

What is an “indicator” of poverty and social exclusion?

Having assessed the content of the National Action Plans on social inclusion 2003-2005, *Network News* wants now to look into the key issue of indicators. How are they worked out and worked up? How can the experience of

people experiencing poverty and social exclusion inform them? How do existing indicators apply to the future Member States? These are the questions that this issue sets out to address.

First, though, we need to be straight about what an “indicator” is in terms of the European social inclusion strategy. It is actually a statistical variable used to analyse how far Member States have gone towards achieving the objective of “*having a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty*” by 2010, as laid down by the Lisbon European Council of March 2000. An “indicator” also sets out to give a fuller picture of poverty and social exclusion, and identify good practices so they can be spread around.

The balance of opinion is that the existing list of common indicators is not delivering because it does not address all the issues, especially access to health and housing. A more qualitative approach is also needed if figures are not to be misinterpreted - or massaged. These data need to reflect people’s real lives. So anti-poverty policy measures must be looking for real, measurable changes (through appropriate indicators) in the living conditions of women, men and children who are at present shut out of society.

V. Forest

FOCUS ON INDICATORS

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NETWORK NEWS COLOURS UP!

You’ve certainly noticed that *Network News* looks different. That’s because EAPN has given itself a full image makeover in recent weeks, including a new logo. *Network News* has got more colourful, with a page layout that’s easier to read. We hope you’ll like it!

The Laeken "18"

The 18 statistical indicators of poverty and social exclusion adopted by the Laeken European Council in Brussels, December 2001 are:

Primary indicators

1. Low income rate after transfers with low income threshold 60% of median income (broken down by gender, age, most frequent activity status, household type and tenure status; as illustrative examples, the values for typical households);
2. Distribution of income (income quintile ratio)
3. Persistence of low income
4. Median low income gap
5. Regional cohesion
6. Long-term unemployment rate
7. Persons living in jobless households
8. Early school leavers not in further education or training
9. Life expectancy at birth
10. Self perceived health status

Secondary indicators

11. Dispersion around the 60% of median low income threshold
12. Low income rate anchored at a point in time
13. Low income rate before transfers
14. Distribution of income (Gini coefficient)
15. Persistence of low income (based on 50% of median income)
16. Long term unemployment share
17. Very long term unemployment rate
18. Persons with low educational attainment

The exact definitions of these 18 indicators are given in the Annexe to the Social Protection Committee's report: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/soc-prot/soc-incl/indicator_en.htm

Two "Statistics in Focus" (8/2003 and 9/2003) recently published by Eurostat, the EU's statistical office, give an overview of the most recent available data for the 15 Member States: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat/sectionThemes/Population and social conditions/Statistics in Focus](http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat/sectionThemes/Population%20and%20social%20conditions/Statistics%20in%20Focus)

Indicators... for what?

Indicators are central to the European Social Inclusion Strategy. How have they been worked out? And what practical use are they?

There are many facets to the European inclusion strategy: common objectives are adopted, based on which the Member States are asked to submit two-yearly National Action Plans (NAP Inclusion). The policy measures are then analysed for their relevance and applicability to other countries. But does that make the measures really effective? Statistical indicators are only central to the strategy because there would be no point trumpeting "good practices" on action against poverty and social exclusion that are not backed up by an assessment of the real impact of the measures on the daily lives of those personally affected. In a nutshell, common indicators are useful to compare progress within Member States and help people learn from one another.

There is no point trumpeting "good practices" that are not backed up by a real impact assessment

Since December 2001, 18 "Laeken" indicators (named for the Summit where they were adopted) (see opposite) have provided the basis for mapping the state of poverty and exclusion in Europe. They were drawn up in 2001 by a Council body, the Social Protection Committee (SPC). In its final report (*), the SPC argued that a large number of indicators are needed to properly assess the multidimensional nature of social exclusion. It went on to prioritise these by placing them in three levels:

- Primary indicators (common) would consist of a restricted number of lead indicators which cover the broad fields that have been considered the most important elements in leading to social exclusion.
- Secondary indicators (common) would support these lead indicators and describe other dimensions of the problem.
- Tertiary indicators (national) that Member States would include in their National Action Plans to highlight specificities in particular areas, and to

help interpret the primary and secondary indicators. These indicators would not be harmonised at EU level.

In the first round of NAPs Inclusion (2001-2003), the Member States did not really have time to go into the indicators issue. The NAPs Inclusion 2003-2005, by contrast, will be a base point for analysing the use made of the indicators (number of indicators used, interactions between European and national indicators, main types, etc.). It will not be easy to puzzle out something which was until recently the Member States' prerogative for one clear reason: statistics can be political dynamite, and so there is an interest for Member States to keep them under political control.

One key aspect of evaluating the use of indicators lies in how they are applied to target-setting. Other than their pledge to "have a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty" by 2010, the Member States balk at setting quantified objectives, such as eliminating extreme poverty. That

may well be because moving from a statistical variable to setting credible targets depends on knowing the potential direct effect that policy measures will have on that variable. In other words, if anti-poverty measures are taken, but poverty keeps on rising, is that down to failing measures or the influence of other unidentified factors? Hence the importance, in EAPN's view, of impact assessment not only of specific anti-exclusion policies, but also of social, employment, economic and monetary policies. That is the principle of mainstreaming action on poverty and exclusion across all policy spheres.

V.F.

(*) "Report on indicators in the field of poverty and social exclusion", October 2001: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/soc-prot/soc-incl/indicator_en.htm

Laura Bardone, European Commission: “We have to give the full picture on social exclusion”

Laura Bardone is secretary of the Social Protection Committee's Indicators Subgroup, and works in the Social Protection and Inclusion Policies Unit of the European Commission's Employment and Social Affairs DG.

EAPN: How far have we come on since the common indicators were adopted?

Laura Bardone: *The subgroup has been looking at consolidation of the Laeken indicators. For example, we're now recommending an age rather than just gender breakdown for most indicators. Also, we've added an indicator for the “working poor”. There have been discussions on adding others on deprivation or illiteracy, for example, but no decision has been taken yet. The aim for illiteracy would be to come up with an indicator to link the profile of parents with the child's basic literacy level to provide fundamentals for analysing the influence of family history on the inter-generational transmission of poverty.*

What about indicators on housing?

The Social Protection Committee asked the Member States to produce tertiary indicators (see previous page). Obviously, the aim is to come up with non-monetary common indicators in this sphere, but we are faced with national not to say local norms and practices, and statistical limitations, in this area. Heating deprivation means different things in Sweden and Italy! There is less space and more pollution in towns than in the countryside, but better access to services. This benefit is not something you find in the available common surveys. “Homelessness” is not included as an indicator because of a lack of information, but also because of the different definitions that can attach to it. Statistics-keeping is deficient and NGOs ought to be involved in compiling them.

Health is another area where indicators are needed...

The two indicators we currently have (life expectancy and self-perceived health status by social status

group) don't give a sufficiently clear picture of the health-related aspects of social exclusion and poverty. The latter indicator, especially, creates statistical problems because self-perceived health, for example, is heavily age-dependent. Bear in mind also that age, employment and health influence one another. The ideal health indicator would be individual health and access to care by social status group (occupation, educational level, income).

How have the Member States used the Laeken indicators in their second round of Plans?

Most have done really good analyses based on the indicators, but tucked them away in annexes with no direct link to the proposed measures and strategies. Others skate around them. Denmark, for example, focuses on the most marginalized groups, that are not covered by the Laeken indicators. The Netherlands uses policy rather than performance indicators - so not the Laeken indicators. It sets the relative poverty line by reference to the minimum income, not the median income as the European Union suggests.

Why the lack of hard targets?

The Member States tell us that it is hard to set hard goals because the outputs depend as much on a wide range of policies as on the economic and social context. They also say that decentralization of policy-making makes it hard to frame national objectives. These arguments hold water up to a point. The employment strategy includes hard targets. But it is true that the theoretical and empirical basis is more developed for employment than poverty and social exclusion. The new EU-SILC survey (see opposite) should help fine-tune the Laeken indicators, so that they reflect the realities of social exclusion.

Interview: V.F.



Laura Bardone

EU-SILC TO LAUNCH IN 2004

It is not enough to have accurate indicators; data must be available! For some years now, European poverty and exclusion data have been extracted from the annual European Community Household Panel (ECHP), the first of which was done on some 60 000 households in Europe in 1994.

But the most recent ECHP data now date from 1999, and those on income from 1998! Also, genuinely comparable data are still fairly thin on the ground. To improve data collection, the European Union has decided to launch “EU-SILC” (Community statistics on income and living conditions). This new tool will provide annual data from 2004, although one group of countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Ireland and Luxembourg) has already launched an exploratory survey this year, while another group (Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) will start until 2005. So the first data on incomes, poverty, social exclusion, employment and living conditions (access to housing, health, education, etc.) will be for 2005... at the soonest.

Indicators soon past their “use-by date”?

The list of common poverty and social exclusion indicators (the “Laeken indicators”) was drawn up by reference to the situation in the current fifteen Member States. But on 1 May next year, ten new countries will be joining the EU. Will these indicators still be a relevant gauge of progress towards tackling exclusion? Enlargement is bound to add to diversity within the European Union. The concept of ‘absolute poverty’ alongside that of ‘relative poverty’ will take on greater importance in an enlarged Europe, given that the relative poverty line in the accession countries is very much lower than the EU-15 average (because of the much lower disposable incomes). In this context, a “relative poverty” measure only will make it hard to frame relevant comparisons.

More qualitative indicators of non-monetary absolute poverty may well be more appropriate, but are not in the current list of 18 indicators. EAPN believes that this clearly demands still more involvement by people enduring poverty in defining indicators.

Controversial statistical data in Hungary

As a step towards joining the EU strategy and open method of coordination in the field of poverty and social exclusion, Hungary has drafted its “Joint Inclusion Memorandum” (JIM) (1). The main problem with this draft is that all conclusions and priorities are based on controversial data. This problem is admitted in the JIM, but this does not change the fact that Hungary cannot produce both true facts and internationally comparable data on poverty and social exclusion. The reasons are the following: according to data of the Central Statistical Office (CSO), the ratio of total income received by the 20% of the population with the highest income to that received by the 20% of the population with the lowest income (lowest quintile) is of 3.3 (income quintile ratio). That means that income inequality in Hungary is less than in several EU countries (e.g. EU average is of 4.6; it is lower - 3.2 - in Sweden and Denmark only). After experiencing the existence of absolute poverty in the decades of post-socialist regime, the phenomenon of relative poverty and deprivation became widely recognised in the 90s. The gap between the rich and the poor is getting wider and wider, so the topic of the “new” impoverishment (since the transition) and the division of society is coming into prominence.

The gap between the rich and the poor is getting wider

Different researches and surveys were conducted to estimate the proportion of people living in poverty but the results are rather different. It is well-known that the richest and the poorest groups are under-represented in the CSO. In contrast, data from TÁRKI (Social Research Centre) shows a 5.4 income quintile ratio.

Another problem is the selection of the equivalence scales: OECD2 (2) is used in the JIM although it is admitted that non relevant statistics could result. Given the different national living standards and consumption habits, the use of OECD2 “equivalised income” is likely to lead to an underestimation of proportion of people experiencing poverty. The final difficulty to be mentioned is connected to the so-called “Roma issue”. A section of the JIM is devoted to the Roma population. In the opinion of most experts, all provisions and strategies aimed at fighting against poverty are likely to affect the Roma people, while “positive discrimination” and special “Roma strategies” will not lead to a decrease of poverty among them but will prejudice non-Roma people. Due to laws on data protection and human rights there is no official register of the Roma population. There are therefore very different estimations of their number and of their living conditions.

To conclude, the current and future Government and research institutes have the task of providing data and indicators which are appropriate and adequately reflect the real national situation, so that they can be used for comparison at EU level.

Izabella Márton

Alliance of Social Professionals, Hungary

Poverty in acceding and candidate countries

Data below provide an overview of monetary poverty for acceding and candidate countries, not - as for the current Member States - on the basis of a common Household Panel but of national statistical sources. Furthermore, in spite of harmonisation efforts, these data cannot be considered to be fully comparable, in particular due to different income reference periods. These figures must therefore be seen as indicative. Proportion of the population who lived in households with an “equivalised disposable income” below 60% of the national median equivalised income:

	Year	Before all transfers	Including pensions	Including all transfers
BULGARIA	1999	35%	17%	14%
CYPRUS	1997	24%	18%	16%
CZECH REP.	1996	35%	19%	8%
ESTONIA	2000	42%	26%	18%
LATVIA	1999	45%	22%	16%
LITHUANIA	1999	38%	22%	17%
MALTA	2000	30%	21%	15%
POLAND	1999	46%	28%	15%
ROMANIA	1999	39%	22%	16%
SLOVENIA	1999	37%	18%	11%
TURKEY	1994	31%	26%	23%

Source: Eurostat. No data available for Hungary and Slovakia

(1) JIMs are reports highlighting trends and challenges on poverty and social exclusion in the acceding and candidate countries to the EU. This process prepares for full participation in the Social Inclusion Strategy and the drafting of NAPs Inclusion in 2004.

(2) OECD2 is a set of main economic indicators proposed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, such as GDP, hourly earnings, interest rates, unemployment rate.

Informing the figures by experience

There is no better way of getting relevant indicators than by reality checking against the knowledge and experience of people experiencing poverty.

Defining "poverty indicators through crossing of knowledge from people living in poverty" was the aim of a European project run by five national EAPN networks (Germany, France, Italy, Portugal and the Netherlands). The project, completed at the end of August 2003, set out to bring the voices of people living in poverty face to face with the knowledge of other players (scientific community, public services, NGOs, etc.).

The criteria

The project set out to analyse, clarify and supplement the 18 Laeken indicators using criteria to measure the impact of policies, namely:

- Do the policies give people living in poverty a choice?
- Do they take account of their capabilities and skills?
- Do they give them better access to rights, goods and services?
- Do they give more security to their lives by making them less vulnerable and more able to plan ahead against problems.

The definition

The project partners set great store by starting off from their own definition of what "poverty" means. Poverty is a complex and multi-dimensional process that cannot be approached through monetary poverty indicators alone and can be interpreted differently in different countries. Hence the value of a common definition, worded as follows: "Poverty consists in being unable to or precluded from meeting one or more needs without outside help. These needs relate to aspects of life which enable self-determination, i.e., assuming one's responsibilities and exercising one's rights, or fundamental goods (income, education, housing, health, etc.). It is inseparable from the individual's perception of a

deterioration in their economic situation, rights, and/or relationships".

While this lays no claim to be a "scientific" definition, it did set a framework for the work. The participatory method - the emphasis on involving people living in poverty - is what made it really operational.

The method

The partners' first concern was to set up national groups of people living in poverty. Then, to get dialogue going with this group, they formed other groups drawn from the scientific community, officialdom, the social partners and community-based organizations. Once this had been done, data were collected through individual and group interviews.

So as not to simply overlay the sets of national results, the partners set up genuinely collaborative working to come up with a list of relevant indicators. An ongoing two-way flow took place between field work and consultation at European level.

The outcomes

What clearly emerged was that people living in poverty have different priorities to the experts: they are more deeply affected by affronts to liberty and dignity, being stripped of or regaining self-reliance, feelings of insecurity, etc. As a result, the indicators (see margins pages 5 and 6) were divided into three broad areas: income and consumption, social rights (education, health, housing and employment); citizenship and identity (including culture).

After many months working on this project (December 2001 - August 2003), the partners are in no doubt that people living in poverty are essential to choosing the "right" indicators, because this makes them more appropriate and sustainable. In other words, the issue of "indicators" should not just be one for statisticians, but put at the centre of a participatory political debate at all levels.

V.F.

The project final report written by the European coordinator Gilles Hacourt, will shortly be available on the EAPN website.

People living in poverty have different priorities to the experts: they are more deeply affected by affronts to liberty and dignity

KEY INDICATORS OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Below is a selection of the indicators from the European project described opposite. Further details can be found in the final report, soon to be available on www.eapn.org

INCOME

- Share of people living permanently below the poverty line
- Share of people exiting and returning to poverty over a specified period
- Share of people claiming minimum income benefit over x years
- Number of people moving off unemployment benefit onto welfare benefit
- Share of households whose debts equal or exceed their income
- Disposable income after housing costs
- Social protection: average number of steps needed to claim a benefit, benefit reciprocity and disqualification rate

EMPLOYMENT

- Forced fixed-term contracts, temporary agency staff and part-time contracts
- Number of people denied access to employment by child care or mobility problems
- Unemployment rate among young people of immigrant origin
- Rate of access to quality training

HOUSING

- Number of homeless
- Number of persons in other forms of temporary accommodation
- People dissatisfied with their accommodation
- Average waiting time for proper access to quality housing; influence of national/ethnic origin on waiting time
- Ratio of total available low-cost housing units to number of people living on or below the poverty line
- Ratio of housing costs to household income

HEALTH

- Ratio of number of good quality services to size of catchment area
- Time required to access these services
- Non-take-up rate on financial grounds
- Ratio of frequency of medical consultations by people living in poverty to average number of medical consultations

EDUCATION

- Number of unqualified 18 year-old school-leavers
- Frequency of parent-teacher interviews
- Ratio of number of training courses for unemployed people to the total number of unemployed
- Number of people on low incomes with no computer skills, no driver's licence, etc. compared to the average
- Rate of persons with poor literacy and numeracy skills
- Pre-school education provision

PARTICIPATION AND IDENTITY

- Percentage of population below the poverty line who are members of (or connected to) a sports club, cultural group, trade union, network, consumer or service user group, community organization.
- Presence of neighbourhood social services (doctor, hospital, legal adviser, debt mediator, etc.)
- Domestic violence and its impact on poverty and social exclusion

FEANTSA's proposals

The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) has produced a number of documents that relate to the collection of information about homelessness and has created a working group to follow this issue:

- Background document on data collection on homelessness (2003)
- Recommendations for indicators on housing and homelessness (2002).

See: http://www.feantsa.org/keydocs/data_collection.htm and <http://www.feantsa.org/research.htm>

Saskia Richter, EAPN Germany: "Choice is about being in charge of your life"

Saskia Richter was the coordinator of the "poverty indicators through crossing of knowledge from people living in poverty" project for the EAPN German Network.

EAPN: How did the German Network give input to the project?

Saskia Richter: *The German Network set up a steering group of eight people from a range of backgrounds (voluntary community, academia, politics, jobless, low-income, homeless), which collated the existing poverty and exclusion indicators, especially those used in the government report on poverty and wealth. That list was then discussed with people living in poverty, both individually and in small groups. The full range of issues was addressed. The outcomes of these discussions were then analysed by the steering group, with support from scientific experts, in order to clarify the indicators.*

Any problems with this participatory approach?

The people we met were keen to talk about political issues like those dealing with indicators. Obviously, you need to set aside enough time for interviews, and it is important to make it clear at the outset that indicators will not change their life overnight, but that it is a long haul. Most wanted face-to-face talks with politicians, because they wanted a direct say in policy-making!

What surprised me was the comparative ease with which they switched from their own personal situation to an analysis in terms of indicators, at least where they were practical and referable to their own experience. If you want to hear what they have to say, there's no point talking about statistical theory!

What kinds of indicators came out of these talks?

It is clear that people enduring poverty and social exclusion want quality indicators to be developed, especially as regards policy measures. One of these qualities is giving them the ability to choose, to be in charge of their own lives. They also stress that these measures must produce tangible results. So, access to care is vital to the homeless, because it really changes their life, whereas life expectancy



Saskia Richter

is a concept much too far-removed from their daily realities.

This exercise enabled us to fine-tune the Laeken indicators and put forward new ones, especially relating to participation, housing and health. So, for example, I could pick out discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin or fluency in the national language; whether there is a supportive network of relations or not; access to transport and social services; the number of homeless or in poor housing, or - in another sphere - debt problems and access to debt mediation services. In short, a list of more qualitative indicators to be used at all levels.

It all looks apt to have an effect on policy-making...

Well, apart from aiming to influence the Laeken indicators, we also want to push the right buttons in Germany. So we invited representatives of NGOs, the social partners, government departments and the European Commission to a conference that we called on 3 July. We're hopeful that it will pay off, especially as Germany's national action plan focused on national indicators, partly because national data are more recent than those to come out of the European surveys...

Interview: V.F.

EAPN Germany's report on the indicators (in German) is available from Saskia Richter, e-mail: richter@diakonie.de, Fax: +49 711 2159 165

Irish Presidency of the EU (1st semester of 2004) "Towards Greater Social Cohesion in an Enlarged Union"

By Mary Coughlan, TD Minister for Social and Family Affairs

Ireland's Presidency of the EU will oversee the formal and historic accession of ten new member states. Their accession will have a profound impact on the future shape of the European Union and will present major challenges - and not least of them will be the social challenges. I eagerly anticipate a packed and busy agenda during the Presidency and will set out here some of the priorities we see in 2004.

For our social policy during the Presidency we have adopted the working title of "Towards Greater social cohesion in an Enlarged Union". Reflecting one of the strategic goals up to 2010 adopted by the Lisbon Council we intend to provide renewed impetus to the Lisbon Agenda.

To achieve greater social cohesion we must combat poverty and social exclusion. Based on the National Action plans for social inclusion which have been submitted by EU Member States.

The second Joint Social Inclusion Report will be agreed between the Council of Ministers and the Commission and will be presented to the European Council at its Spring meeting. We will support an important initiative to improve the effectiveness of social policy input to the Spring Council.

A key feature of this social inclusion process at national level, particularly in Ireland, is a wide and ongoing consultation, with NGOs.

Our desire now would be to widen that consultation further to ensure that more people actually

experiencing poverty and social exclusion are included. I am, therefore, pleased that the Irish Presidency will host a third meeting in June 2004 of people experiencing poverty from EU countries - an annual initiative supported by the EU institutions. We are looking forward to working with the EU Commission, Belgium, the European Anti Poverty Network and other interested organisations in preparing an effective meeting. The aim will be to develop further ways of promoting the participation at all levels of people experiencing poverty and the structural networks to facilitate this. A particular objective will be to promote their involvement in the development of the NAPs Inclusion.



Mary Coughlan

The relative decline of our populations, our greying Europe and the expansion of the EU will force the issue of immigration to the fore in the coming years.

It is important to recognise that immigrants may face a high risk of poverty and social exclusion and to take the necessary measures to counter this.

Consequently, the Irish Presidency will host a conference which will focus on the

role of social and economic policies in achieving social inclusion and will take the theme "Reconciling mobility and social inclusion".

This will include exploring the reality of mobility in today's enlarged EU, the type of risks to social exclusion that immigrants moving within and from outside the EU encounter, and the need for integrated approaches within government, between

EAPN IRELAND'S PROFILE

EAPN Ireland is a network of 150 local and national non-governmental organisations working against poverty and social exclusion in Ireland. It was set up in 1990 to empower members, and the anti-poverty sector generally, to understand and influence EU policy and its implementation in Ireland.

EAPN Flash is adapted (with the addition of national news a) for circulation to more than 2,000 people; Network News is distributed to more than 500 people; more than 2,000 copies EAPN Ireland Review are produced, as well as briefing papers on particular issues. In addition EAPN Ireland organises training sessions and information activities around the country.

The main areas of work of EAPN Ireland match closely those of the European network: Social Inclusion, Employment, Structural Funds, Enlargement and the Future of Europe. A priority this year has been the Convention on the Future of Europe, where we played an important role in bringing social policy issues to the national debate.



Commemoration of the UN International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, Dublin, 17 October 2003

EAPN Ireland receives funding from the Combat Poverty Agency through its National Anti-Poverty Networks Programme and employs a staff of three.

EAPN Ireland is one of 26 members of the Community Platform, which is made up of national networks and organisations in the community and voluntary sector which are engaged in combating poverty and social exclusion and promoting equality and justice.

R. Hanan - B. Carty

receiving and sending countries and with the NGOs that work with immigrants and emigrants.

A major priority will be to work for the adoption by the Council and the European parliament of the proposals to simplify the EU regulations protecting social security and health care rights for workers moving within the EU.

Our Presidency will also be marked by a focus on family issues, as 2004 is the tenth anniversary of the UN International Year of the Family. "Families, change and social policy in Europe" will be the title of one of the first EU social policy conferences taking place after the formal accession of new member states in Dublin in May. Families as a focus of social inclusion and social cohesion will be on the central themes addressed.

And, finally, "Making Work Pay" - ensuring that social protection and work are mutually supportive - has been selected as the main theme for discussion at the Informal Council of Labour and Social Policy Ministers in Galway, in January.

This is one of the policy areas identified as part of the Lisbon Agenda for the modernisation of our social welfare systems. In March last the spring Council requested Member States "to undertake substantial benefit reforms, and to introduce incentives for entering the labour market". The Informal Council meeting will facilitate an initial political consideration of these issues by both Employment and Social Affairs Ministers.

Sophisticated strategies... but little impact

Ireland is one of the richest countries in Europe, but the low-tax regime contributes to one of the highest levels of poverty and some of the poorest social and public services in the European Union.

Recent years have seen a redistribution of wealth and power towards the rich and away from the poor, despite important achievements in social policy and economic growth and the reduction in unemployment.

Our equality legislation and anti-poverty strategies are among the most sophisticated in the EU, with committed experts in key Ministries and Agencies, but they have little impact on mainstream Government policies.

Ireland has had a National Anti Poverty Strategy (NAPS) since 1997. This includes a 'global' target to reduce poverty and a series of sectoral targets. Anti-Poverty NGOs were strongly involved in the

formulation of this strategy in 1997 and its review in 2002.

However, there is frustration that the targets, and the poverty-proofing mechanisms, seem to have little real impact on Government policies. This is also the pattern in the two NAPs Inclusion. The impressive consultation process and a well-structured Plan have not led to new resources to improve the lives of people living in poverty.

Finally, anti-poverty NGOs negotiated and endorsed two national partnership agreements, which provided resources for measures designed to reduce poverty and inequality.

However, the latest agreement (2003) involved no real negotiations on social issues and included no new resources for anti-poverty measures. It was rejected by the Community Platform, which brings together national anti-poverty networks.

R. Hanan - B. Carty

EAPN works for a society where the effective exercise of fundamental rights by all is a reality

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