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2012

Combating **child poverty**
through measures promoting the socio-
cultural participation of clients of the Public
Centres for Social Welfare

SHORT REPORT

Belgium, 20-21 September 2012

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Held in Brussels (Belgium) on 20-21 September 2012, the Peer Review was hosted by the Belgian federal Public Planning Service for Social Integration (PPS Social Integration). In addition to the host country, ten peer countries were represented: Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway and Spain. The stakeholder representatives were EUROCHILD and COFACE. Taking part for the European Commission were representatives of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

1. The policy under review

The fight against child poverty is a major focus of EU social policy and was a key theme of the Belgian EU presidency in 2010. That year, one child in five across the EU was living in a household with income beneath the national at-risk-of-poverty threshold. In Belgium, 18.3% of children are currently in households with incomes below the threshold.

Socio-cultural participation (SCP) is regarded as a fundamental civil right in Belgium and has been defined as such in the country's constitution since 1994. Each Belgian municipality has a Public Centre for Social Action/Welfare (PCSA/W), which provides, along with financial and other assistance to people in need, support for participation in social, cultural and sporting activities by their clients and their clients' children.

Three interlinked federal subsidy measures are available for the PCSA/Ws' work in the field of socio-cultural participation:

- A general Socio-Cultural Participation (SCP) measure. Evaluation shows that the PCSA/Ws draw widely upon this measure, although recourse to and use of the funding varies from one municipality to another. Primarily, it helps to pay membership fees and other costs for participation in clubs and associations by PCSA/W clients who would otherwise face financial barriers to taking part. Demand for this support at local level has been increasing, to the point where many centres now set a maximum for SCP assistance to each individual.
- A measure for combating poverty among the children of PCSA/W clients. In 2010-2011, the federal government provided a new stream of funding specific to the socio-cultural participation of children. However, while the PCSA/Ws view the reduction of child poverty as a core task, the Centres' take-up of this measure was low in 2010. Only 58% of the resources made available were used. Late notification of the measure, and its temporary nature (two-year duration), may have discouraged take-up. The PCSA/Ws that made most use of this measure were those that already had experience of working on child poverty. The subsidies were used mainly for educational support (contributions to school bills, books, meals, bus passes and school excursions), paramedical support and recreational activities for the children.
- A "PC recuperation" measure. Since 2007, PCSA/Ws have been able to draw on federal resources to purchase second-hand PCs for their clients. Only a limited number of centres make use of this measure and take-up is continuing to fall. This is mainly due to the low federal contribution per computer (EUR 100 maximum) and the fact that other ICT-related costs (internet connections, printers etc.) cannot be covered with these resources. Given the continuing digital divide, the PC recuperation measure is regarded as important, but it is felt that it should be more strongly integrated into the general SCP measure.

In addition to the federally funded measures, a number of regional and local initiatives are being taken in Belgium to promote socio-cultural participation by children from impoverished households. Among the good practice examples described to the peer reviewers is a "children's rights plan" adopted by the Flemish municipality of Zottegem to ensure that all its children enjoy four fundamental rights: a safe home, health,

education and leisure. And in the Walloon municipality of Hensies, a Children's Council elected by school students enables children to propose and implement their own activities to promote social inclusion.

2. Key issues discussed during the meeting

A major topic was the precise meaning of "socio-cultural participation". The "socio-cultural" element can be understood as a point on the continuum between education and development. It may also have elements of civic learning. A sense of belonging is another important factor, and this implies respect for the cultural background of those taking part. "Participation" may simply mean access and involvement, but it can also be understood as conscious engagement. A third interpretation is that children (and others) are to be actively involved in the design of solutions. It may be that a change of paradigm for "participation" is needed.

Great importance was also attached to the barriers to children's socio-cultural participation. On the one hand these may be external: the availability of sufficient funds is certainly essential, however there is a wide range of barriers beyond – access to and availability of activities, cultural, familial and institutional attitudes as well as lack of information and skills. Moreover environmental (e.g. poor housing), physical (e.g. disabilities) or language barriers should be borne in mind in the context of SCP measures. On the other hand internal barriers such as a lack of self-respect and sense of worth may hamper the participation in socio-cultural activities.

3. Key learning elements

- Poverty is a matter not only of money but also of access to education, health care, childcare, family support etc. So to tackle the social exclusion arising from poverty, a multidimensional approach is needed.
- In most European countries, more children than adults are at risk of poverty. In times of austerity, the number of children at risk is likely to increase. This is particularly serious because, in addition to its short-term effects on children, poverty has longer-lasting impacts that play out over the course of their lives.
- Particularly in the current economic climate, it may be necessary to argue the case for SCP measures in terms of social investment. However, it should be remembered that for the children concerned, these measures may also produce important benefits to which no economic value can be assigned (such as self-esteem, belonging, friendship and happiness).
- It is of crucial importance to listen carefully to the children's needs and to offer them appropriate opportunities to develop and have their voice heard. This entails actively involving children, parents and families in designing SCP measures.
- The Belgian scheme is a good example of a small-scale, relatively inexpensive measure targeting the most vulnerable that has leverage effects by generating other activities and commitments.
- The Belgian policy is a good example of interaction between the local level and a strong national framework. In particular, the Belgian scheme incorporates flexible funding arrangements that can accommodate varying local conditions and priorities.
- By using the PCSA/Ws as a channel for SCP measures, Belgium has taken an important step forward in targeting those measures.
- However, there are "leakages", as a considerable number of children who ought to benefit from such measures have no connection with PCSA/W clients. Moreover non-take-up of SCP measures represents a significant concern and the various reasons (e.g. lack of information, stigmatisation) should be considered in the development and implementation.

- The use of the PCSA/Ws implies a risk of exclusion of some households from the SCP measures, even if they are clients of a centre. In service organisations that exist primarily to provide means-tested social support staff members tend to think in terms of “worthy” and “unworthy” clients.
- The stigmatisation of those receiving SCP support is a real risk. However, there are ways around this. For example, a municipality may decide to issue all of its children with passes for a sports facility. Either these are issued free of charge to all or else the passes are so designed that it is impossible to distinguish between those who have paid for them and those who have received them for free.
- Buddy systems and anchorpersons in institutions offer a cost-efficient opportunity to overcome barriers and involve children from various backgrounds. Volunteers play an important role in this respect.
- Promotion of SCP for children from poorer households should also take place in schools, some peer reviewers argued. For example, in some European countries, increasing numbers of children are, for financial reasons, unable to take part in school excursions and field trips. Means of discreetly funding their participation should be provided.
- Children from a migrant background/Roma communities are in some cases less likely to participate in local socio-cultural activities. In some migrant communities, a gender element is involved here: boys from these communities find it easier to participate than do girls.

4. Relation/Contribution of the Peer Review to Europe 2020

The European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion is part of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The Platform emphasises the need to identify best practices and promote mutual learning. This Peer Review clearly contributed to that process on a core issue: child poverty and well-being. Notably SCP measures support the Europe 2020 targets on education – to reduce school drop-out rates below 10% – and poverty/social exclusion – at least 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The local activities and services seek to intervene in the inter-generational transmission of poverty and so on in a relatively inexpensive way.

A forthcoming Recommendation from the European Commission on combating child poverty and promoting child well-being is an important part of the EU’s inclusion agenda. Peer reviewers called for that recommendation to be completed and implemented rapidly. It was suggested that the promotion of children’s socio-cultural participation should be one of the priorities highlighted in the Recommendation, as part of a commitment to increasing opportunities and social mobility. At the same time, the diversity of children’s needs should be taken into account. Children are not an undifferentiated group. Regarding participation, EU policy should also reflect the need for all professionals who work with children to listen to the children, peer reviewers said. The discussions also emphasised bridges and linkages across policy levels (vertical) and areas (horizontal, such as parenting support).