



European
Commission



Peer Review
in Social Protection
and Social Inclusion

Children first -

Pilot local consultation platforms on child
poverty

SHORT REPORT

Belgium, 13-14 January 2015

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Held in Brussels (Belgium) on 13-14 January 2015, the Peer Review was hosted by Belgium's PPS Social Integration. It was opened by the Belgian Secretary of State for Combating Poverty, Elke Sleurs. In addition to the host country, eight peer countries were represented: Bulgaria, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The stakeholder representatives were Eurochild and COFACE. Taking part for the European Commission were representatives of DG EMPL.

1. The policy under review

More than one in four children in the EU live in households that are suffering poverty or social exclusion. Child poverty is a reality even in the most prosperous EU countries - including Belgium, where 17.2% of children were at risk of poverty in 2013.

Belgium's **Public Social Welfare Centres** (PSWCs), based in each municipality, are key to local anti-poverty action. They have both a preventive and a proactive role. As these centres possess great local expertise, the Belgian government has been encouraging them, through the *Children First* programme, to set up **local consultation platforms on child poverty**. The platforms involve a wide range of local actors in this field, ranging from anti-poverty associations to child daycare centres, schools, sports clubs and student support centres. The aim is to work proactively to **identify and prevent child poverty**. The platforms:

- promote **coordination and consultation** among their members;
- encourage greater **pooling of experience**;
- raise **local awareness** of child poverty;
- provide **information about existing aid channels**;
- stimulate **local projects**;
- provide **specific support** at the individual and collective level.

The target group for the platforms' action is children aged 0-12 who are in poverty or at risk of poverty. Special attention is paid to early childhood (0-5 years). The children's parents are part of the consultation platforms.

The platforms are an important element of the Belgian **National Child Poverty Reduction Plan**, adopted in 2013.

57 PSWCs were involved, either as initiators or as participants, in the launch of platforms. Children First is a relatively low-cost project, in 2013, the Belgian federal government contributed € 2 million to this scheme. However, like the PSWCs themselves, the platforms are autonomous. Consultants have been engaged by the government to guide the exchange of experiences and expertise, prepare a manual, formulate policy recommendations based on analysis of the platforms' operation during their pilot year, and collect good practice. They are also drawing up indicators for measuring the effectiveness of the platforms.

As the Secretary of State pointed out, the recently formed Belgian federal government has demonstrated a significant commitment to combating child poverty, which is specifically mentioned in the governmental agreement. She announced that she will continue to implement the National Child Poverty Reduction Plan drawn up by the previous government. In doing so, she will consult all relevant stakeholders. The EU Commission recommendation *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* serves as an important guideline for this plan. Child poverty receives also specific attention in a new Belgian federal action plan for combating poverty as a whole.

2. Key issues discussed during the meeting

The Peer Review discussions focused mainly on three topics:

- **Addressing poverty in early childhood:** Growing up in poverty affects both children's short-term well-being and long-term outcomes, not only in material terms, but also considering non-material consequences of inadequate resources of the family, such as low educational attainment, poor health status, mental illness or social isolation. Thus a focus on early childhood, as provided by the Belgian consultation platforms, is crucial in proactively preventing and fighting poverty and to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.
- **Improving cooperation among services:** Various alternative forms of cooperation among services that might be sustainable and effective exist in the peer countries. Some are focused on individual cases, others more on collective action. There were differing views on how government can best promote cooperation. Some approaches rely on voluntary cooperation, others favour compulsory institutional arrangements. Some envisage a stricter systemic response than in the Belgian case.
- **Stakeholder involvement:** The notion of stakeholders provoked some discussion. Who are the primary stakeholders in the Children First programme – organisations, or children and their families? Certainly, the children and their families must be fully involved in the process. In some cases, the primary stakeholders may also be wider communities, such as the Roma in Bulgaria. Dialogue with stakeholders should occur on an equal level and should not follow a top-down approach.

Practical examples of the local platform approach were presented and discussed from municipalities in the Brussels Region ("Kids Network Anderlecht"), Flanders ("Trampoline: first jump together and then by yourself") and Wallonia ("Together against child poverty").

3. Key learning elements

- **Child poverty cannot be seen in isolation.** It is part of the poverty suffered by the households in which the children live. So it has to be **tackled through a multidimensional, 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.
- Effective drives against child poverty need to be **both preventive and proactive**. It is particularly important to also reach out to children "off the radar" and to **provide services in a non-stigmatising way**.
- 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.
- **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.

- 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.
- Processes like *Children First* are difficult to **monitor** and **evaluate**. Their outcomes are not easy to define and operationalise. Short-term horizons and the great diversity of activities and actors can also pose problems for assessment. Evidence based policy is needed, but we need to be cautious about what and how we evaluate. We must not lose sight of the purpose. Some peer countries have experience of combining self-evaluation with external evaluation, or of evidence-sharing between cities on non-conventional solutions.
- The 2014-2020 **European Social Fund** has ring-fenced 20% of its envelope for social inclusion. Projects aimed at fighting against child poverty such as the Children First local platforms are eligible for financial support.
- **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.

4. Contribution of the Peer Review to Europe 2020

Europe 2020 is the EU's growth strategy for this decade. **Social inclusion** is one of its main objectives, as part of the drive for a **smart, sustainable and inclusive economy**.

Europe 2020 calls for the number of people living in poverty in the EU to be reduced by 25 million by the year 2020. At present, there are 127 million people in poverty. In 2008, when the strategy was formulated, this was still 122 million. Almost 30 million of those now living in poverty in the EU are children.

Adopted in February 2013, the Commission's recommendation *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* 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 participation in social, cultural and sports 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 aiming to promote child participation, so they are contributing 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 practices.

The *Investing in children* recommendation is closely linked to the EU's **Social Investment Package** (SIP), which takes a lifecycle approach to strengthening people's future capacities. EPIC, the **European Platform for Investing in Children** (<http://europa.eu/epic>) is an EU website supporting the implementation of the Investing in Children recommendation. It includes a repository of evidence-based practices e.g. in the area of parent support. Peer Review participants suggested greater use of this site as a means of sharing knowledge of local initiatives against 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 practices on coordination at the local level in order to promote effective action.