature of which was that much of the information had been gathered from children themselves by means of a 'children's hotline'. In Ireland, the role of the *Ombudsman for Children's Office* is to promote and safeguard the rights and welfare of children, as well as to investigate complaints made by children or by adults on their behalf. It also actively engages in consultation with children through initiatives like the *Big Ballot* in 2007, a consultation with 75,000 children and young people across Ireland.

Direct individual discussions with children, in simple terms but without condescension, is another means, provided that trained professionals are available. In the Netherlands, for example, children are consulted on the contents of the so-called 'child package' (including e.g. vouchers for clothes, purchase of school materials, swimming lessons, etc.) that some Dutch municipalities provide to low-income households in order to promote their participation in society. Initiatives are also under way to include the issues of child poverty and child well-being in the EU urban agenda. In the *Child-Friendly Cities* programme, local authorities involve children in local decisions. Under the *Investing in Children* membership awareness scheme, services working with children can be awarded a certificate if they engage in effective dialogue with children to improve their lives.

Monitoring and evaluation

The Commission recommendation on *Investing in Children* pays special attention to the use of evidence-based approaches. Member States are encouraged to 'strengthen evidence-based policy development and social policy innovation, making sure to take due account of the potential impact of policies on children' (European Commission 2013b:10). Monitoring and evaluation are indispensable for well-grounded policy decisions, such as whether to continue with or even scale up the project. Monitoring and evaluation provide feedback for all actors to improve effectiveness and, subsequently, the outcomes for children and their families.

The role of programme assessment and the appropriate methods to perform it generated considerable discussion during the meeting. It was stressed that programmes like *Children First* are difficult to monitor and evaluate, for a couple of reasons. In the specific case of the Belgian platforms, these are as follows.

- The programme is designed in such a manner that it lacks (quantified) expected outcomes at the national, the regional or the local level. Rather than being rigidly designed, the *Children First* programme provides a strong impulse for cooperation and



offers great scope for local peculiarities (e.g. scale of needs, range of actors, policy approaches). Since the programme is designed to facilitate cooperation primarily through collective action, it is hard to set individual-level outcome targets (e.g. the number of children or families supported to leave poverty or material deprivation).

- The great diversity of activities (and to some extent of actors) can also pose problems for assessment.
- In the light of the main objectives of the programme, the one-year time horizon of the pilot phase might be considered a drawback to a well-grounded programme evaluation.
- Finally, the evaluation of a low-budget programme like this would incur very high costs relative to the total budget of the programme.

In the Belgian case, the consulting firm commissioned by the Federal Public Service for Social Integration (FPS SI) began the follow-up to implementation by scrutinising the various applications, in order to assess what the applicants had been planning to do and to discern any common approach. They then organised an ‘exchange moment’ with the different platforms, providing an opportunity for them to share the experiences they had accumulated in the early part of the programme. A survey was also conducted on what had proved successful in their work and what had not. The information from these stages of the follow-up was then used to identify a set of critical success factors. As a next step, workshops are being organised with experts to try and refine these elements and to come up with some examples that may guide platforms in the remaining phase of the programme. The report will include recommendations that will feed into any decisions on the future of the *Children First* programme.

Although assessment of these kinds of programmes is a challenging task, there are also examples of good practice. In the case of the Irish *Area-Based Childhood Programme*, a national evaluation will assess the achieved outcomes by combining self-evaluation with external evaluation. In the Netherlands, programme evaluation is carried out at the level of the municipalities. Also, the *G32 network* in the Netherlands provides another example of how to support evidence-based policy making. In cooperation with national centres of knowledge and other stakeholders, the network places a strong focus on evidence-sharing and publishing knowledge (e.g. on poverty and debt relief issues since 2010).

Early childhood

Growing up in poverty affects both children’s short-term well-being and long-term outcomes. And aside from material outcomes, there may be non-material consequences if the parents of a family have inadequate resources at their disposal: low educational attainment, poor health status, mental illness or social isolation. Early childhood experiences are especially important for later cognitive and behavioural outcomes. Thus a focus on early childhood is crucial in proactively preventing and fighting poverty and in breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Aside from their direct impact, early interventions may also have an effect in other ways – for example by strengthening parental support at critical periods. The importance of early interventions is also acknowledged by the *Children First* programme, which aims to put special emphasis on the youngest children (aged 0–5) within the wider target group. However, none of the Belgian practice examples presented at the meeting highlighted the importance of early childhood. In all three presentations, schools were



mentioned as local actors involved in the platforms, but nurseries and kindergartens were not. In general, most of the initiatives that are relevant from the *Children First* perspective (either described in the peer country comment papers or emerging during the peer country discussion) focus more on school-aged children. Only a few relevant programmes, like *Sure Start* in Hungary, have the youngest as their primary target group.



E. Conclusions and lessons learned

The main conclusions and lessons learned during the Peer Review of the *Children First* programme are summarised below.

- **Children are among the prime victims of poverty.** In Belgium and other countries, child poverty rates are above those for the population as a whole. So the fight against child poverty should have high priority within the EU's Europe 2020 Strategy.
- As put forward by the Commission's recommendation on *Investing in Children*, there is a need to develop integrated and **multidimensional strategies** (at both the national and the sub-national level) to promote the well-being of children. Given the multidimensional nature of the problem, no single policy is sufficient to ensure the social inclusion of children.
- **Child poverty** has to be **tackled through a multi-level policy framework** in order to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Although action can be locally tailored, **strong central government commitment** to combating child poverty is also essential.
- **Coherence across the whole policy spectrum** is essential if poverty is to be tackled efficiently. Policies to alleviate poverty must not be cancelled out by policies that, in fact, increase poverty.
- Policies that are **both preventive** and **proactive** may be more effective in the fight against child poverty and social exclusion than reactive programmes.
- A focus on **early childhood** is crucial in proactively preventing and fighting poverty and in breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. In accordance with the recommendations of *Investing in Children*, local policies should also place a stronger emphasis on this issue.
- Often the **most vulnerable** children are those that are hardest to reach in terms of service provision. Local platforms may play an important role in reaching out to children 'off the radar'. Providing services in a **non-stigmatising way** was highlighted as another key aspect of such programmes.
- **Cooperation** among services and institutions **does not cost much money** but is essential for ensuring the effectiveness of programmes. It is necessary to establish common objectives and a shared understanding.
- As the cases of peer countries demonstrate, a **key actor** may contribute greatly to the success of cooperation among service providers. This key actor may be either the local government or its agency, which is frequently the case, or an NGO.
- Lack of trust between different actors can pose problems for the consultation platform approach, as can misunderstandings and poor communication. **Capacity building** in the organisations concerned can be one way of overcoming this.
- The timeframe for projects such as the Belgian platforms is a key factor. It is important to **establish structures that provide sustainability of projects** beyond the initial financial support.

- There was general agreement that no policy to tackle child poverty can succeed without the **participation of** those directly affected, and so **children in poverty and their parents** must certainly be involved. In practice, however, consultation platforms highlight the difficulties faced when trying to involve these people (e.g. the short timeframe of the project is itself a barrier).
- **Monitoring and evaluation** are indispensable for well-grounded policy decisions, such as whether to continue with or even scale up the project. Monitoring and evaluation provide feedback for all actors to improve effectiveness and, subsequently, the outcomes for children and their families.
- Programmes like *Children First* are difficult to monitor and evaluate. Their outcomes are not easy to define and operationalise. The great diversity of activities can also pose problems for assessment, while a short-term horizon can be considered a drawback to a well-grounded programme evaluation. Some peer countries have experience in **assessing the outcomes achieved** by combining self-evaluation with external evaluation, while others promote evidence-sharing between local authorities on non-conventional solutions.
- The **European Social Fund** (ESF) has a specific thematic objective of social inclusion, covering such fields as access to childcare, income support, the work–family balance, and the institutionalisation of children. However, very few Member States have used the money available through the ESF for action against child poverty. The 2014–2020 ESF has ring-fenced 20% of its envelope for social inclusion. Projects aimed at combating child poverty, such as the *Children First* programme, are eligible for financial support.
- The *Children First* programme provides **useful lessons**, even though the transferability of the scheme may vary across countries according to the extent and depth of child poverty, the general quality of governance, the structure of social services, and the roles of local authorities, national governments and NGOs.



F. Contribution of the Peer Review to Europe 2020 and the Social Investment Package

Adopted in February 2013 as part of the SIP, the Commission's recommendation on *Investing in Children* stresses the importance of early intervention and preventive approaches. The recommendation's first and second pillars are about access to resources. The third concerns child participation – the right to be heard in legal proceedings and the right to participate in social, cultural and sporting activities outside school. This third pillar is the least developed, even though it is essential to breaking the cycle of disadvantage. The Belgian local consultation platforms are aimed at promoting child participation, and so they contribute to the Europe 2020 effort in this field. The platforms are also a specific response to the recommendation's call for strengthened coordination among the different actors, policy streamlining in all relevant areas, stakeholder participation and the exchange of good practice.

EPIC, the *European Platform for Investing in Children*, is an EU website supporting implementation of the *Investing in Children* recommendation.⁷ It includes a repository of evidence-based practices, for example in the area of parent support. Peer Review participants suggested greater use of this site as a means of sharing knowledge about local initiatives to combat child poverty. However, in Belgium, as in other EU countries, the need for innovative solutions remains. The local consultation platforms are part of that search.

Mutual learning within the EU's Open Method of Coordination has given Member States a better understanding of child poverty. This Peer Review provided an opportunity to share good practice on coordination at the local level, in order to promote effective action.

⁷ <http://europa.eu/epic>



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Children First – pilot local consultation platforms on child poverty

Host country: **Belgium**

Peer countries: **Bulgaria - France - Greece - Hungary - Ireland - Malta - The Netherlands - United Kingdom**

This Peer Review (13-14 January 2015) examined the Belgian local consultation platforms for the prevention and identification of child poverty, a new initiative launched under the Children First programme in 2014. Through Children First, the federal government supports the Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs) in playing a leading role at the local level in the fight against childhood poverty through the launch of local consultation platforms with local actors. The intention is to ensure that child poverty is detected in a preventive and proactive manner and to seek joint remedies.

Children First reflects the EU Commission's 2013 Recommendation 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage', and the Social Investment Package more generally, by improving coordination, increasing the involvement of parents, children and other local stakeholders, and encouraging the exchange of good practice.

