



## Executive Summary

### Peer Review on “Social Activation and Participation”

Belgium (online), 25 and 26 February 2021

The focus of this Peer Review was on social activation and participation measures; they are targeted at people the furthest away from the labour market and aim for social inclusion via meaningful activities, either as an end in itself or as a first step towards employment. The event discussed challenges and successful approaches related to social activation, the involvement of stakeholders, ethical questions related to the conditionality of participating in such measures to receive social assistance and the evaluation of social activation policies and programmes, both from an individual and a societal perspective.

The Peer Review was hosted by the federal Public Planning Service Social Integration, Belgium. It brought together government representatives and independent experts from the host country (Belgium) and nine peer countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Portugal and Slovenia). In addition, representatives of the European Commission, the European Labour Authority and the European Social Network, as well as a Thematic Experts were present.

For the host country, the Peer Review provided an opportunity to showcase local Belgian social activation measures, such as social, cultural, sport or training activities, financed by yearly allowances to local welfare offices and to discuss challenges and success factors with practitioners and experts from other countries.

From the perspective of the European Union, social activation and participation is an important policy goal. In its 2008 Active Inclusion Recommendation<sup>1</sup>, the European Commission called upon the Member States to design and implement an integrated strategy for active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market. The strategy combining adequate income support, access to the labour market and access to quality services, should facilitate integration into employment for those able to work, and support social inclusion and participation for those who cannot. The goals of social activation and participation are also included in the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>2</sup>. Article 4 states that *‘Everyone has the right to timely and tailor-made assistance to improve employment or self-employment prospects [...] People unemployed have the right to personalised, continuous and consistent support.’* Furthermore, according to Article 14 *‘Everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life, and effective access to enabling goods and services.’* The 2016 Council Recommendation on the Integration of the Long-term Unemployed<sup>3</sup> further reaffirms the goal of integrating individuals far from the labour market into employment.

**The key policy messages from the Peer Review can be summarised as follows:**

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<sup>1</sup> Commission Recommendation of 3 October 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market. Available here: <https://eurlex.europa.eu/eli/reco/2008/867/oj>

<sup>2</sup> See also here: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/european-pillar-social-rights\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/european-pillar-social-rights_en)

<sup>3</sup> Council Recommendation of 15 February 2016 on the integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market. Available here: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32016H0220\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32016H0220(01))

### ***Social activation and participation are important policy goals in its own right***

- While social activation is typically part of a wider set of labour market activation policies that aim for professional integration and inclusion, it is distinct from labour market activation and is vital for the social inclusion of people who are not (yet) able to work.
- For individuals very far from the labour market, stabilisation of the life situation, i.e. preventing further exclusion and isolation, should be viewed as a success. In addition, a secure income fosters this stabilisation as it allows people to take part in activities that are meaningful and help to develop their social skills. For example, in Luxembourg the social inclusion income (*Revenu d'inclusion sociale (REVIS)*) aims for either labour market integration or social inclusion.

### ***Social activation requires continuous adequate and reliable support***

- Activation and participation measures require long-term commitments to and ongoing support for participants. Terminating or interrupting measures – e.g. due to the COVID-19 pandemic – can jeopardise prior achievements in integrating and activating individuals.
- Developing successful social activation policies often takes time, so funding should be sufficient and reliable to allow for longer-term planning.

### ***Needs assessments, tailored, integrated and comprehensive services and case management can increase the success of activation measures***

- The needs of excluded and isolated individuals are heterogeneous and often complex. Therefore, activation measures should start with a needs assessment, done by the service user, in cooperation with a social worker. Services should be comprehensive, integrated and tailored to individuals' needs, considering also the needs of family and involving family and friends in activation efforts. For instance, the LEAP programme in Malta has successfully contributed to labour force participation by needs assessment and a multiple service offer, such as childcare support for those who require it.
- Case management is important to build trust between the service provider and participants. The caseloads for social workers must be manageable.

### ***Social activation requires the work of multiple stakeholders***

- Support for isolated, socially excluded people is often fragmented across different services and benefits. Successful measures hence require vertical (local, regional and federal authorities) and horizontal (public authorities, NGOs, social enterprises, theatre groups, sports clubs, companies, etc.) coordination between multiple stakeholders, services, policy areas and, in many countries, the demands of different funding organisations.
- Various actors, such as employers or volunteers play a key role to promote social inclusion. A community approach with multiple local actors can help with outreach to the target group and gives a wider support network.
- The involvement of service users and social workers in the development of measures can increase the take-up, effectiveness and sustainability of social activation policies.

### ***Coercion and stigmatisation must be avoided***

- Participation in social activation measures should be a choice, empower individuals and increase their autonomy. 'Soft pressure' may be used to persuade participation in social activation activities (such as common agreements or contracts) with a

focus on encouraging participants, and to identify activities they find interesting and meaningful.

- Opening social activation measures to the general public can reduce stigmatisation and increase participation. This, in turn, can improve the chances of social and labour market integration. For example, courses offered as part of the Belgian practice are open, but not limited to social assistance recipients. This helps participants to expand their social networks.

***Evaluating social activation policies is difficult but necessary***

- The effect of social activation policies is difficult to measure because the needs of the target group are complex and the goals and the comparator, i.e. the alternative scenario against which to compare the effect of measures, are not always clearly defined. Furthermore, social activation and participation can have positive spillover effects to other policy areas (e.g. improve health, decreased crime, a more positive attitude of residents towards their community), and, while the cost of measures are immediate, their effects can take a long time to fully materialise.
- Nevertheless, comprehensive, evidence-based evaluations are necessary to find and scale the most effective policies, estimate the social return on investment and to convince society and politicians of the value of social activation.