



Peer Review on “Social Activation and Participation”

Online (Belgium), 24-25 February 2021

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1 Introduction

The focus of this Peer Review was on social activation and participation measures for socially excluded people or people at high risk of social exclusion. These measures aim to increase resilience and self-esteem of people the furthest away from the labour market. Meaningful activities such as skills training or volunteering furthermore may address social isolation and support solidarity in local communities.

In many Member States, social activation measures are closely linked to labour market integration efforts, often as a first step towards labour market entry. However, there are also more specific social activation measures that primarily aim to enhance participation and to promote social inclusion, such as in Belgium. This Peer Review provided an opportunity to showcase local Belgian social activation measures which are more distinct, but not entirely separate, from wider labour market activation policies. In Belgium, local social welfare offices have the legal task to support the social participation of service users. They offer social, cultural, sport or training projects to promote social inclusion by participation and engagement in socially meaningful activities, either as an end in itself or as a first step in a pathway towards paid (re-) 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 Expert, were present.

1.1 The EU policy context

Across Europe, signs of economic recovery before the COVID-19 related crisis did not necessarily translate into a reduction of **inequalities and social exclusion**. Concerns prevail over the 'uneven developments in the income distribution, including increasing depth of poverty, the rising risk of poverty for people living in (quasi-)jobless households and the limited progress towards the Europe 2020 target to reduce poverty and social exclusion'¹.

In 2020, **lockdown and social-distancing measures** and job losses during the pandemic highlighted the precarious situation of people the furthest away from the labour market and further exacerbated their risk of social exclusion. Hence, a comprehensive approach to address social inclusion is crucial and timely.

Therefore, the **2008 Active Inclusion Recommendation**² by the European Commission remains highly relevant. The Recommendation calls upon Member States to design and implement an integrated strategy for active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market, combining adequate income support, access to the labour market and access to quality services. This should facilitate the integration into the labour market for those able to work and support social inclusion and participation for those who cannot.

¹ European Commission, 2020. Social Protection Committee annual review of the Social Protection Performance Monitor (SPPM) and developments in social protection policies. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=9820&furtherNews=yes> (15.3.2021)

² 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> (15.3.2021)

However, the 2017 evaluation of the Recommendation³ shows that there has been an uneven implementation of active inclusion strategies across Member States.

Challenges of an inclusive and comprehensive active inclusion strategy

included some coordination obstacles of the different services at local level, a lacking consistency between the provision of social services and cash benefits, as well as limited access to relevant support, such as social assistance services, employment and training services, housing support and social housing, childcare, long-term care services and health services. Moreover, minimum income benefits have been increasingly linked to a registration with public employment services. While this activation approach promotes the readiness to take up training or employment, it may leave people who are unable to work without appropriate support aimed at their social inclusion.

The goals of social activation and participation are also included in the **European Pillar of Social Rights**⁴. 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 **European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan**⁵, launched in March 2021, proposes concrete actions to implement social rights across Europe. Next to the employment and training targets, the action plan sets the target to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030. In 2021, relevant activities of the Action Plan include a new Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, a proposal of a European Child Guarantee, an Action Plan for the Social Economy and a proposal for a Council Recommendation on Minimum Income in 2022. Moreover, the Social Scoreboard will be revised to cover the areas of the European Pillar of Social Rights more extensively.

1.2 The Peer Review: Key learning messages and policy implications

The key learning messages from the Peer Review are summarised below:

Summary of key learning messages

Social activation and participation are important policy goals in their own right

- While social activation and participation are typically part of a wider set of labour market activation policies that aim for professional integration and inclusion, they are distinct from labour market activation and are 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 positive outcome. 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.

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,

³ European Commission, 2017. Commission staff working document on the implementation of the 2008 Commission Recommendation on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market. Available here: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=17619&langId=en> (15.3.2021)

⁴ See also: https://ec.europa.eu/info/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en (15.3.2021)

⁵ European Commission, 2021, The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. Available here: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=23696&langId=en> (15.3.2021)

done in cooperation with the service user in order to offer empowering personalised support. Services should be comprehensive, integrated and tailored to individuals' needs, considering also the needs of their family members and involving family and friends in activation efforts.

- Case management is important to build trust between the service provider and participants. The caseloads for social workers must be manageable.

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.

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 actors. In many countries, this also means that different funding streams have to be coordinated.
- Various actors, such as employers, professionals 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; it should empower individuals and increase their autonomy. 'Soft pressure' (such as common agreements or contracts) may be used to persuade the participation in social activation activities 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 of socially excluded persons. This, in turn, can improve the chances of social and labour market integration.

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. improved 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 ex-ante and ex-post 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.

2 Host country practice: Social activation and participation in Belgium

2.1 Situation in Belgium

In Belgium, social exclusion and poverty are linked to a number of **labour market challenges**, such as low employment, barriers of low-skilled workers to find jobs and weak work incentives. This translates into higher long-term unemployment than the EU average, and 11.2% of the working age population lived in jobless households in 2019⁶. In addition, technological, demographic and changes caused by the recent pandemic will require workers to adapt more quickly to new roles and tasks. Despite a strong focus on active labour market policies over the past decades, more people have turned to the local welfare agencies for financial and other support. Especially certain groups, such as low-skilled workers, migrants or people with disabilities face a high risk of social exclusion.

Under these circumstances, social activation measures have evolved, aiming to promote the inclusion of people who are socially excluded and isolated. In Belgium, social activation is **distinct from measures to promote labour market integration**, as the activities primarily aim at participation, self-management, empowerment and/or skills development. They seek to improve the service users' quality of life, make them feel safe and included in their local community and being able to connect to local residents. For example, the Ferm Day Centre in Flanders offers different activities, such as gardening, work with animals, cooking classes or woodworking courses. Here, daily social contact and attending scheduled activities have been crucial, especially during the pandemic.

Social activation measures can also mean the **start of a trajectory towards employment**, as skills building for everyday tasks, discovering interests and motivation and improved self-esteem are beneficial as a first step towards professional integration.

Social activation measures include activities such as voluntary work, skills development, cultural or sports activities, or nutrition advice and vary locally, depending on local levels of social exclusion and needs of the local population. Social activation measures are funded via the federal level, which also sets out a wider framework of social activation. Within this framework, social activation measures are broadly **divided between three main areas**. The first funds individual participation in cultural, social or sport activities and access to ICT and internet, the second type of actions are group activities ranging from language courses to skills training and the third area is targeted at measures to address child poverty.

Moreover, Belgium's **regions play an important role** in shaping different social activation measures according to regional needs. Especially Wallonia, Brussels and bigger cities throughout the country face higher unemployment. Therefore, some measures in cities are specifically aimed at target groups who face challenges to access employment and inclusion in society, such as people with disabilities, people with mental health issues or newly arrived migrants.

Social activation measures are implemented via **local welfare offices**. In general, these local welfare offices are crucial in addressing poverty and social exclusion, as they provide the minimum income and various support services. Hence, social activation is not only targeted at minimum income recipients, but also at people who require medical or social support, and more broadly at everyone living in the area. Here, the local centres work flexibly to adapt measures to local needs, offering activities that have low thresholds to participate. However, linked to the social

⁶ Eurostat, 2020. Population in jobless households - annual data [LFSI_JHH_A] Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsi_jhh_a/default/table?lang=en (15.3.2021)

inclusion challenges described above, social welfare centres have been challenged by rising caseloads.

There is **very little hard evidence** of the impact of social activation measures, partially because social participation and breaking isolation are hard to assess, but also because the objectives of the broad range of offered activities differ. Practitioners report that the measures have an important impact on the lives of people, for example in terms of reducing their loneliness or improving their communication skills. Nevertheless, questions remain over the long-term effects on peoples' lives and whether those most in need are reached.

Box 1: Espace Citoyen – Open and not limited to social assistance recipients

The *Espace Citoyen* (Citizen's Space) implemented by the local welfare authority (*Centre Public d'Action Sociale*) in Gosselies, a municipality in Charleroi, was introduced to the Peer Review participants during a virtual study visit.

Gosselies has experienced economic hardship due to the closure of a major employer and ongoing decline in its urban centre. Therefore, the Citizen's Space not only aims to increase social activation, but also to revitalise urban space by local residents' involvement and participation.

Charleroi has several offices for social welfare, in which social workers provide assistance, including a youth centre, specific debt counselling or housing support. The offices for social welfare offer a broad range of activities, for example theatre courses, cooking classes in a local neighbourhood restaurant, computer courses, photography and workshops teaching crafts skills.

The Citizen's Space of Gosselies opened in 2015 and implements several projects. Social assistance recipients, but also everyone living in the local community, can participate in the activities. This helps participants to expand their social networks, promotes social cohesion and reduces stigmatisation. On a case-by-case basis, employees of the Citizen's Space present the different activities and select 1-2 activities for a new participant according to individual interests.

One example is the Miriam project for single mothers helping them with administrative tasks, childcare and support for the child, while giving mothers the time to exchange.

The pandemic in 2020 has had a huge impact on participants of social activation measures. In order to react to these challenges, new measures were set up, for example a project for women, helping them with digital communication and supporting them to build up their self-esteem.

3 Key Peer Review discussion outcomes

This section summarises the discussion during the Peer Review on social participation and activation.

3.1 Social activation and participation policies in EU Member States

As referred previously, social activation and participation measures are often **offered within a wider framework of labour market integration policies** and implemented at the **local level**. Contrary to Belgium, where social activation measures are a more distinct measure, social activation policies in EU countries are not always easy to single out from a wider set of measures that primarily aim at labour market integration.

For example, social activation policies in Norway are largely work-oriented, and individual measures are mostly financed by grants from departments and directorates of the central government in various policy areas. The grants are provided on an annual basis and are available for municipalities and other organisations like NGOs.

Similarly, in Bulgaria, increasing labour market participation and decreasing inactivity among the working age population is a key governmental priority pursued by activation policies. Activation policies in Malta, too, are focussed primarily on incentivising and enabling individuals to enter paid employment. In Slovenia, as a response to long-term unemployment, social activation programmes are focused on a better link between employment and social services with the aim of competence development.

In contrast, in Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg social activation measures are more distinct (but still often linked) from labour market policies (see also Thematic Discussion Paper⁷). In Belgium and the Netherlands, social activation measures are implemented by local authorities and largely financed by payments from the central government. In Luxembourg, the key element to supporting social integration is the social inclusion income, which provides means-tested financial support in combination with labour market integration or social activation measures (see Box 2).

Box 2: Social inclusion income REVIS (*Revenu d'inclusion sociale*) in Luxembourg

The social inclusion income (*Revenu d'inclusion sociale (REVIS)*) in Luxembourg is paid to individuals and households with an income below a certain threshold. REVIS was introduced in 2019 and replaced the former guaranteed minimum income (*Revenue minimum garanti (RMG)*).

The new benefit follows an explicit social inclusion approach. Based on their individual profiles, REVIS recipients who are below the age of 65 and able to work are oriented either towards a labour market integration or social and professional activation track. Individuals in the first group are registered with the public employment services and supported through active labour market policies. Individuals in the second group fall under the responsibility of the *Office nationale d'inclusion sociale* (ONIS). ONIS develops activation plans with beneficiaries tailored to their individual needs and organises stabilising and activating measures. The plan includes activation projects, such as community work courses and training sessions or health treatments and is based on mutual commitments and a schedule of actions to be undertaken.

Overall, REVIS is based on a 'step model' of three consecutive steps. The first step is stabilisation (preventing also further isolation and exclusion), the second step is social activation (increase social interactions and participation), and the third step is professional reinsertion (integration into employment). However, each step represents an objective on its own. The second component includes activities organised by ONIS, such as community work. In the third step, people who are fit for work register at the employment agency and start looking for employment.

While labour market integration should be pursued where and when possible, the Peer Review showed the importance of understanding **social activation and participation** as a **policy goal in its own right**. As described in the Thematic Paper⁸, the focus of activation policies can influence the target group of the policy: when social activation is regarded as an intermediary step towards labour market integration, activation policies tend to be focussed on working age individuals who can potentially (re-)enter the labour market. Conversely, retired workers and those perceived as having permanently reduced work capacity (e.g. people with disabilities) may be excluded. Furthermore, focusing on labour market integration as the ultimate goal can result in unrealistic expectations. Not all participants will be able to (re-)enter paid employment. Instead of finding employment, for individuals very far from the

⁷ Thematic Paper, available here: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=23761&langId=en> (15.3.2021)

⁸ Ibid.

labour market, stabilisation of the life situation, i.e. preventing further exclusion and isolation, should already be viewed as a positive outcome.

3.2 Promising approaches

Excluded and isolated individuals have diverse needs and often face stigmatisation. In addition, they are often challenged by the complexity of various agencies that provide support. For instance, the provision of various benefit payments and the access to social services are often provided by different actors. There may also be concerns around maintaining a secure income, for example when individuals pick up gradual employment and see their benefits reduced as a result.

In addition, the societal, economic, legal and institutional contexts within which social activation and participation policies are implemented differ across countries, regions, and municipalities. Against this background, there is no **one-size-fits-all approach**. Instead, all policies and interventions must be adapted to the specific needs of beneficiaries and local contexts. However, some common challenges and promising approaches were identified during the Peer Review.

3.2.1 Tailored, integrated and comprehensive services

Given the complex and heterogenous needs of the target group, **needs assessments** are key to find out specifically what types of support are required by each individual beneficiary. The needs assessment should be done in a co-operative approach, discussing interests, motivation, worries, skills, the personal context, next steps and income provision. Joint needs assessment, for example between social and health services are helpful to develop more holistic plans. Beneficiaries should not be forced to constantly react to different public agencies, decide who gets their data and what they need. Here, the aim lies on empowerment, but it is important to consider that many beneficiaries start with very low self-esteem and need support expressing their specific needs. Social activation is therefore often a long process.

By extension, support must be **tailored** and **comprehensive** to address the challenges preventing individuals from actively participating in society. A certain level of flexibility for social workers can help them tailor services and support measures to beneficiaries' individual needs. The provision of services should be **integrated** so that beneficiaries have one single contact for all the services they require.

Positive examples for integrated service provision include the 'Face-to-Face' Employment and Social Assistance Centres (ESACs) project in Bulgaria. Launched in 2015, the project is being implemented through a partnership between the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), the Employment Agency (EA) and the Social Assistance Agency (SAA). Through the project, joint teams from EA and SAA provide integrated services to members of vulnerable groups. The services provided are based on individual needs and can include information, counselling, assistance and referral to other services. Another positive example is the LEAP programme in Malta (Box 3).

Services should also consider the **needs of family members**, e.g. by providing child care services. Support for individuals with care obligations – in most cases women – is important because it frees up their time and enables them to participate in social activation programmes or engage in other types of activities (e.g. job search or employment). Furthermore, support for children can help to break intergenerational poverty cycles. One example addressing the needs of both parents and children is the project Miriam in Belgium (see Box 1). Support with childcare is also provided as part of comprehensive support services of LEAP in Malta (see Box 3). In Bulgaria, the project 'parents in employment' provides childcare opportunities and mediation services for employed and unemployed parents.

Box 3: One-stop shops and holistic needs assessments in Malta

The Maltese LEAP programme was launched in 2013 with the objective of encouraging and empowering individuals to enter the workforce. The needs of beneficiaries are assessed through holistic needs assessments of the recipients' household.

The core component of the programme is a one-stop shop offering multiple services including information, professional advice and comprehensive support in areas including employment, training, social work and community activities. Childcare services are offered to employed and unemployed parents requiring them. The needs assessments are also used to detect other individuals within the same household who may need support, but who would not contact authorities on their own.

3.2.2 Continuous adequate and reliable support

Social activation measures require **adequate financial resources** and **personnel**. Several participants of the Peer Review mentioned high **caseloads** for social workers as a significant impediment on their ability to provide the high levels of comprehensive support required by the target group.

Furthermore, support must be **continuous and reliable**. One social worker described her work as building a support structure around individuals ("We are holding up people until they become independent."). While in place, the structure offered by social activation helps individuals to stay integrated in society and live a largely independent life. However, once the support is removed too abruptly, people are unable to maintain the same structure and integrated lifestyle and fall back into isolation and exclusion. The longer people stay disconnected, the harder it then becomes to re-integrate them into society. In particular in the context of the required closure of facilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the inability to provide continuous support was described as a severe problem. Consistency is also important to allow for members of the target group to develop trusted relationships with case workers which have been described by Peer Review participants as crucial to the success of social activation.

Reliable long-term funding is necessary to ensure continuous support. Furthermore, developing effective social activation policies can take time. As a consequence, funding should be sufficient and predictable to allow for **longer-term planning**. This is not always the case. In Belgium, funding commitments by the federal government are made and renewed annually. This, some participants remarked, can make it difficult to plan ahead.

On an individual level, continuous adequate and reliable support may take place through **secure income** that fosters stabilisation and allowing people to take part in activities that are meaningful and help to develop their social skills. Therefore, social protection systems offering adequate minimum income benefits are required. If (gradual) professional activity is the aim, wages and benefits need to be sufficiently balanced. For example, in Malta, social assistance recipients who eventually find employment have a gradual reduction of their benefits over three years; from 65% of the benefit during the first year, 45% during the second year, to 25% during the third year. This allows them to re-integrate into the workforce and pay into the pension scheme, but provides also some income security.

3.2.3 Involvement of multiple stakeholders

Support for isolated and socially excluded people can be fragmented across different services and benefits. In addition to the integrated provision of services, e.g. through one-stop shops, successful measures require **coordination** between multiple stakeholders. For example, in Norway where social activation measures are financed by multiple governmental departments, horizontal coordination, between the different funding organisations, and vertical coordination, between funding and receiving

organisations, is a major challenge. Furthermore, funding from different sources can make it difficult for the organisations implementing social activation measures to balance and coordinate the demands of all donors.

In addition, effective social activation and participation efforts require **horizontal coordination** between multiple stakeholders including public authorities, NGOs, social enterprises, cultural institutions, sports clubs or companies. For example, cooperating with a theatre can help a local welfare authority to develop theatre classes they would otherwise be unable to offer and, thereby, expand the range of activities available to beneficiaries. Furthermore, coordination and cooperation between stakeholders can help to ensure the efficient use of resources and prevent duplicating efforts. In Belgium, for instance, the local welfare centres implement a place-based approach via regular meetings with local organisations and actors in order to identify problems and to develop common solutions. In Luxembourg, the ONIS exchanges with local NGOs to develop and co-fund approaches.

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. However, involving beneficiaries at the local level can be challenging. By definition, excluded and isolated individuals are not actively involved in the community. In addition, interest groups representing the target group may only exist at the regional or national level. Nevertheless, efforts should be made to actively consult and involve members of the target group.

Employers can provide important support for social activation and labour market integration in different ways. The Belgian region of Flanders supports mentored and unpaid work in public, non-profit and for-profit organisations for people far from the labour market. The measure aims to provide beneficiaries with a daily structure, help them build self-esteem, develop a social network and foster their self-development. The organisations providing work opportunities are not paid, but the mentors are subsidised.

Several countries **subsidise the employment** of vulnerable individuals like long-term unemployed. For example, in Cyprus, employers can be paid between 60-70% of the salary for one year under the condition that they keep the person in employment for another year after the end of the subsidy. A different approach to involving companies is to appeal to their social responsibility. Furthermore, several participants of the Peer Review suggested that employers can be convinced that it is in their own (financial) self-interest to employ members of vulnerable groups because a diverse workforce can improve their public image and attract new customers. Additionally, it must be ensured that participants in work-focussed activation measures are not exploited as unpaid labour.

In Belgium, **public sector** employment is used to support social and labour market integration. Local welfare offices can provide employment opportunities to members of the target group. Such work opportunities can improve social activation and participation and can act as a stepping stone towards other employment opportunities. Working with **NGOs and social enterprises** has the potential to engage different target groups and to support people in a secure environment. For example, many social enterprises offer employment in combination with (peer) support. This allows participants to learn and practice the types of skills required for regular employment in the private sector in a more flexible, supportive and protective environment. In Norway, social entrepreneurs play an important role for example by cooperating with major employers in providing employment opportunities for certain vulnerable groups like immigrant women. In order to provide continuous support to socially excluded people, sustainable funding for NGOs or social businesses is necessary. For example, in Norway, government grants are available for social entrepreneurs during the early stages of a new venture (e.g. via financial support for grant writing, business plan development and during the first years of the project). However, the long-term sustainability of social enterprises after the initial funding is not always secured. In

Belgium, social enterprises are required to secure co-funding to ensure more financial sustainability.

Stakeholder involvement can also improve **visibility** and **participation**. The more organisations and people are involved, the higher the visibility of the measures. Moreover, specific stakeholders, such as local social services or NGOs, may be more apt at practicing **outreach** to the community. For example, Bulgaria successfully deploys specialised mediators to practice outreach to youth and members of the Roma community. In general, a **community approach** involving multiple local actors can help improve outreach to the target group and increase the take up of services and benefits, but also supports social cohesion. For instance, in Portugal, the Social Radar Programme has the objective that people in local communities look out for each other. This has had positive effects on the solidarity between citizens, and a better feeling towards their local area. It also resulted in lower police involvement in those areas.

Joint action plans can be used to formalise and clarify the cooperation among local stakeholders. Furthermore, **piloting** new partnerships through "learning communities", i.e. implementing partnership models initially on a small scale and evaluating their success before rolling them out on a larger scale can be a cost-effective way of developing new forms of cooperation.

3.2.4 Avoiding coercion and stigmatisation

Participation in labour market activation measures is often **mandatory** and linked to the receipt of benefits. In Belgium, minimum income recipients sometimes feel required to take part in social activation measures. In the Netherlands, social assistance recipients are obliged to participate in volunteering activities. Similarly, in Norway, social assistance recipients below the age of 30 have the duty to participate in activation measures.

There was agreement among the Peer Review participants that when it comes to social activation **coercion should be avoided**. Trying to force socially isolated individuals to participate in social activities was regarded as counterproductive. Especially activities that are 'standardised' to target a bigger group of recipients are often perceived as not useful and in line with the individual skills and interests. Instead, participation in social activation measures should be a choice, they should empower individuals and increase their autonomy. However, 'soft pressure' (such as common agreements or contracts) may be used to persuade participation in social activation activities. Thereby, the focus should be on encouraging beneficiaries to participate in activation measures and on providing beneficiaries the freedom of choice to identify activities they find interesting and meaningful. For example, in the Belgian practice 'Espace Citoyen' (see Box 1), social workers work with new participants to initially select one or two activities they are interested in and feel comfortable with. Over time, when participants become more confident, they are encouraged to discover and take part in other, new activities beyond their immediate comfort zone. A similar approach exists in Luxembourg where the *Office nationale d'inclusion sociale* (ONIS) develops integration plans with beneficiaries that are built on gradual steps to take part in certain activities.

One possible barrier for participation related to coercion is (the fear of) **stigmatisation**: excluded and isolated individuals may be ashamed to ask for help which may lead to non-take up of activation and participation offers. On the societal level, the stigmatisation of, for example, long-term unemployed and welfare recipients by employers can be another barrier to integration.

The stigma associated with taking part in social activation measures can be reduced through **diverse participant groups**. For example, activities offered by the local welfare authority in Charleroi, Belgium, are open, but not limited to social assistance recipients (see Box 1). Another example from the host country included mixing members of the target group with volunteers from the community or Citizens' Assemblies in the community to co-create projects.

Opening measures by mixing participants can also foster social inclusion because participants are able to expand their social networks. Moreover, other participants get in touch and interact with members of the target group which may **reduce prejudices** and sensitise members of the community to needs of and challenges faced by excluded and isolated individuals. Finally, a wider group of participants increases the visibility of the measure and, thereby, improves outreach.

3.3 Evaluating social activation and participation measures

Evaluations of the results and effectiveness of social activation measures **remain limited** across Europe. Practitioners' feedback suggests that participation in social activation measures can have a positive impact on participants' daily lives. However, especially long-term effects, such as the improvement of life quality beyond the duration of the activity, are hard to measure.

The **effect of social activation policies is difficult to monitor** because the needs of the target group are complex. When assessing social inclusion, it is often challenging to define a measurable goal, also because the actions are, ideally, based on a personalised approach. In addition, linked to the 'work first' approach in most Member States, many measures examine primarily labour market integration which does not necessarily reflect social inclusion and leaves out people who are not able to work. Here, the different effects on individuals in terms of wellbeing, health or autonomy could be captured, as well the impact these activities have on their neighbourhoods. For instance, in Slovenia, the social activation programmes will be evaluated in 2022, looking mostly at quantitative data (the number of people involved in programmes), however, for people the furthest removed from the labour market, qualitative measures may be more useful to check aspects like their wellbeing.

Moreover, 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. improved health, decreased crime rates, a more positive attitude of residents towards their community), which is challenging to be captured by an evaluation study.

Furthermore, cost-benefit analyses of social activation policies are complicated by the **different time horizons** of expenditure and returns: while the cost of measures are immediate, their effects can take a long time to fully materialise. Moreover, evaluation capacity and observing long-term effects requires time which is often contrary to social activation measures that run on a very limited timeframe.

Nevertheless, **comprehensive, evidence-based ex-ante and ex-post evaluations** both from an individual perspective and a societal perspective **are necessary**.

3.3.1 Individual effects of social activation

Evaluations focusing on the effects of social activation and participation measures on participants and their immediate relatives are important to identify and scale up effective measures and policies.

Many social activation measures collect services users' feedback, for example in the form of questionnaires about their well-being or their satisfaction with the services. In Belgium, personal autonomy is measured by the 'Autonomous Matrix' or the 'Outcome Star', in which frontline workers assess with the person in a person-centred and collaborative way areas of personal life and change.

Peer Review participants recommended the following types of indicators measuring individual results:

- **Indicators over time.** Starting data collection at the beginning of an individual's social activation (baseline measure) and repeating it in regular intervals is important to gain an understanding of a person's situation over time (longitudinal approach). In order to implement continuous and personalised support, it is important to regularly check-in with social activation participants, asking them for feedback, their worries or plans. Indicators could then also detect short-term and

long-term effects and indicate a person's degree of autonomy (such as done with the Activation Ladder⁹).

- **Harmonising indicators.** Several indicators can be used to measure the effects of social activation on individuals. Peer Review participants suggested indicators related to quality of life¹⁰, functioning¹¹, disability, (mental) health, wellbeing, self-esteem, skills development. While many potentially useful indicators exist, their use has not been harmonised and standardised across evaluations. This makes it very difficult to compare the effectiveness of different social activation measures against each other.
- **Tailor-made indicators.** For individuals very far from the labour market, stabilisation of their life situation, i.e. preventing further exclusion and isolation, should be viewed as positive outcome. For instance, in Luxembourg, the objective of social activation is to gain stability, rather than to make progress towards employment. To ensure a personalised approach, indicators should be tailor-made to individual circumstances in order to capture meaningful and policy-relevant results.
- **Qualitative measures.** More qualitative indicators via surveys and observations can reflect individuals' satisfaction, perception and attitudes and inform about motivation.

3.3.2 A societal perspective on social activation

Evaluating social activation and participation measures from a societal perspective is necessary to estimate the social return on investment, to convince the public and politicians of the value of social activation and to achieve societal and political commitment.

- **Indicators at various levels** could be used over time to provide a comprehensive view: individual, neighbourhood, and societal. This would also allow to capture effects on the next generation.
- **Measuring spillover effects.** It is important to evaluate across sectors of society and consider positive spillover effects in other policy areas. For example, activation and participation can increase individuals' health or lead to a more positive attitude of residents towards their community. Thereby, public spending on social activation measures can reduce the need for expenditure on other policies.
- **Societal return on investment** is difficult to measure, because non-monetary effects would need to be quantified at various levels and policy sectors and be related to costs. Standardisation of indicators (such EuroQuol QoL) could aid in this effort. For example, there are plans to measure the social return on investment (SROI) of mentored unpaid work in Belgium, but it proves to be very difficult to calculate and put social inclusion into monetary terms.
- **Using a comparison group.** Ideally, each evaluation uses some sort of comparator, which could be the status quo (business as usual) or the cost of doing nothing. Evaluations against comparison groups have been used for example in Norway. However, ethical concerns, such as withholding a beneficial measure from some of the group members, would need to be addressed.

⁹ Van Gent, M. J., Van Horssen, C., Mallee, L., & Slotboom, S. (2008). *De participatieladder: Meetlat voor het participatiebudget*. Amsterdam: Regioplan.

¹⁰See also here: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Quality_of_life_indicators; WHOQoL survey. Or *indicators* used in the OECD report "How's Life"? Namely: health status, civic engagement, social support, satisfaction with personal relationships etc, available here: <http://www.oecd.org/sdd/47917288.pdf> (15.03.2021)

¹¹ International classification of functioning disability and health, see here: <https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/international-classification-of-functioning-disability-and-health> (15.03.2021)

- **Capacity building on the ground.** Practitioners, case and social workers could be equipped and supported to gather evidence, by developing easy-to-use, adaptable indicators, technical assistance and collaborating with experts such as from academia.
- **Combining methods.** Multiple complementary evaluation and monitoring methods may be used to allow for a comprehensive assessment of the measure in question at both the individual and societal level.

4 Conclusion

Social activation measures are distinct from labour market activation measures, with the primary aim to support social participation and inclusion. With increasing inequalities and the socio-economic impact of the recent pandemic, addressing social exclusion is essential and challenged by the closure of local support facilities.

Professional integration has been a strong focus in many Member States in recent years. The pathways of activation vary between Member States depending on their welfare approach and labour market situation, but very often focus on 'employment first'. More support should be allocated for people who are not (yet) able to work, especially with regards to personalised services which offer meaningful activities to promote social inclusion. The recent pandemic and the target to lift 15 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2030 in the EU underline the need for social activation.

Specifically, in countries with high unemployment rates or rigid labour markets, social activation can be seen as a long-term investment in human skills that can increase the quality and volume of labour supply, improve local social cohesion and reduce health and other costs related to the adverse effects of social exclusion and poverty. Here, social activation, active inclusion and labour market integration can go hand in hand and do not exclude each other.

Socially excluded people can be motivated by meaningful activities that are identified via a common needs assessment. Social activation measures should be based on a place-based approach involving local actors and provide access to services the individual may need. In practice, there are still cooperation and resource challenges to ensure continuous measures and to address stigmatisation. Here, long-term policies, commitment and funding allow local stakeholders to try and test common measures based on local needs. This should also involve local residents and volunteers to increase social cohesion and to reduce stereotypes.

Finally, information on the results of social activation measures can inform policy-making and safe-guard funding for future social inclusion measures. To do so, professionals need to be able to evaluate the results on an individual and societal level, looking at short- and long-term effects.

