



Peer Review: The NAPinclusion Social Inclusion Forum

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Synthesis report

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Introduction

The Irish Peer Review, held in Dublin on the 15th and 16th of November 2007, was hosted by the Irish Ministry of Social and Family Affairs and brought together government officials and independent (NGO) experts from the host country and seven peer countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, the Slovak Republic, Spain and the United Kingdom. Also participating were stakeholder representatives from the European Anti-Poverty Network and ATD Fourth World, together with representatives of the European Commission's DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.

This Peer Review was about the role of the *NAPinclusion Social Inclusion Forum* (SIF) as an element in the Irish social inclusion policy development and implementation process. It assessed the importance and impact of the event and its relevance for other countries. But also what Ireland could learn from experiences in peer countries was on the agenda.

A particularity of this Peer Review was the attendance at the Social Inclusion Forum itself – held on the 15th of November – by the Peer Review participants.

From the point of view of the European Commission, the key objectives of the Peer Reviews in social inclusion are:

- To facilitate better mutual understanding of national policies and their impact;
- To stimulate learning for improving the effectiveness of policies;
- To facilitate the intelligent or sophisticated transfer of key components from a certain context to other relevant contexts.

A full report on the proceedings and discussions during the Peer Review can be found in the *minutes* on the Peer Review website¹. This synthesis report will give an overview of the issues at stake as to stakeholders' involvement in social inclusion policies, related to the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) and of the input from the Irish Peer Review to its further development and assessment. The report starts with a description of the SIF and related experiences in the peer countries.

1. The Social Inclusion Forum and its context

Social inclusion receives high priority in Ireland. A special Cabinet Committee chaired by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and supported by a (interdepartmental) Senior Officials Group develops policy in this field and monitors its implementation. In 1997, Ireland was the first EU country to adopt a National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS). This sets targets for income adequacy, education, employment, housing and accommodation, health and combating urban disadvantage and rural poverty. The present NAPinclusion (2007-2016) adopts a lifecycle approach, the key groups being: children, people of working age, older people, people with disabilities. Social partners are consulted in the policy development process of the NAPinclusion. Since the Community and Voluntary Sector have formal social partner status in Ireland, they are included in that consultation. But it is recognised that this representation does not speak for everyone in the community and voluntary sector, nor for all people in poverty.

The Social Inclusion Forum is part of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) and was established as a one day event in 2002 by the Government as part of the new institutional structures for the NAPS.

¹ <http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net/peer-reviews/2007/the-napinclusion-social-inclusion-forum>

It provides an opportunity for people at local level, who are not directly represented in the social partnership process:

- to hear at first hand what is being done to combat poverty and social exclusion, both at the national and EU levels, and the key developments and challenges for the future;
- to put forward their views and experiences on key policies and implementations issues relating to the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (NAPinclusion);
- to identify barriers and constraints to progress and how best these can be tackled; and
- to provide suggestions and proposals for new developments and more effective policies in the future².

The Social Inclusion Forum is convened by the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) which is assisted in this regard by the Office for Social Inclusion.³

Held annually, the first three SIFs were attended by 200-300 people, among them people who are themselves experiencing poverty, organisations representing these people, representatives of bodies co-ordinating service delivery at local level, officials from local and national government, including senior policy makers from government departments and members of the research community. The peer reviewers were among the approximately 250 people taking part in the fourth SIF, held on 15th November 2007.

The Social Inclusion Forum was divided into plenary sessions, roundtables and workshops. The first plenary heard inputs from high-level keynote speakers, including the Minister of Social and Family Affairs. During the roundtables, participants were assigned to small groups. They were asked to respond to a number of written questions and to provide brief feedback to the second plenary. The subsequent plenary discussions were recorded and later transcribed. Participants could then choose to attend one of a number of themed workshops. These featured inputs from experts, to which the participants could respond. Detailed notes of each workshop were taken by rapporteurs. A final plenary session of the Forum included feedback on key points from the workshops, an overview of the day and a panel discussion. A detailed report of each Forum is published. These are available at www.nesf.ie.

The Social Inclusion Forum is not an isolated initiative. It is part of the wider participation and consultation process informing the NAPinclusion. The SIF is a top-down / bottom-up public meeting point, the quality of which depends on the preparation by and capacity building among stakeholders. Therefore, the following initiatives are important to mention:

- In 2002, the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) organised regional seminars to inform stakeholders about the NAPinclusion process and to increase their capacity, more in particular of people experiencing poverty.
- In 2003, the Combat Poverty Agency funded the Community Platform to hold awareness and capacity building meetings.
- In 2005, the Office for Social Inclusion undertook seven regional seminars and circulated papers before the SIF to stimulate discussion and to enhance stakeholders' preparation.
- In 2006, the EAPN Ireland was funded by the Combat Poverty Agency to undertake capacity building with people in poverty. EAPN organised a series of focus groups meetings. Some 20

² NESF (2006) Third Meeting of the NAPS Social Inclusion Forum, 15th February 2006 Royal Hospital Kilmainham: Conference Report. Dublin: NESF, p. 2.

³ An overview of relevant structures, key institutions and their roles is to be found in annex 1 of the Discussion Paper to this Peer Review.

participants of these focus groups took part in this 2007 SIF. They had a preparatory meeting the whole day before the SIF, assisted by funding from the Office for Social Inclusion.

The SIF and the various consultations surrounding the NAPinclusion have been used by the Office for Social Inclusion to identify both existing social inclusion issues that are not being adequately addressed and new, emerging policy issues that need to be planned for. The outcomes of the SIF are also discussed in the Senior Officials Group.

2. Peer countries' experiences

This paragraph aims at giving a short overview of the state of affairs in each of the peer countries and of the most “appealing” aspect of the SIF for each of them. It is essentially based on the peer countries' comment papers and some elements brought forward during the Peer Review meeting.

2.1. Belgium

Belgium has a strong tradition in participation of grassroots organisations and “organisations where people experiencing poverty speak”. Starting point for the Belgian “responsive” policy development was the poverty report in 1994 – 1995. This report was built on a lot of qualitative data reflecting experiences of poverty. It was decided to create a national service for combating poverty, social exclusion and precariousness. This service has monitoring and organising dialogue as its central functions. Secondly, an inter-ministerial conference is the steering body for the development of national social inclusion policy. Thirdly, government chose a partnership approach between different levels of government and between public authorities, civil society and private partners for developing concrete actions. Finally, a bi-annual report and the recommendations included in it are the basis for the actualisation of the political agenda. Intensive consultations with monthly meeting semi permanent groups (people experiencing poverty as well as professionals) in specific fields, provincial round tables and political debate in parliament are part of the evaluation and development process. This is a dynamic process that leads to new debates. National funds are available for capacity building of grassroots organisations.

Improvements of the Belgian participation process could be sought in a better feedback from government to the stakeholders, a better link with local authorities, and improvement of the echo in parliament. From a Belgian point of view the SIF is most interesting as a “flagship” event, bringing poverty and social inclusion in a public debate and thus helping it remaining on the political agenda. Furthermore, the social partner status of NGOs seems to be very helpful in the participation process.

2.2. Bulgaria

Consultation with stakeholders is defined as obligatory under the actual Bulgarian legislation. To this end a number of consultative bodies are established, without the consultancy of which the adoption of certain documents is impossible, for example the National Council for Tripartite Cooperation, the National Council for Integration of People with Disabilities, the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues, National Council for Child Protection, Council for Social Assistance, etc. A key importance in the consultation process is attributed to the participation of the National Association of Municipalities. The approach followed in Bulgaria allows for all interested parties (social partners, non-governmental

organisations, representing the interests of various vulnerable groups in the society, local authorities, etc.) to take part not only in the process of consultation and control on the implementation of policies, but also in the process of their formulation. All legislative and strategic documents in the field of social protection and social inclusion are developed following this approach, including the Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion and the National Report on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2006-2008. On the other two governance levels – local and regional, the respective consultative bodies are similar to the national model.

With respect to the representative organisations there are specific rules for representation applied at national level with the aim to ensure equal representation of civil society in policy-making. Apart from the nationally represented organisations, in the past years organisations which are not nationally represented but are very active in the sector of their activity are also included. Such organisations generate many good practices and methods. A number of Roma organisations and organisations providing social services might be stressed as examples in this respect.

The advantages of this participation structure could be summarised as follows:

- Impartial and quality critical assessment of the current situation and more innovative decisions.
- Wide participation of NGOs and other partners guarantees the improvement of the control on the implementation of the various sectoral policies.
- Gradual building of mutual trust between all the partners which enables greater openness, better flexibility and creativity.
- Ground for common understanding of the importance and the meaning of the partnership in relation to the common goals and the particular contribution of each party.
- Considering the need of establishing local models for social inclusion.

As this overview shows, the basic structures and instruments for participation are present in Bulgaria, but a lot of improvement could be reached in the implementation, at three levels: the infrastructure, the financing and the coordination. The overall coordination of the social inclusion policy is the responsibility of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy. In the frame of the Ministry, a Social Inclusion Section responsible for the coordination of the NAPinclusion was set up within the Social Protection and Social Inclusion Directorate. There are many institutions involved in the implementation both at national and local level. This imposes serious challenges to the coordination mechanisms at interdepartmental level. Furthermore, the financial back up of the participation mechanisms is very limited and the dialogue with NGOs needs further improvement. For Bulgaria, the direct dialogue between government and NGOs is the most interesting aspect of the SIF.

2.3. France

At national level, France has a consultative institution called CNLE (National Council of politics to combat poverty and social exclusion). It is involved in the drawing and assessment of the NAPinclusion guidelines. The CNLE is composed of 54 members, representing seven groups: central administration, members of parliament and local authorities, NGOs, trade unions, social organisations, national councils and experts. Trade unions and NGOs in particular represent people experiencing poverty but these people are not directly members of the CNLE.

National networks are consulted by the DGAS (the office for social inclusion) on the NAP implementation and monitoring process. But, at the moment, this implementation does not involve directly people experiencing poverty or exclusion nor grassroots organisations. On the other hand, the DGAS experiences local forums through a pilot about improving the access to people's basic social rights (PARADS

networks). These forums allow people to express their views and difficulties but it is not intended to contribute to the NAPinclusion.

Like in Ireland there is a Cabinet Committee on social inclusion (CILE). It is chaired by the Prime Minister and holds its meetings every two years. It defines measures to combat poverty and social exclusion which are guidelines for programming the two years actions of each ministerial department. It is supported by an inter-departmental Senior Officials Group (CP CILE) who has quarterly meetings, is in charge of monitoring those measures and ratifies the progress of the NAPinclusion.

In 2004, a National Conference to prevent and fight exclusions (CNPLE) was organised to gather local authorities, NGOs and professionals engaged in this field. It was held again in 2006. Prior to it, 5 regional conferences were held and their conclusions fed into the national conference.

The French government takes into account all these events and working groups to implement new measures and targets when preparing the NAP's actualisation.

EAPN-France is also active in the field of participation, in partnership with social NGO networks. During the French Presidency (2nd semester 2008), a national forum of people experiencing poverty will be organised by this network. It builds upon the experience of a similar initiative, existing for three years in the Champagne-Ardenne region.

Finally, bottom up initiatives on the monitoring and evaluation of national policies are also organised within programmes co-financed by the European Commission (e.g.: PROGRESS). The French project "Regards croisés sur les politiques d'inclusion sociale" is an example of such experiences. The project is led by the Salvation Army in partnership with the DGAS (Ministry), EAPN and UNIOPSS (the national umbrella organisation of social NGOs). The aim is to draw a critical interpretation of the French NAP inclusion by organising workshops in three regions (regional seminars) with people experiencing poverty and associations who work with them. Review, analysis and propositions are made by these workshops and are gathered on a website: www.inclusion-sociale.org. These propositions will be presented to politicians and central government officials, urging them to take into account the voice and actual participation of people experiencing poverty in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the NAPinclusion. This project aims to develop this approach and to compare it with similar initiatives in other European countries (Belgium, Lithuania and Greece) in order to learn from each other.

The strengths of the last two initiatives are the inclusion of people experiencing poverty and the commitment of government departments, but their weakness is the separate development in relation to the official consultation process. A real dialogue in order to influence the government's agenda is lacking. This is from the French perspective an important added value of the Irish SIF.

2.4. Hungary

In Hungary the concept of fighting against social exclusion came into life as a result of the EU Open Method of Coordination. A comprehensive strategy against poverty did not exist before. The NAPinclusion is still a document to produce for the EU and not a strategy on its own right, although the most comprehensive in the social policy field. The governmental structure set up to coordinate the elaboration and monitoring of the plan hasn't become the main coordination structure in the field of social policy. As a result the Hungarian NAPinclusion and the National Strategy Report were drafted as a synthesis of the existing strategies and actions of other ministries and departments, including their own public consultation

process for their development. Moreover, the drafting process of the NAPinclusion was quite closed, so NGOs could hardly take part in it.

The most important consultation body in Hungary is the Social Policy Council which consists of the seven regional social policy councils and the national social policy council. The Social Policy Council was established by a government decree in 2005 to be the most important consultative body of the Minister of Social Affairs. While the regional councils are “tripartite” bodies with the representatives of those *sustaining* social services (mainly local or county governments and some churches and NGOs), those *providing* social services (including NGOs) and those *using* social services, the National Social Policy Council (NSPC) has 13 members, including two representatives of organisations of users of social services. The National Social Policy Council discussed and commented all important laws and policy strategies in the field of social inclusion policies, social benefits and services, including the JIM, the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion 2004-2006 and the National Strategy Report 2006-2008.

There are some discussions and debate about the representation of civil society in Hungary nowadays. Although the added value and importance of the involvement of civil society actors are not obvious for all of the decision makers, some kind of processes or/and bodies for consultation are established in most of the government fields (social, environmental etc.). As the dominant government approach is to keep dialogue within formal bounds – with the establishment of councils, committees etc. – with the involvement of a certain number of representatives of civil society, it is a key issue for the government to find the appropriate and empowered civil representatives.

As an initiative of the Hungarian Anti Poverty Network and with the support of the Ministry of Social Affairs national meetings of people experiencing poverty were organised in 2005 and 2006. The national meetings followed the methodology of the European meetings of people experiencing poverty, as they provided opportunity for direct dialogue between decision makers and people experiencing poverty on issues like housing, child poverty, rural disadvantages etc. Although the meetings were very important with regard to the possible establishment of open consultation on social inclusion issues, they didn't have any formal link to the NAPinclusion process and the participation of politicians and representatives of the administration was very weak.

The interest of the SIF for Hungary is the level of political engagement linked to it, the fact that social inclusion has political priority as a comprehensive process, the importance of the preparation and the follow up (impact).

2.5. The Slovak Republic

In Slovakia, local governments play a central role in social inclusion policies. At national level, some stakeholders have the impression that the European Commission is imposing a social agenda. Regarding the NAPinclusion in general and participation of stakeholders in particular, Slovakia is still very much in transition, trying to keep up with the complexity of European policy changes. There is a high level of formality and as far as there is participation, it has no continuity. Government has a rather reactive attitude in this domain. But there are also very positive developments. One of these is the regional policy for Roma inclusion. This is an example of collaboration between government and NGOs. It included a process of about 1.5 year involving several working groups. Other examples are the development of EAPN Slovakia, and the planned appointment of a liaison officer for NGOs at ministry level. But there is still a lot of separate lobbying of specific groups and categories, without synergy. This synergy and mutual understanding of different societal groups seems for Slovakia an important aspect of the SIF.

2.6. Spain

Spain is a highly decentralised country in which many policies are devolved to the so-called Autonomous Communities (regions). In particular, most of the policies addressed by the National Plan for Social Inclusion (NPSI) are exclusively in the hands of the Autonomous Communities. The role of central government is in most cases to establish minimum levels in the provision of services and to coordinate. In the case of the NPSI, the Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs (MTAS) acts as the leader and coordinator.

The coordination and information mechanisms between all agents involved in the design, monitoring and evaluation of the Spanish NPSI are the following:

- *The Special Commission for the NPSI*, composed of the General Directors of Social Services or similar of the 17 Autonomous Communities and the two Autonomous Cities (Ceuta and Melilla) (AACC); the local level represented by one member of the Spanish Federation of Provinces and Municipalities (FEMP); and one representative of each of the ministries involved in the design and implementation of the NPSI. As said above, the MTAS acts as the leader and coordinator.
- *The State Council of NGOs in the field of social action*, representing civil society, dependant of the MTAS. There is a working group – in which the National Institute for Employment (INEM) participates – on issues related specifically to social inclusion. It is consulted during the first drafts of the NPSI and translates the views of the sector. To do so, they send a questionnaire to as much NGOs as possible, with the objective of evaluating the current NPSI and collect opinions and suggestions for the next one.
- *The Sectoral Conference for Social Affairs*, as the political arm of the Special Commission for the NPSI, composed of the regional councillors (regional ministers) of social affairs of all AACC. It approves the NPSI before it goes to its final approval by the State Ministers Council.
- *Forum for technical cooperation* with AACC and the local level, through the FEMP, in issues related to social inclusion, minimum income and specific studies/reports on social inclusion issues.
- *Consultations* of Social Partners (Trade Unions and Employers' Associations), political groups in the national Parliament and people experiencing social exclusion, through their representatives, the NGOS.
- *The Economic and Social Council*, composed of Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, produces a consultative report on the NPSI.

In its role as leader and coordinator of the NPSI, the MTAS organises bilateral meetings with all ministries involved. In the framework of devolved competences, devolvement of the participation processes also occurs, since most of the AACC make their own Regional Plans for Social Inclusion.

Although the Spanish Social Dialogue has been and is considered as a good practice in the promotion of reforms in the labour market and, to a lesser extent, in social inclusion issues, it does not include NGOs. Communication with or participation of Social Partners in the NPSI is not as intensive in Spain as it seems to be in Ireland. Spanish Government promotes actively and strongly the participation of NGOs in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the NPSI, recognising their closer relationship with persons facing processes of social inclusion and their better knowledge on how to act. However, it does not promote direct participation of these persons and neither is there a conviction that this is a good practice. An exception to this is the annual seminar in which the EAPN and the MTAS collaborate, similar to the Annual European Meeting of EAPN.

The two main elements of the Spanish structure for participation/coordination/information (the Special Commission and the State Council of NGOs) do not have a structured or institutionalised common

meeting point. An instrument like the SIF could gather them and improve communication among all actors (regions, municipalities, various ministries, NGOs), particularly the relationship between NGOs and the rest of ministries involved would gain from such improvement.

2.7. United Kingdom

Until 2000, policy making in the UK was a closed shop. There was no organised relationship between government and NGOs. Since then, attempts are made to engage with a wide range of stakeholders, particularly those from outside local or national government, in the development of the NAPinclusion. The importance of engagement of a wide range of stakeholders, particularly those with experience of poverty, and of the need for formal institutional structures to allow this engagement are increasingly recognised both by NGOs engaged in the development of the NAP and by the UK Government. Over the last seven years the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and various NGOs (coming together at the Social Policy Task Force, SPTF) have held regular meetings to contribute to the development of the NAP. Over time this collaboration has resulted in a number of outputs, including the *Get Heard* project (150 grassroots workshops), the *Bridging the Policy Gap* project, and the setting up of the NAPinclusion Stakeholder Group, a cross departmental, cross Government body overseeing the development of the NAP which also involves NGOs.

Organisations involved in EAPN in the UK are actively involved in discussions, both with other NGOs and the UK Government, about how the processes that feed into the development of the NAPinclusion can be made to be more participatory and about how these processes can be seen to have greater impact. Some of the questions that are regularly raised in relation to participation include:

- Resourcing for intermediary organisations and grassroots groups to support engagement in policy processes;
- Impact on policy of participation;
- Relationship between social inclusion policy and other key policy areas, particularly health, employment and housing;
- Links between local implementation and national policy formation;
- The use of participatory processes and fora to increase public understanding of poverty issues;
- Engagement of National and 'regional' parliaments in discussions regarding the development of NAPinclusion.

For the UK, the visibility and regularity of the SIF seem to be the most interesting aspects to consider for transfer.

3. The view of European stakeholders organisations

Two European stakeholders' organisations participated in the Peer Review meeting: ATD – Fourth World and the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN).

3.1. ATD – Fourth World

ATD Fourth World has 50 years of experience in participation with very poor families throughout Europe and finds it always extremely motivating to see new initiatives that aim to bring all different levels of stakeholders together in order to dialogue and to bring the political level closer to the realities of those who live with the consequences.

The very first thing that participation does is to give recognition to the struggle and actions that those who live in poverty face every day. It provides an opportunity to prove their individual and collective efforts and in doing so it addresses a question of human rights. To enable this participation is to give a voice to and allow people to exercise their rights as citizens. It also serves as a step forward in the fight for human rights for all.

There are many projects and initiatives in Ireland and other countries that bring different stakeholders together in order to dialogue and create something together. All of these efforts should be recognised and supported and it would be interesting to draw on and highlight good practice – not only at a political level but also at others, including the very local level within people's communities. When speaking about participation, it is also and perhaps foremost to achieve participation in one's immediate surroundings. This is to meet the specific objective laid down in the OMC – *“ensuring that inclusion policies are well co-ordinated and involve all levels of government and relevant actors including people experiencing poverty”*.

In the context of the Social Inclusion Forum, this participation aims at bringing the decision-making process closer to the realities of what people live. In doing so, it improves democracy and enables the creation of policies that more closely correspond to the needs and aspirations on the ground. The ATD comment paper to this Peer Review also sought to highlight the other windows of opportunity that enabling participation presents and what else might be possible to achieve - how much further than consultation it could go.

The line between ensuring that enough support is put in place and becoming too patronising is a fine one. However, ATD Fourth World believes strongly that if poverty has to be eradicated, policies have to include the very poorest, the most difficult to reach. Therefore, the participation of the most vulnerable and weakest members should also be sought, and in general these are people who have not had an education, who have never had experience of meetings like the SIF and for whom an extra effort must be made in order that they can find their place. The big question is whether their participation is possible and welcomed and if so whether the initiators are willing to go the extra mile in order to make it happen. This highlights the need for real investment in time and energy and the difficulties of adjusting to the time schedules of the policy-making process. Preparation is crucial to how well a meeting such as the SIF goes. Therefore, the capacity-building meetings that were organised in preparation for the forum are a really interesting part of the process. They served to get people's input from the ground in a different setting and manner to those of the forum. This is essential. However, it is slightly different to actually participating in the meeting itself. It is here that one needs to be careful. Therefore, if one of the aims of the SIF is to bring different levels of actors together, including people experiencing poverty, it should be

clearly evaluated how well this was achieved. From the evaluation of previous SIFs, it would seem that there are some improvements that can be made.

It is more than just a question of hearing the voice of experience. It is also about empowerment, in order that people living in poverty can benefit from the exchange. This means moving towards a partnership approach with them. One participant with experience of poverty wrote an evaluation after a few meetings in which she took part at different levels. She said that she “felt like a puppet that is used to help people write their reports”. The issues of accountability and transparency really need to be addressed. People in poverty and people who work by their side need feedback on how their participation has been taken into account. It is not an easy thing to come and share your life and that of others, about which you feel a deep humiliation, and then to feel as though this has not been taken into account or properly listened to. If this is not addressed, the feelings of fatigue, pessimism and of being used will continue to occur. They will undermine the process and reinforce the views of an already distrustful public.

In the light of these remarks, the Social Inclusion Forum is a great first step and must be applauded and supported for managing to bring together such a wide spectrum of groups and organisations in dialogue. This is a strong starting point which can be continued to be built on and developed. The host country paper mentions the participation of significant numbers of people with experience of poverty. There were many more involved in the preparation of the forum. ATD hopes that this Peer Review would enable others to learn from the experience and continue to develop the practice in their own countries - but keeping in mind all the other aspects that participation encompasses. Perhaps an even more ambitious approach is needed - projects and initiatives that create things together with those living in poverty. This would then really be working towards the liberation of those who are denied a voice and place in society.

3.2. European Anti Poverty Network

Some important policy issues related to participation that are being raised and debated in the European Anti-Poverty Network are the following:

- The participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in policy development and ways of strengthening this participation are core to the work of EAPN. This is something that needs to happen at all levels of policy making, but which must be real and lead to change in policy and impact on poverty. The experience in EAPN has highlighted the importance of a “two-way” effort. Governments and other stakeholders need to be prepared to work in different ways and to move out of their comfort zone.
- The impact and outcomes from engagement with policy processes is an area which constantly needs to be monitored and reviewed.
- Information exchange about ongoing initiatives and the implementation of social inclusion policies should be established, so that local and regional policy-makers together with NGO networks share knowledge and experience to find the right solutions.
- The proposed policy measures on people experiencing poverty and social exclusion should be placed in a comprehensive framework, in consultation with NGOs, with expected outcomes, deadlines and a budget allocation etc, in order to facilitate implementation and monitoring.

- Coordination with other key actions and measures promoting social inclusion and particularly participation needs to be emphasised.
- In a broader policy context, the level of engagement with policy, strategies and methods related to social inclusion and its impact on mainstream policy such as economic policy is an area which constantly needs to be addressed at a national level and in the context of the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy.
- The resourcing of organisations representing people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, mainly by the government, is extremely important in ensuring that these communities have a say in influencing the development and implementation of policy.
- Local funding for projects provides an opportunity to mobilise national networks to address excluded people's needs in a concrete way, i.e. by drafting a proposal, with a budget, with deadlines. Although such funding sources do not represent important amounts, they are a good way to involve people experiencing poverty and social exclusion at the local level, so they can learn about working with institutions. Structural Fund money, particularly the use of global grants through the European Social Fund, could play a significant role in this.

EAPN highlights important positive aspects of the SIF which might be relevant to other countries as follows:

The Social Inclusion Forum (SIF) could provide an important and positive example of practice in relation to objective 3 of the OMC for social protection and social inclusion: ***mobilisation of all actors and stakeholders, including people experiencing poverty***, in the development of social inclusion policies. The SIF provides a *formal* opportunity for a range of stakeholders, including policy-makers, people experiencing poverty and groups representing them, to directly engage on specific issues related to addressing poverty and social exclusion outside of the more limited opportunities provided by the normal social partnership process.

The ***provision of resources to national anti-poverty organisations*** by the Combat Poverty Agency to directly support the participation of people experiencing poverty and local groups representing them, so that they have had *some* opportunity to contribute to consultation processes for developing the NAPinclusion, and to prepare and contribute to the SIF even if they were not all able to participate directly on the day itself. The Office for Social Inclusion funded the participation of 20 delegates at this year's SIF.

The ***participation of high-level organisations*** in planning the SIF is important in being able to attract representatives from Government Departments and agencies and other stakeholders to the SIF and offers a better possibility of mainstreaming the results into the social inclusion policy process at national level.

4. Current experiences in Europe and the quality of participation in social inclusion policies

Governance is at the heart of European reflection and discussion since a number of years.⁴ The subsidiarity principle makes it necessary to reflect about the roles and responsibilities of different government levels. The double movement of Europeanization and devolvement changes relationships in a rapid way. Another element of change is due to the different and changing relationships between government bodies and non governmental actors. Their position varies from instruments for the delivery of services to partners in policy development. Also the relationships between public authorities, service deliverers and citizens / users / clients are changing.

The European Commission considers participation of stakeholders in social inclusion policies as one of the central common objectives of the OMC. The reasons for that are the conviction that full participation of all citizens in policy development and implementation is a fundamental right and the expectation that full participation of all stakeholders will increase the quality of policies. Therefore the Commission insists on reporting about participation in each of the guidelines for the National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion, but it is difficult to assess the quality of the participation in Member States, since there is no clear view, let alone a common understanding, of the key elements of “good” participation.

4.1. Participation in national social inclusion policies

In all the NAPs Inclusion the issue of involvement of different levels of government and relevant stakeholders is discussed, more or less extensively⁵. An overview of governance developments in social inclusion policies in all Member States is given in the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2007's supporting document⁶. The governance chapter of this document discusses four major governance related issues: mobilising stakeholders and raising awareness; mainstreaming social inclusion; gender mainstreaming and use of indicators, targets, monitoring and evaluation. We discuss these four issues briefly.

On the subject of **mobilising stakeholders**, the report mentions that “The bulk of Member States have made progress, since the previous Naps/inclusion, in mobilising and consulting those concerned. Among the arrangements for preparing the 2006-2008 National Strategy for Social Inclusion a number of new good practices have emerged, building on the experience gained so far in the OMC.

In many countries (DK, BE, CY, CZ, EE, ES, FI, FR, IE, LU, MT, NL, PT, SE, UK) the process of drafting the NAPinclusion was open, from the outset, to participation by NGOs and social services providers, allowing thorough discussion. Nonetheless, in all Member States there is scope for improving the quality of this involvement, ensuring that it actually impacts on policies and priorities, and for extending it beyond the preparatory phase.”⁷

⁴ See i.a. European Commission (2001). *European Governance. A White Paper*. COM(2001) 428 final. Brussels: European Commission.

⁵ see i.a. the MSI project – www.europemsi.org

⁶ European Commission (2007). *Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. Supporting document*. SEC(2007) 329. Brussels: European Commission, pp. 59-66.

⁷ European Commission (2007). *Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. Supporting document*. SEC(2007) 329. Brussels: European Commission, p 59.

In the framework of social inclusion policy development different more or less interactive methods are being used in several Member States to gather the views of civil society. There are more centralised and more local or regional approaches. Some approaches are directed more to organisations, while others target also the larger public. It would be certainly worthwhile to construct a European directory of these methods, as they could be a source of cross-national inspiration.

The Joint Report 2007 insists on the issue of resources and capacity building to insure genuine consultation. In this context the importance of time has to be stressed, for civil society organisations and certainly for organisations representing people experiencing poverty and exclusion. It can regularly be observed that the time to react on government's proposals or requests for input is (too) short in order to enable organisations to gather views of their members.

Within the National Action Plans assessment framework, it seems difficult however to compare the extent and quality of participation of civil society in different Member States. This makes the overviews essentially descriptive. Also, the national independent experts and representatives of civil society seem only able to judge the involvement of stakeholders and actors within the national framework and without very explicit criteria. A recent report, based upon a study commissioned by Caritas Europa and co-financed by the Commission, describes an attempt to come to such comparison.⁸

Mainstreaming social inclusion can be seen both as aim and result of social inclusion policy development. It needs co-operation between different government levels and sectors, but could also use the input from civil society organisations. In order to stimulate mainstreaming, a specialised co-ordinating body at sufficient high policy level and focal points in the crucial government departments and levels are key. The French example is given in the Joint Report 2007: "The FR strategy comprises a political and administrative framework, a targeted approach, and cross-cutting policy objectives directly built into the budgetary process, with indicators to monitor progress."⁹ Furthermore, the report mentions a Belgian experiment with on-the-spot mediators (trained "lay-experts") in poverty and social exclusion placed in 10 branches of the federal administration, and it refers to focal points in each ministry in Portugal for assessing the contribution to mainstreaming.

One dimension of mainstreaming is not so much developed in the Joint Report 2007: the role of / and relation between different government levels. In all European countries, the role of local and regional government in the fight against poverty and social exclusion is important and growing. This has to do e.g. with devolving policy responsibilities, but also with changing views on the role of minimum income schemes (often administered at local level) as potential activation mechanisms. In some countries this leads to local or regional Action Plans on inclusion. Therefore communication and dialogue about social inclusion policies between government levels becomes an ever growing necessity¹⁰. At the same time the necessity to think about civil society participation in *local* policy development is growing. In several

⁸ Francis Davis, Jenny Rossiter, Jolanta Stankeviciute (2007). *European Public Value and The Caritas Social Vision – An Interim Assessment of Europe's National Social Inclusion Strategies*. Report, produced by the Von Hügel Institute, St Edmund's College, Cambridge within the CONCEPT project, co-financed by the European Commission. Brussels: Caritas Europa.

⁹ Id., *ibid.* p. 61.

¹⁰ The Discussion Paper for the Peer Review on Social Inclusion in Paris, June 2006 refers extensively to this issue of relationships between government levels: H. Swinnen (2006) *Social inclusion policies: Coordination and partnership – Discussion paper – Peer Review: Social inclusion cross cutting policy tools – "Document de politique transversale (DPT)" Paris 29-30 June 2006* –. Brussels: ÖSB, CEPS, IES. <http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net/peer-reviews/2006/social-inclusion-cross-cutting-policy-tools-2013-2014document-de-politique-transversale-dpt-2014>

European countries, local authorities have the obligation to install consultative boards of users in general or for specific policy domains (e.g. municipal social service users boards in the Netherlands). And one could ask how these local (or regional) participation tools and structures relate to local or regional consultation for National Action Plans on Inclusion.

On the input side, **gender mainstreaming** is seen by the European Commission as a central element of all policies. In Lithuania, says the Joint Report 2007, the gender aspect is consistently present in the social situation analysis and is mainstreamed into all policy priorities. In Ireland, gender equality is to be reached, i.e. by *Positive Actions to Promote Gender Equality* and *Equality Proofing*. The National Women's Strategy is a cross-departmental strategy aimed at enhancing the socio-economic status of women, their well-being and their participation in decision-making and civil society.

Within a participatory development process of social inclusion policies, the **use of indicators, targets, monitoring and evaluation** can (should?) play an important role. There is a great variety of monitoring and evaluation practices throughout Member States. The involvement of non governmental stakeholders is rarely systematic all over the process from indicators, over target setting to monitoring and evaluation. Most initiatives to include NGOs and people experiencing poverty are ad hoc or at one moment in this process. As described above, Belgium developed a more systematic involvement of people experiencing poverty in the policy cycle. In some Member States, NGOs and social partners assist the government in developing the monitoring framework and to assess results. As to evaluation arrangements, according to the Joint Report 2007, there is little information available. As an example of ex ante evaluation, Ireland's Poverty Impact Assessment is to be mentioned.

4.2. A framework for description and analysis of actor involvement

The fact that all Member States are now reporting to the EU, or feel embarrassed not to be able to report, on participatory methods of policy-making is largely thanks to the Open Method of Coordination. The involvement of stakeholders is at the very heart of the objectives of the OMC and of the development of national action plans. Those objectives are about the comprehensiveness of policies, the integrality of approaches, partnership between different government levels but also between different government departments, partnership between government and civil society, and the involvement of so-called "target populations". The difficulty of combining all these elements within one structure, system or process of governance may clearly be seen in the case of the SIF. People are indeed asking if it is about consultation, information exchange, linking government departments, the relations between local and national government, or target populations. When preparing a forum such as the SIF, thought needs to be given to how to create inputs on all these aims and achieve an appropriate mix. This is certainly not easy.

A first step to facilitate such reflection would be to define the different variables or elements of participation and start thinking of quality criteria. The following list is an attempt in this direction.

Actor involvement variables

1. Actors to involve	1. Different government departments 2. Different government levels 3. Social partners 4. NGOs 5. Voluntary sector (professionals) 6. People experiencing poverty and exclusion / their representatives
2. Stages of the process	1. Agenda setting 2. Problem analysis 3. Policy development 4. Decision making 5. Implementation 6. Monitoring 7. Evaluation
3. Degree or spectrum of involvement	1. Information 2. Consultation 3. Advice 4. Co-production (of plans) 5. Co-determination 6. Self-management
4. Quality of the process	1. Transparency 2. Political engagement 3. Public visibility 4. Dialogue 5. Responsiveness 6. Adequate and coherent working methods
5. Preconditions for involvement	1. Basic support (professionals – money...) 2. Capacity building 3. Time

The first three rows of this table are about the scope of participation, while the rows 4 and 5 could be considered as assessment variables.

Scope variables

In participatory policy processes it is crucial for all actors (potentially) involved to know who can participate, in what stage of the policy cycle and to what extent.

As there is a strong link between the involvement of stakeholders and mainstreaming social inclusion into all aspects of national and local public policy-making, the involvement of many actors at all levels of governance, both horizontally (across all ministries and State agencies) and vertically (from those involved in the policy design, its implementation, the delivery of the programmes and/or services, to the external

target audience - individuals, groups and representative organisations), has to be carefully considered and communicated. The list of potential stakeholders in the frame above is indicative. Some of these categories could be overlapping. This is certainly the case with NGOs / voluntary sector / representatives of people experiencing poverty. What is meant here by the “voluntary sector” are the private not for profit professional service delivery bodies (mostly in health and social welfare). Many of these have the formal status of an NGO. But many NGOs are not service delivery organisations, but advocacy or lobbying (member) organisations. Some of these are representing people experiencing poverty. Which stakeholders are to be considered will widely depend on the different (country or regional) contexts, and the subjects to be discussed. In some cases it will be important to include representatives of sectors such as education, culture, sport, etc.

The degree to which each actor is involved will depend on contexts, issues at stake, the stage of the policy process and governing rules.¹¹ In that sense, the six “degrees” mentioned under row 3 of the table could also be seen as equally important options for an optimal policy development and implementation process. But the choice for one or the other degree of involvement should be clear to all actors and be a possible subject for negotiation. For each of the degrees of participation in a specific policy context, “rules of play” can (should) be defined or agreed in order to create real commitment among stakeholders and to avoid false expectations. It should be clear for instance who has to be informed at what stage and to what extent about policies at stake. As the different degrees build on all the former ones, for consultation, of which the Irish Social Inclusion Forum is a good example, quality information is a precondition. But essential for consultation is that authorities listen to opinions and views of other stakeholders and that they are clear of the outcomes and impact of such consultation. Advice could be seen as a more specific form of consultation, in which authorities ask for a reaction on provisional policy measures or on how to handle specific problem situations. Here it should be clear what the exact procedures are for the demand and the delivery of advice. There could be also rules for “spontaneous” advice of stakeholders and how authorities have to handle these. And finally, the status of the given advice has to be specified, i.e. to what extent the advice is binding. The following degrees of participation are about cooperating in the production and implementation of policies. It can go from participation in working groups preparing or implementing social inclusion policies (co-production) to taking part in the decision making process (co-determination). Last but not least there are policy fields or aspects in which stakeholders can have or be provided with means to decide and / or manage themselves. A good example of these are the means for training or advice provided to organisations representing people experiencing poverty.

Assessment variables

Under the headings *Quality of the process* and *Preconditions for involvement* the table gives a short list of possible assessment criteria.

The whole policy development and implementation process, including the internal government processes, should be as transparent as possible to all invited non governmental partners. If the internal processes are like black boxes, partners can’t understand the time schedules used and their own place in it.

In order to motivate partners’ involvement, but also to organise checks and balances, political engagement, public debate and open dialogue are crucial. This has to take the form of formal political debate in parliament of course. It is somewhat amazing to see how little social inclusion is debated in parliament in some European countries. But also public debate and dialogue through public meetings and

¹¹ Swinnen, H. (2005). La démocratie participative dans le processus politique local: Le cas de la ville d'Utrecht (Pays-Bas). In M.-H. Bacqué, H. Rey, & Y. Sintomer, *Gestion de proximité et démocratie participative: Une perspective comparative* (pp. 179-195). La Découverte: Paris.

conferences is important to keep social inclusion on the public agenda. Last but not least, dialogue has to be an integral part of the actors' involvement process. This means that public authorities not only listen to these actors, but also give feedback and discuss about what happened with their advice.

Coherence between objectives, strategies and working methods within consultation and participation processes is essential. Apart from the (important!) technical issues linked to working methods, some of the more basic questions to be answered for each concrete action are the following:

- Do we need a more structural approach (permanent committee) or is a more ad hoc approach (forum, conference) sufficient or even more appropriate?
- Do we want to raise collective or individual influence?
- How do we measure, or organise the legitimacy of invited partners? By rules of formal ("political" or "statistical" representation) or by checking the inputs or outcomes (e.g. through surveys)?
- How do we handle the relation and potential conflicts between representative democracy and forms of participatory democracy?
- How do we see the relation between the well or better organised actors and others?

Whatever the answers to these questions are, it is clear from experiences in many countries and situations that a number of different strategies and methods have to be used and combined in order to get sufficient and productive involvement of the most relevant actors (including target populations) in the social inclusion policy process.

To be adequate, involvement needs appropriate time schedules. In different countries we can observe a certain bias as to the time used by government to prepare the NAPs in relation to the time accorded to non governmental partners to realise their involvement. More in particular the less powerful or professionalised partners are often put in an uncomfortable position. Moreover, grassroots organisations need sufficient government support in order to enable their capacity building, development and functioning. Otherwise, their involvement in the policy development process and more in general in the process of social inclusion can not be assured.

4.3. Input from the Irish Peer Review

This paragraph brings together – along the topics of the table above – remarks, impressions, reflections and suggestions of the Peer Review participants in their comment papers and at different points in time during the Peer Review meeting. Most of the remarks are about the SIF itself, but can be seen at the same as of a more general nature covering stakeholders' involvement in the social inclusion policy process as a whole.

Actors to involve

Both in the Peer Review participants' comment papers and during the Peer Review meeting itself, many questions touched the involvement of the different stakeholders.

As to the overall participation in the SIF, the Irish representatives could clarify that an analysis of the some 250 people registered for the 2007 forum showed that a little over half of them were from the non-statutory voluntary and community sector, including both people who were themselves experiencing poverty and representative groups. About one-third were from eight government departments, a number of municipalities and some other statutory bodies. The remaining 15% were from non-statutory organisations representing local areas. So there was a fair spread of representation.

In relation to the participation of national and local government officials, it is important to know that in Ireland most government departments have a social inclusion unit or a social inclusion liaison officer who ensures that social inclusion issues are disseminated within that government department. Regarding participation by municipalities, up to five or six years ago, many Irish local authorities did not have an explicit anti-poverty or social inclusion focus to their work. However, all local authorities are now required to take account of poverty and social exclusion issues in the context of policy development, while funding has recently been provided for the creation of further social inclusion units in local authorities. All of this is quite new to many municipalities, so they are coming in gradually. But their interest and participation in the SIF is increasing.

The type of stakeholders to invite to an event such as the SIF depends of course on the objectives of such a meeting. If it were just to consult different stakeholders, then this could be done bilaterally. But it is also the aim of the meeting to serve as a bottom-up, top-down meeting point. And to bring different interests together, so that the mutual understanding grows.

Therefore it is important that the Irish initiators could testify that representativity of SIF participants has improved year by year. In particular, the representation of people in poverty has increased every year. The capacity-building performed by organisations such as EAPN and the CPA is central to that. The overall aim of the SIF is to mobilise all relevant actors. Therefore, it must bring a range of people together. While recognising that the proportion of people who have experience of poverty needs to be increased, its function must be to bring them together with other categories of participants. The SIF does not ask participants what their status is, and whether they have personally experienced poverty. There is a very long tradition in Ireland of NGOs, whether local or national, being founded, driven, staffed and led by people who themselves have experience of the issue concerned. For example, one of the organisations represented at the 2007 SIF was OPEN, the One-Parent Exchange Network. Many of the people working in OPEN are or have been lone parents. They are therefore very well aware of the issues facing lone parents. But they will not necessarily tell people at the SIF about their personal experiences, because they are representing an organisation. So it is not always easy to identify people who have personal experience of poverty.

At the same time it is important to find a balance between types of attendees. Concerning people experiencing poverty, material and psychological difficulties for participation have to be overcome. Therefore, reimbursement of costs, capacity building and preparation are crucial. Most participants at the Peer Review would support a strong(er) presence of people experiencing poverty at such meetings, because it is a matter of equal treatment AND of empowerment: their voice has to be heard and it gives an opportunity to come closer to the centre of power, which is an important element of empowerment.

Finally, one has to bear in mind that a public event, such as the SIF is not the only place and time to participate, and that the presence at the forum is not the only way to make the voice of people heard (see also remarks about working methods under one of the next sections).

Stages of the process

The most important value of the SIF in this respect seems to be its continuity. It happens year after year, which means that participating stakeholders have the opportunity to compare and follow developments. It became clear also that the SIF is part of a larger process of participation in policy development, where also the formal social partnership and other structures play an important role.

However, for participants at the Peer Review it was not clear to what extent the Irish stakeholders present at the SIF who are not part of the social partnership are involved in the different stages of the policy development and implementation process. Reading the proceedings of previous SIFs and listening to the input and discussions during the 2007 SIF elements of different stages in the policy process were included. It was about discussing and influencing the problem definitions, suggestions for appropriate policy measures, but also about evaluating current policies. The experiences in peer countries showed that a systematic input of all stakeholders in each of the stages of the policy cycle is not really developed. A reflection about the added value of such input and ways to organise it would be an important step forward.

Degree or spectrum of involvement

The Irish Peer Review participants explained that the SIF is essentially about information, about exchange of views and experiences, and about consultation. This consultation is complementary to what happens within the social partnership. Moreover, the social partnership is a body for negotiation, which the SIF is not. Nevertheless, it seems that the SIF also has a function in agenda setting (it brings new needs for policy to the fore), although it can not “impose” its agenda for future social inclusion policy development. But a more direct link between the social partnership and the SIF could be helpful. An example of such a link is to be found in Belgium, where exchange meetings are organised between participants of informal and of formal consultations (social partners).

The peer country representatives observed a tension between different expectations among the different parties present at the SIF: consultation vs. listening to concerns or joint development of policies. More clarity about the different aspects of the SIF, e.g. in separating these throughout the programme of the meeting, could be helpful to become clearer also about the status of the different outcomes.

Quality of the process

The quality of the process regarding the SIF has been discussed at length throughout the Peer Review meeting. The level of Irish political engagement with stakeholders' involvement in social inclusion policies, the quality of the dialogue during the SIF, and the appropriateness of working methods were highly valued. Suggestions have been made about possible improvements in terms of transparency and responsiveness.

High level *political engagement* with social inclusion, as shown in Ireland both through the institutional structures and institutions for social inclusion and through the presence of the Minister for Social Affairs and senior officials from many government departments at the SIF, is indeed key for stakeholders' motivation to get involved. For people experiencing poverty it is a way to show the recognition of their struggle and efforts. It is also an important support for mainstreaming activities.

The Peer Review participants were impressed by the *quality of the dialogue* during the SIF, as well in the sessions as during the breaks. The latter seem to be very much used for informal networking, including between grassroots organisations and government officials. The Irish Peer Review participants underlined the chance the SIF provides for a personal exchange of views and information between government officials, stakeholders and people experiencing poverty as well as the opportunity it gives people and organisations to broaden their perspective. To describe the observed quality of discussions, Peer Review participants used terms such as mutual respect, trust, constructive spirit, respect for general interest. They also valued the active participation, engagement and knowledge of participants.

It is clear that the quality of the dialogue was supported by the *appropriateness of the working methods* and techniques. The professional facilitators, using participative methods in the different roundtables and

workshops played a crucial role. Questions for the roundtables and presentations during the workshops were well prepared. Participants received background papers on the different subjects before the meeting. This enabled them to prepare their own reactions. The preparatory meetings with people experiencing poverty are also to be mentioned as key, as well as the more general capacity building and support for grassroots organisations. All these elements made it a dynamic forum.

Some Peer Review participants had questions about the structure of the day and had the impression that a one day event is very short in view of the many different aims to fulfil.

Finally, a few more general methodological points were discussed:

- The importance of training of (social) workers and (local) government officials in participation methods;
- The voice of people experiencing poverty could be reinforced during events such as the SIF in other ways than simply increasing the number of participants, e.g. through video presentations;
- The involvement of “lay” experts both for improvement of participation and for mainstreaming social inclusion policies;
- The importance of reimbursement of costs (travel, childcare...) for volunteers in participation processes.

About *transparency and responsiveness*, exchange during the Peer Review meeting concentrated on impact, accountability and feedback. The Irish participants testified that the impact of the SIF is guaranteed in a more informal way through the presence of high level government officials during the meeting itself. In a more formal way it is also organised through a discussion of the outcomes of the SIF in the Senior Officials Group.

The detailed SIF report, based on the transcript of recordings during the SIF, is both a support to that discussion and an instrument of transparency for the SIF participants and their organisation. The use of language plays an important role in this. As much as possible, the interventions are transcribed in a language that remains close to the one used during the meeting. People are interested and pleased to receive a detailed report of discussions in which they have been involved. This helps them to feel ownership of the discussion.

Improvement could be found in a more systematic feedback by government officials about remarks and proposals made during the SIF. This could take the form of a yearly report in which government presents a clear list of subjects raised, and proposals made during the SIF, followed by government actions on each of these, or arguing why action has not (yet) been taken. Such initiative would show government's sense of accountability and gratitude for the input given by SIF participants. Consequently, one could also expect other actors than government to show their contribution to social inclusion policy development and implementation.

Preconditions for involvement

This is another assessment variable where Ireland seems to be a good practice example. Many preconditions are already been mentioned in previous sections, showing the essential role these play in quality participation. They could be divided into two categories:

- Support to grassroots and other civil society organisations: money, professional support and capacity building.
- Sufficient resources for the participation of stakeholders in policy development and implementation: time, capacity building and money.

The initiatives taken in Ireland, through the Combat Poverty Agency and EAPN Ireland were particularly valued by the Peer Review participants. Some other examples were mentioned, such as the professionally supported monthly meetings in Belgium and the regional policy for Roma inclusion in Slovakia. Attention was asked for reimbursement of costs occurred by individual attendees of participation activities, and for the potential of (trained) “lay” experts. But the support for grassroots organisations should not be limited to help preparing them for their involvement in specific participation activities or processes. The support has to be continuous, in function of the changing composition of groups, to create and sustain a “fertile soil” for participation.

5. Concluding remarks

This chapter includes remarks about transferability potential, some suggestions for improvement of the SIF and similar events, and a few reflections on quality participation. It ends with the European perspective. One particularity of this Peer Review was the type of site visit. The representative of the European Commission underlined its importance: A site visit during a Peer Review always gives added value. You learn things that you would never be able to learn just from written documents. This particular Peer Review had taken the concept of the site visit to a higher level by allowing real participation in the Social Inclusion Forum. All the reviewers had very much appreciated that possibility. It had given them a good feel for what the SIF is all about as a mechanism for participation. It had also provided a good overview of the challenges that Ireland is facing as far as social inclusion is concerned.

Transferability potential

While thinking of transfer, the different societal contexts in Europe should be kept in mind, but also the different experiences with participation in policy processes. In this Peer Review meeting there were some experienced countries, and some countries where participation is in a very early stage. Important context variables are of course the size of countries (centralised or devolved participation structures), the degree of devolvement (see the autonomous regions in Spain), the relation between urban and rural areas, etc.

But altogether, the peer countries’ representatives did see great transfer potential in the Irish example of the SIF as a public event, or in a number of its composing elements or characteristics, or in the underlying process and conditions.

The added value of the SIF according to the Peer Review participants could be summarised as follows:

- It creates better understanding of each others position.
- It directly links different types of stakeholders.
- It is part of a larger consultation process.
- It shows recognition of NGOs and grassroots organisations.
- It brings together different government levels and sectors with NGOs, which is rather unique.
- There is a strong political commitment.
- It is based on continuity.
- The dialogue is of high quality (openness, constructive, trust).

Suggestions for improvement

Some of the lessons learnt from the Irish perspective are also important for possible transfer of this practice:

- preparation is key;
- report back in a systematic way;
- interaction should take place at national and local level;
- adequate resources have to be devoted to the process and provided for to prepare and motivate participants.

Peer Review participants added some points of attention for “events such as the SIF”:

- Keep an appropriate balance between participation of government and civil society representatives.
- Under certain circumstances, to present such an event as a joint initiative of government and civil society organisations could be more motivating.
- Take care of possible consultation fatigue.
- Legitimacy and representativity of participants has to be considered. See e.g. the distinction between types of NGOs: service NGOs and representation NGOs.
- Use the appropriate language and respect the way in which people formulate the issues at stake.
- Think of the private sector as actor.
- Show gratitude for advice.

Evaluation and good-quality participation

All participants emphasised the importance of proper evaluation of the participation process and its impact on policies. Evaluation and monitoring linked to impact assessment are vital, and are likely to encourage greater credibility for the process as well as ensuring that it delivers on its objectives, but care needs to be taken to involve all stakeholders and to make use of participative methodologies and indicators (EAPN Europe). According to the European Commission representative, each Peer Review emphasises the importance of independent evaluation of policies and institutional arrangements, and it might also be useful in the case of the SIF. On the criteria for good-quality participation, one conclusion reached by the present seminar is that good-quality participation does not drop from the sky. You need to work on it. The preconditions for good participation start with having clear objectives, having resources to support the process, empowering people, and ensuring feedback. The evaluation framework proposed in this synthesis report (see paragraph 4.2) is very helpful and could usefully be built on.

The Irish host concluded all too modestly that the “peer reviewers feel the SIF is good enough to continue”. So he and his colleagues would not have any grounds for going to their political masters and telling them that the peer reviewers had said it was a sheer waste of time. The hosts themselves are conscious of the need for more preparation for the SIF. That preparation is a process in itself, which can link people and give them an opportunity to express their views. Clearly, the level of resources is a constraint on the amount of preparation that can be done, but that too is part of the process. It can help to crystallise people’s concerns. In terms of participation in the SIF, the review had given the hosts a great deal to think about. Clearly, there is a need to include many more people who are experiencing poverty, although this does raise some difficulties. Legitimacy is also important – the participants should be credible representatives of a viewpoint. On the extent to which social partners should be included in the forum, there is a fear that this might lead to people experiencing poverty being crowded out by high-powered employer and trade union representatives. At the same time, it is important that the social partners should be addressed too. Government policies are often the result of demands made by the social partners, so they should perhaps accept a share of the responsibility for social exclusion and take

action to help decrease it. The National Action Plan for Social Inclusion could provide the grounding for the SIF process and be part of the monitoring exercise.

European perspective

It was the hosts' impression that the SIF participants' awareness of the EU social inclusion framework is in general not very high. However, it is probably not essential for them to be aware of it. It is more important that they see, operating on the ground, the results of the Open Method of Coordination and of the facility provided for Member States to share best practice. Naturally, officials in ministries and municipalities are very much aware of the EU process. Organisations such as EAPN do receive EU funding to carry out awareness-raising actions in relation to key elements of the social inclusion at the EU level.

The European Commission representative, in his concluding remarks also linked to the European level. Looking at the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2007¹², one of the conclusions with regard to governance and participation in the development of the National Action Plans is that progress is being made on the establishment of procedures for participation, but that we need to focus more on the quality of participation. The framework that the present review had begun to establish for ensuring the quality of participation should also be used at the European level. A number of challenges will be faced in the near future. The next round of National Action Plans will be in 2008, so he suggested that the conclusions of this Peer Review might be used when preparing the guidance for those plans and when analysing the plans themselves, later in the year. Member States may be looking to Europe to stimulate participation, and we should take up this challenge. Just the fact of holding this review had shown the level of interest in the issue. The next cycles of National Action Plans will be spread over three years. The challenge then will be to encourage continued participation of stakeholders in all policy stages related to the NAPs, also in the years when no full reporting at the European level is required. Another challenge to be faced at the European level is linked to the recent streamlining of the "social OMCs". Will this be an opportunity for more participation in the other strands of the OMC (pensions and health and long term care), or is it rather a threat to the participation that has already been obtained?

The European Commission has proposed that the year 2010 be designated as the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. The 2010 European Year aims to reach EU citizens and all public, social and economic stakeholders. Its four specific objectives are:

- Recognition of the right of people in poverty and social exclusion to live in dignity and to play a full part in society;
- An increase in the public ownership of social inclusion policies, emphasising everyone's responsibility in tackling poverty and marginalisation;
- A more cohesive society, where no one doubts that society as a whole benefits from the eradication of poverty;
- Commitment of all actors, because real progress requires a long-term effort that involves all levels of governance.¹³

¹² European Commission (2007). *Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion. Supporting document.* SEC(2007) 329. Brussels: European Commission
http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/joint_reports_en.htm#2007

¹³ Proposal for a decision of the European parliament and of the council on the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010).
http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/news/2007/dec/antipoverty_1_en.pdf

These objectives clearly refer to participation of all, also in the policy making process. If this is so, then it is time to further develop insight in the scope and quality of policy participation, in how to identify and define (measurable) objectives and criteria.

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