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Contribution of the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020 to the consultation on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights

In 2011, as part of the Europe 2020 strategy, the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 was founded under mandate by the Inter-Ministerial Conference “Integration in Society”. This happened as an analogy of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 forms the central consultation body for preparations and monitoring of European and Belgian policy relating to poverty prevention and social exclusion in function of the preparation and follow-up of the National Reform Program and strategic reporting as part of the strengthened Open Method of Coordination (social inclusion and social protection strand). The Belgian Platform gathers a wide range of stakeholders and meets at least 4 times a year.

This contribution is based on the discussions that took place in function of the preparation of the opinion of the Belgian Platform on the National Reform Program 2020. This opinion was included as an appendix to the Belgian National Reform Program 2020.

Conclusions – Recommendations for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights

I. General

The Europe 2020 strategy will soon come to an end without that a thorough evaluation took place and without that a new ambitious strategy is launched. In this context, we would like to argue on behalf of the Belgian Platform for a multi-dimensional follow-up strategy for Europe 2020 with clear and ambitious targets in the economic, financial, social and ecological fields.

The Member States must be encouraged/compelled to draw up National Plans to combat poverty and social exclusion that contain at least the following elements in an integrated and coherent manner:

- A vision and strategy to combat the structural causes of poverty framed in the international commitments within the framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (especially goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere) and the European Pillar of Social Rights.
- Participation of people in poverty during the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the plan. Capacity building through support to the organisations that facilitate this participation is necessary for this purpose.
- An impact assessment of the proposed policy measures.
- Multi-level monitoring structures to ensure the integrated implementation of the plan.

2. Working with indicators, targets and sub-targets

- Much work has already been done on the quantitative monitoring of poverty in Belgium, and at more or less all policy levels. Facts and trends are quantified using indicators. However,

this collection of data does not ensure (political) action. Identifying the situation with data and indicators is a first step, but then action must be taken. It is very important to link the indicators, on the one hand, and the monitoring, on the other. Both must be part of an integrated strategy grounded in a results-oriented and evidence-based policy.

The monitoring instrument for the implementation of the European Pillar must be further developed and completed :

- The monitoring instrument should be complemented by a benchmarking with a ranking according to Member States' performance in implementing the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.
- The information from the benchmarking should form the basis for policy exchange processes and multi-lateral reviews between Member States, driven by the European Commission and advisory structures such as the SPC and EMCO.
- Information relevant to the policy can be of both a quantitative (numbers) and qualitative nature. Both types of information are necessary to support the policy. They are complementary. When discussing indicators and targets we focus on quantitative information. The problem is that not all important information can be captured in figures. Furthermore, a number of important target groups in the fight against poverty are not included in the figures, such as the homeless or those facing a sanction as part of a social protection rule. The use of qualitative information is necessary to interpret the result of quantitative indicators. Consultation and participation of all relevant stakeholders, especially people experiencing poverty, is in this essential. It is important to use and strengthen the existing channels and instruments for providing this information in a participatory and inclusive way as for example EAPN and the Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty, the Annual Convention for inclusive growth and Human Rights Institutions.
- Targets are useful in realising and monitoring policy. They help in getting the action process going and keeping it running. It is important to continue formulating (quantified) objectives and ambitions in order to continue stimulating and guiding the political effort required and impose possible sanctions if not met.
- Monitoring, indicators and data all increase visibility of the problem of poverty, however, there are in fact no instruments to reduce poverty. Care must be taken that statistical changes and innovation are not abused to artificially reduce poverty.

3. The European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 principles and recommendations for implementation

Chapter I: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market

Discrimination and racism make access to the labour market more difficult for certain groups with a migration background or because of their ethnic origin. The EU action plan against racism 2020-2025 proposes a number of important measures to combat this, including the drawing up of national action plans against racism by the Member States. It is important that these are also tested against the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

- 1. Education, training and life-long learning**
- 2. Gender equality**
- 3. Equal opportunities**
- 4. Active support to employment**

Member States should be encouraged to develop tailor-made pathways that focus on work and well-being at the same time. There are examples of adapted pathways for people who are far away from the labour market, where the pathway does not only relate to the trajectory to a job, but also involves working on other areas of wellbeing at the same time. The success factor of these types of pathways is an integrated approach in which organisations active in the 'work' domain and organisations active in the 'well-being' domain collaborate. The point of attention is that there should be no limit to the duration of such pathways, in the interests of sustainable results. Everyone should be able to evolve at their own pace, with trial and error.

Chapter II: Fair working conditions

5. Secure and adaptable employment

6. Wages

7. Information about employment conditions and protection in case of dismissals

8. Social dialogue and involvement of workers

9. Work-life balance

10. Healthy, safe and well-adapted work environment and data protection

Chapter III: Social protection and inclusion

11. Childcare and support to children

The child-guarantee initiative is a welcome way to remobilise the required political support to eradicate child poverty and insecurity.

However, it is important to note that the European Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013 on "Investing in children, breaking the vicious circle of disadvantage" puts forward three pillars for integrated strategies: access to adequate resources through parents, access to affordable quality services and the right of children to participate. The Child Guarantee focuses on the second pillar of the Recommendation, in particular on guaranteeing adequate nutrition, free health care, free education and equal opportunities in education, decent housing. The other dimensions in the fight against child poverty also deserve a place in the implementation plan for the European Pillar.

Belgium has some experience with integrated plans in the field of child poverty and children's rights. But the institutional patchwork seems to make such comprehensive plans increasingly difficult; and none of the previous plans has ever been accompanied by budgetary commitments. Conditionality of aid by submitting such comprehensive and budgeted plans can be a major step forward in the granting of EU aid.

Meanwhile, Belgium does have considerable experience in dialogue with associations where the people experiencing poverty voice their opinion: their participation in the negotiations about support programmes can be very useful in stimulating social innovation upon the allocation of EU support.

Ideally, the child guarantee should also encourage system reforms in favour of families in poverty situations. It should prevent stigmatisation of the target audiences and the substitution of national social policy measures with European funding.

12. Social protection

The Council recommendation on access to social protection stipulates that member states should draw up a plan by 15 May 2021 to fill the gaps in access to adequate and effective social protection. It is important to ensure that all stakeholders are involved in the elaboration of this plan, in particular those who currently do not have access to formal coverage.

13. Unemployment benefits

14. Minimum income

Following the Council conclusions of 9 October 2020 on strengthening minimum income protection, an action plan should be drawn up to update the European reference framework, with the involvement of all stakeholders, especially people living in poverty and the organisations that unite them. Existing benchmarking should be further developed with indicators reflecting the principles of accessibility, adequacy and enabling services, thus encouraging Member States to further develop their minimum income systems according to these principles.

The possibility of a binding European directive deserves to be further explored.

15. Old age income and pensions

The European reference framework on minimum income and the benchmarking should also cover the minimum income schemes for everyone in old age.

16. Health care

17. Inclusion of people with disabilities

The European reference framework on minimum income and the benchmarking should also cover the minimum income schemes for people with disabilities.

18. Long-term care

19. Housing and assistance for the homeless

Member States should be encouraged to develop a national strategy to combat homelessness, covering both the prevention of homelessness and the curative aspects, investing in efficient and structural solutions. The European Union can play an important role in encouraging the exchange of good practice and experience between Member States. In addition, knowledge about homelessness should be increased and deepened through the development of harmonised data and indicators at European level.

The Renovation Wave for Europe aims at boosting building renovation for climate neutrality and recovery and has affordability as one of its key principles. The objective of making energy-performing and sustainable buildings widely available, in particular for medium and lower-income households and vulnerable people and areas must be clearly monitored to avoid unacceptable increases in housing costs and evictions.

20. Access to essential services

There must be guaranteed that the Green Deal represents an opportunity, rather than a threat, for access to essential services. Access to energy, water, green areas and mobility, for example, must be carefully monitored, especially for vulnerable groups.

More information about the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 can be found [here](#).