

## Belgian political crisis creates social insecurity

**B**elgium has been at a political standstill since the federal elections in June 2007. It was not until mid-December 2007 that a caretaker government was put in place, tasked with paving the way for a definitive government in March 2008. No proper decisions have been or could be made in many areas, including social policies, during this interregnum. It has prevented a response being given to the Commission's 2nd round of minimum income consultations because the ministers concerned had no time to consider it.

The social climate in Belgium has become very fraught of late. Energy prices are inexorably rising. Research has shown that the cost of food and other basic items has risen 15% in a year while pay has gone up only by 2%. Rent and other housing costs (electricity, gas, and water) eat up 2/3 of minimum allowances, but are also near-unaffordable for those on lower incomes. All these factors have produced extreme disquiet among wide swathes of society (affecting many more people than just those living in poverty), resulting in a rash of strikes in industry and commerce, and widespread instability in the general economy. Meanwhile, a strong and proactive government is missing. Questions are put about Belgium's normally fairly stable social situation whenever members of the government or other prominent figures take the stage abroad.

This social insecurity – which hits those on minimum benefits hardest, as most are living in poverty - goes together with a growing tendency to “activate” minimum income claimants, holding them increasingly responsible for their own plight. In a prosperous economy with many jobs still going unfilled, anyone not in work is seen as failing to take up the available opportunities, and therefore to blame

for their own unemployment. The result is a “witch hunt” against anyone not in work.

In pursuit of the goal of an increased employment rate set by the EU, those unable to meet the fairly exacting demands of the labour market for a variety of reasons are put under pressure and penalised, up to and including forfeiting their minimum income entitlement. Meanwhile, undocumented entrants from Third World countries, and even from new member states, are treated as illegal aliens and locked up like criminals – including children – and forcibly removed to their country of origin even though research has shown that more foreign labour is needed to maintain current welfare levels. Even regional and national employers' associations are arguing for their situations to be regularised in order to address the labour shortage.

This social insecurity goes together with a growing tendency to “activate” minimum income claimants

But federal migration policy remains repressive, as if the only way to benefit the Belgian economy is by repatriating migrants. It is a policy directly at odds with the regional government approach where “...undocumented people must be able to effectively exercise all their rights and be offered significant future prospects”.

Ludo Horemans  
EAPN Belgium

Minimum Income schemes are a fundamental prerequisite for an EU based on social justice and equal opportunities for all!

N°125  
January-March 2008

printed  
in English and French  
and also available in other languages  
at [www.eapn.org](http://www.eapn.org)

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Network News aims to generate debates on specific themes. The views expressed are not necessarily those of EAPN. If you want to comment on the content of this issue, send an email to [team@eapn.skynet.be](mailto:team@eapn.skynet.be)



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# Network News



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE EUROPEAN ANTI POVERTY NETWORK

N°125 | JANUARY-MARCH | 2008

## EAPN CAMPAIGN FOR ADEQUATE MINIMUM INCOME SCHEMES

### CONTENTS

#### EAPN campaign on Minimum Income

<input type="checkbox"/> An overview of the EAPN campaign.....	2
<input type="checkbox"/> EAPN response to Commission's Active Inclusion consultation .....	2
<input type="checkbox"/> What does EAPN expect for this campaign?	3
<input type="checkbox"/> Minimum income schemes in the EU: Different realities.....	4
<input type="checkbox"/> Minimum Income: what are we speaking about? .....	4
<input type="checkbox"/> Minimum income schemes: Myths and realities .....	5
<input type="checkbox"/> How is it to live on minimum income? .....	5
<input type="checkbox"/> EAPN campaign: Interview with EAPN Austria and EAPN UK.....	6
<input type="checkbox"/> Hard talking about poverty .....	6

#### News from Belgium

<input type="checkbox"/> EAPN Belgium campaign on minimum income elicits positive response .....	7
<input type="checkbox"/> Spotlight on EAPN Belgium .....	7
<input type="checkbox"/> Belgian political crisis creates social insecurity .....	8



NOT EVERYONE  
HAS ACCESS TO A  
DIGNIFIED LIFE.

## Everyone deserves a decent life: an overview of the EAPN campaign for adequate minimum schemes

EAPN launched on 19 December 2007 an EU wide campaign for Adequate Minimum Income schemes. 24 out of 27 Member States have minimum income schemes in place at this present time, but there are serious flaws with their accessibility and their adequacy. It is time to state clearly that adequate Minimum Income schemes are a fundamental prerequisite for an EU based on social justice and equal opportunities for all!

### POTENTIAL NEW IMPETUS FOR SOCIAL EUROPE: EAPN RESPONSE TO COMMISSION'S ACTIVE INCLUSION CONSULTATION

The Commission published on 17 October 2007 - International day for the eradication of poverty - a Communication on "Modernizing social protection for greater social justice and economic cohesion: taking forward the active inclusion of people furthest from the labour market" .

It is the second phase of a consultation initiated in 2006, through which the Commission is promoting the notion of active inclusion, entailing the provision of an adequate level of income support with a link to the labour market, and a better access to services.

Under the French presidency in the second half of 2008, Member States will discuss the adoption of Common principles on Active Inclusion. In our response published on 28 February. EAPN welcomes this Commission consultation as an important and timely initiative, which raises positive expectations, at a time when we otherwise deplore the general political context at EU level which is not favourable to the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

We insist that active inclusion should really be understood and implemented as a whole, bearing in mind that its three components are strictly interdependent, and that adequate income and services are a prerequisite to employment/social integration.

EAPN also recommends that the implementation of Active Inclusion Principles is worked out through a strengthened Open Method of Coordination, a better consistency between the processes impacting on social inclusion, and concretely supported by the financial instruments. It also calls for EU guidance to ensure qualitative participation of anti poverty organisations and the people experiencing poverty as a continuous dynamic process.

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**M**inimum Income can be defined as a non contributory income guarantee that enables people who cannot fend for themselves, to receive a minimum amount of monetary income. Having sufficient money to live on is an essential prerequisite for a decent life even if poverty is not only about money. Minimum Income schemes are also the corner stone of social protection. In a framework of lack of progress in the fight against poverty there are 3 main reasons why EAPN wants to campaign now on Minimum Income.

**Minimum Income schemes are not accessible to all today and the levels are too low to allow for a decent standard of living**

Minimum income schemes do not exist in all EU countries. Italy, Greece and Hungary do not have such schemes organized at national level. Accessibility for all is not guaranteed in the places that they do exist. Some groups are not entitled to Minimum Income due to their age, employment situation, or status as migrants. Complexities of the systems prevent people from taking up their rights: the support schemes that do exist are often a complex, entangled mesh, which many find very difficult to traverse which acts as a barrier to claiming what is rightfully theirs. Minimum Income schemes are not set at a level adequate enough to lift people out of poverty. They do not take into account the rise in the cost of living nor the increasing price of services that people rely on, such as housing or energy. They fail to consider the reality of heavy financial deficit that people are often

forced to live with.

**Increased conditionality and compulsion are attached to the Minimum Income schemes with the aim to provide 'incentives' for people to work**

More and more conditions are being placed on receiving the minimum income /social welfare in an effort to force integration into the labour market. Benefits are reduced after a certain period, as an 'incentive' to become more active in finding employment. This results in making in some cases social benefits conditional on the take up of low quality jobs which do not correspond to personal competencies and needs. These sanctions are unfairly leaving people in situations where they receive no income at all to live on.

Minimum Income schemes are often not set at a level adequate enough to lift people out of poverty

Contrary to the populist beliefs which informs this compulsion approach, people do want to find work and be useful in their society but they are faced with many obstacles and barriers (such as lack of quality jobs, access to education and training etc, lack of support services like child and other care services) that prevent them from doing so.

**Lack of public and political recognition of the right to access minimum resources, due to negative images and false stereotypes**

There is a huge void in political and public recognition of this situation linked to the stigmatization of receiving benefits and the often false impressions that exist of people who

survive on this minimum income. Instead of being seen as essential for a decent society and a safeguard for all, available when necessary, it is seen as a hand out given to lazy people who have no intentions of finding work.

The access to minimum income is a social right and the pre-requisite for a dignified life. In a decent society, no individual – man, woman or child should be forced to live below the poverty threshold. The provision of minimum income in our society brings many positive things, not only does it provide a safeguard to those in precarious situations who are not able to work but provides people with the necessary security so that they can actively seek work, rather than having merely to struggle to survive. Without the provision of minimum income, poverty would be a much higher cost to society in terms of healthcare, education, public costs etc.

## Minimum income in the EU processes...

### 1992: a first step, but not enough...

The 24 June 1992, the European Council came to a momentous unanimous agreement to recognize the basic right of a person to sufficient resources and social assistance to live in a manner compatible with human dignity (Recommendation 92/441/EEC).

For years, EAPN has called for Minimum Income schemes to be based on fundamental rights, to be accessible for all, and to be set at a level allowing for a dignified life. EAPN has highlighted that such adequate minimum income should be implemented with the participation of people experiencing poverty themselves, within an integrated approach, ensuring that access to Adequate Minimum Income, access to decent jobs and access to quality services are developed and mutually reinforcing, whilst ensuring that adequate financial and other support is provided for people for whom work is not a option, due to family responsibilities, age, disability etc.

## The 'active inclusion' strategy: a welcome window of opportunity

Since February 2006 the Commission has been promoting a new Active inclusion approach defined as a comprehensive strategy containing 3 main elements: 1) A link to the labour market through job opportunities or vocational training 2) Income support at a level sufficient enough for a dignified life 3) Better access to services, to help labour market integration - child care services, healthcare, counselling, lifelong learning, ICT, flexible work arrangements... EAPN welcomes this holistic approach.

In the latest months, the EU Commission consulted Members States, Social Partners, the European Parliament and all stakeholders on more action at EU level for implementing this approach. Notably, the European Council could adopt by the end of 2008 a set of common principles on Active Inclusion.

We welcome this proposal, and we hope that it will be a driver for Member States to develop Adequate Minimum Incomes schemes likely to bring a real difference in the life of people experiencing poverty. This will not be easy in a context where employment is often considered as the only route out of poverty.

EAPN, will continue to be engaged in the policy debate regarding all aspects of Active Inclusion (see margin p.2), but we will also bring out this issue in a wider context, and continue through this campaign to raise consciousness that the lack of Adequate Minimum Income constitute an emergency in the European Union.

Claire Champeix  
EAPN Policy officer

For more information about the EAPN campaign and the campaign material available, go to: [http://www.eapn.org/code/en/news\\_detail.asp?pk\\_id\\_content=3130](http://www.eapn.org/code/en/news_detail.asp?pk_id_content=3130)

## WHAT DOES EAPN EXPECT FOR THIS CAMPAIGN?

EAPN thinks it is the perfect time to launch its campaign on minimum income. We have three objectives:

### Objective related to the policy processes

In the short term, we wanted Member States to get involved and respond positively in the Commission consultation process on Active inclusion which ended in February 2008. We now want to see the EU Member States to engage positively towards the elaboration of common principles on Active Inclusion due to be adopted by the end of 2008. We also want to see this Commission consultation process on 'Active Inclusion' paving the way towards more Member States action for insuring access to all to adequate minimum income, as well as debate at European Level on more bindings EU instruments.

### Objective related to awareness raising

We want to counter negative representations associated with poverty. People do not believe poverty is happening in our societies, often those experiencing poverty are seen as people who do not want to work, and the solution is to place more conditions on the receipt of benefits in order to force them to take up work. There is no understanding of what their reality is, and that other issues need to be addressed in order that they can fully participate in society they must have help first! We want to break through that perception.

### Objective related to the EAPN development

Through this campaign we try to elaborate a strong message that EAPN will use on a longer term. This campaign is also the start of a process of developing the capacity of campaigning of EAPN national networks and raise their profile as campaigning organizations.

## MINIMUM INCOME: WHAT ARE WE SPEAKING ABOUT?

**Social security and welfare benefits** is a name for the incomes provided by public authorities on various grounds: for sickness and disabilities, age, familial responsibility, unemployment etc. Some of these income supports are called **replacement benefits** since they replace income from work when people are unemployed. Benefits are organized on the basis of assurance or social assistance.

Minimum Incomes schemes are distinct from **minimum wage schemes** which offer employees a floor level of salary fixed by law or collective agreements.

Minimum Income provisions are social assistance schemes of last resort and are therefore a lifeline for the people in greatest poverty. Most EU Member States have some kind of Minimum Income scheme, though their accessibility and adequacy vary enormously. Most are not effective enough against poverty.

In 1992 the European Council recommended Member States to recognize the basic right of a person to "sufficient resources and social assistance to live in manner compatible with human dignity".

The levels of Minimum Income should be fixed, with the participation of people concerned, in relation to the national standard of adequacy and decency.

Minimum Income schemes should be complemented with quality accessible services and, for those people able to return to the labour market, positive actions to support them back into employment. This is why EAPN promotes the notion of Adequate Minimum Income for a dignified life.

## Minimum income schemes in the EU: Different realities

Almost all EU Member States have developed, although under different forms and with different timings, a universal social assistance scheme aimed at guaranteeing to all legal residents a minimum income to "live with dignity", whatever may be the national understandings of this concept of "living with dignity".

**T**here are only three countries in the EU where no universal guaranteed minimum income schemes (GMI) exist: Italy, Greece and Hungary. Nevertheless, in these countries reforms are being undertaken but their outcomes are unclear at the present stage.

### Basic principles: different national understandings...

If we look at the basic principles structuring GMI we can distinguish between different groups of countries:

A first group is constituted by countries where GMI schemes are aimed at providing a sufficient replacement income to maintain or reach living standards socially recognized as the necessary minimum to live a decent life (DE, AU, FI, SE, MT), some adding also explicitly to this formulation an objective of social integration (through activation) (DK, BE, L, NL, FR).

In another group of countries the aim of GMI schemes is more expressed in terms of subsistence minimum (ES, PT, SI, BG, RO, CZ, SK, EE) or targeted towards people or households in need (UK, IE, LV, PL).

Spain and Luxembourg are the only countries referring explicitly to the fight against poverty and social exclusion as the aim of their GMI schemes.

The means-testing of the benefits and the condition of active job search for those able to work are common to all the guaranteed minimum income schemes.

### The level of the benefits granted remains heterogeneous

Beyond these common characteristics the level of the benefits granted is quite heterogeneous in the EU. For a single individual (and without

taking into account the other social transfers) it could rank from 28 euros/month in Latvia to 1130 euros in Denmark.

But in some Member States, where the level of general scheme benefit is lower, it is supplemented by specific allowances for housing, health, family benefits or other allowances to bear costs of basic services (education, heating, gas-electricity, transportation).

In certain countries there are also specific GMI schemes for particular groups of the population such as old-age persons or invalids. The safety net may include access to specific services (legal counsel, over-indebted help) and sometimes to benefits in kind (food or clothes).

### Efficiency for fighting poverty?

Figures show that in every country of the EU the net income of social assistance recipients' households do not reach the poverty threshold of 60% median household income which is the EU reference poverty threshold. If we look at the equivalent 50% line it is only in a few countries that income of social assistance recipients' households are slightly above this limit. What is worrying is that even for the lowest poverty line of 40% median income, which represents situations of severe poverty from an income perspective, we found only a few countries where households living on social assistance have an income above this extreme limit.

Thus, it seems that income provided through GMI and social assistance schemes is not even sufficient to avoid situations of severe poverty, which is normally the minimal aim of these safety nets of last resort.

Audrey Gueudet, EAPN Information officer

This article is based on the report "Minimum income standards in enlarged EU: Guaranteed Minimum Income Schemes" drafted by Ramon Peña Casas [http://www.eapn.ie/pdfs/155\\_paper%20in%20enlarged%20EU.pdf](http://www.eapn.ie/pdfs/155_paper%20in%20enlarged%20EU.pdf)

## Minimum income schemes: Myths and realities

Many people fear adequate minimum incomes would remove work incentives, and paying adequate minimum wages would be unprofitable for business and damage the national economy. EAPN asked John Veit-Wilson, an internationally recognized expert on this subject, to respond to some commonly-heard objections to adequate minimum income schemes.

### Higher Minimum Income would reduce the incentive to work by reducing the gap between social welfare benefits and minimum wages

The idea that people choose between employment or welfare benefits on the basis of narrow calculations is simply an economic theory unsupported by real-world evidence. In fact, most people who can work try to find employment which pays enough to keep themselves and their families out of poverty. Many people who cannot enter the paid labour market because of their youth, family responsibilities, disabilities or age, equally need adequate minimum incomes.

When society fails to protect people against poverty by ensuring adequate minimum incomes both in and out of work, it not only damages them and harms their children and other dependents as well, if they have them, but it creates long-term costs for society and the economy as a whole, such as ill-health and loss of working capacity.

### Raising Minimum Income would lead to increased benefit fraud and make the system unmanageable.

Most of the wrong payments made in social assistance are caused by errors rather than by fraud (evidence from the UK National Audit Office). Many of these errors are made by the administrative staff themselves, because the systems are so complicated that not even the staff can get benefit payments right, and this often leads to claimants getting less than they have a right to, rather than too much.

If there are incentives to unjustified claims for social assistance, it is because claimants have too little money to live on decently. Many existing systems of social assistance are so

administratively under-funded that they are not at present managed according to their goals. Higher benefit levels, simpler entitlements and better staffing would all make the systems both more effective in achieving their goals and more efficient in using their resources.

### If the level of Minimum Income is raised, workers will demand that low wages are also raised, and business enterprises cannot afford to pay more. To be competitive, we must adapt and reduce the welfare state.

Once again, this argument is based on oversimplified economic theory, and the evidence shows that higher levels of minimum wages are compatible in EU member states with high growth and stable economies, and with lower levels of inequality and better welfare states. Workers should always be paid wages at decency levels.

Why should those workers earning the lowest incomes have to carry the burden of keeping the national economy secure for the benefit of the whole of society? If raising their earnings to decency levels has economic consequences, the costs of work which benefits society should be carried by those with the greatest resources to bear them, not by those with the least. If enterprises really cannot afford decency level wages for those who earn the least, then it is right that those who earn more than the least should contribute (through taxation on incomes and profits) to the resources of the welfare state.

More answers to commonly-heard arguments are available on the EAPN website: [www.eapn.org](http://www.eapn.org)

More information about income adequacy is also available on John Veit-Wilson's website: [www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/veit-wilson](http://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/veit-wilson)

When society fails to protect people against poverty [...], it creates long-term costs for society and the economy as a whole

## HOW IS IT TO LIVE ON MINIMUM INCOME?

"The way people look at you is humiliating. You are not considered a human being."

"The problem is not that we run out of money occasionally; the real problem is that we live our entire lives that way and our children grow up into this too."

"I can't be sociable. My self-confidence is ruined, because every day I must worry about the next day."

"I have lost friends as I cannot participate in their activities."

"I had my income reduced due to a ceiling of social welfare after 6 months. This means that now I don't have enough money to buy food in the last week of the month."

Quotations from the Report of 5th Meeting of People experiencing Poverty, Austrian Presidency of the EU, 2006 and "Voices from the Poverty Line", EAPN 2006. These documents are available on the EAPN website: [www.eapn.org](http://www.eapn.org)

## HARD TALKING ABOUT POVERTY...

The campaign for a decent minimum income is a new departure for EAPN. While it – and especially the campaign image available on page one – were being developed, many different questions cropped up, not least how to put our message over without stigmatizing people experiencing poverty?

Our contacts with different service providers, both for this campaign and other projects, have time and again shown us how uninformed people – not least in the media and broader society – are about poverty.

There is a big job of groundwork to do informing people about the many faces of poverty and social exclusion to dispel all the mental images that “poverty” conjures up.

The first thing is to get people clear about the scale of poverty in our countries. The knee-jerk reaction is to deny the facts. How could one of the world’s richest regions have so many living in poverty?

The next thing is to explain that there is no undifferentiated mass of “the poor”, but rather different individuals living different lives with different problems, so it is meaningless to try and put a single face on poverty.

Finally, we need to reverse the negative image that poverty is often saddled with. People affected by poverty are often blamed for their own plight. The emphasis on “individual responsibility” as an explanation in the public debate seems to be rising as that on “injustice” fades rapidly.

Audrey Guedet  
Communication Officer (EAPN)

## The EAPN campaign on Minimum Income in the National Networks: Interview with EAPN Austria and EAPN UK

### EAPN Austria: Minimum security needs more than a certain minimum income per month!

A new minimum income system is about to be introduced at the beginning of 2009. It is meant to improve the social assistance system, that currently varies from one federal state to the other. It is a means tested system, thus beneficiaries will need to be available to the labour market in case they are regarded as ‘employable’.

While the new system partly has included elements that have been demanded by EAPN Austria for many years, there are also still many concerns, especially with regards to its implementation. EAPN Austria is mainly worried how – and by whom - employability and need will be tested and has been criticizing the lack of concepts on how to better include those who are most distant from the labour market.

Using the EAPN campaign visual, EAPN Austria will launch a campaign that raises attention to the fact that minimum security needs more than a certain minimum income per month but also depends on the labour market policies, which should provide good quality work with minimum salaries instead of forcing people into any kind of job at any price.

EAPN Austria will also stress the necessity of good social infrastructures that guarantee access to high quality social services to everyone. And the need for a better qualification and specific training programmes for those working at social and labour market service centres. Less humiliation of people experiencing poverty and more respect are needed! The campaign was presented to the Austrian president in early March.

Michaela Moser  
EAPN Austria

### EAPN UK: Let’s Put Adequate Minimum Income on the Political Agenda

The campaign for an adequate minimum income is going to be a long hard fought battle – but one that must be won. The experience of campaigners in the UK has highlighted the difficulties we face and focussed our attention on the need to win over our networks and supportive organisations to gain public support for an adequate minimum income for all.

From 2003 we showed through our Peanuts4Benefits campaign that benefits were rising at a percentage rate not only less than average wages but less than inflation. The government’s response was, and is, to concentrate on increasing employment rates. However, they only aim to achieve an 80% employment rate and so millions will be reliant on benefits.

A systematic propaganda campaign from all governments over the last 30 years has presented most benefit claimants as scroungers whose poverty is largely their own fault. Far from promoting an adequate minimum income governments have fostered an environment where many people say that claimants should get nothing unless they commit to help themselves or undertake “community work” for their benefits.

This is despite studies showing that in order to be able to access a healthy lifestyle a single person would need double the benefits that they presently receive.

EAPN’s Minimum Income campaign is a great boost to campaigners in the UK. The campaign materials produced will be invaluable in convincing organisations that we can change opinions and that the issue is one common to all networks across Europe.

We have no illusions about the size of the task that confronts us but if we fight we might win. If we don’t then we will certainly lose.

Colin Hampton, EAPN UK

## EAPN Belgium campaign on minimum income elicits positive response

The Belgian Network has been actively taking EAPN Europe's minimum income campaign forward in recent months.

**T**he Belgian Network and its regional networks ran a letter-writing campaign towards the relevant federal and regional ministers, and encouraged a range of organizations and individuals to follow suit. We used the French material, translating the leaflet and letters into Dutch and adding a list of the ministers involved. The Belgian Network itself also wrote to all federal and regional ministers, political party leaders and Belgian MEPs.

The campaign could have been ramped up even further by forewarning all the organisations and contacting key ministers or their assistants personally. Time is the biggest enemy here: the Belgian Network has no staff, other than one person temporarily budgeted specifically to prepare the European Meeting of people experiencing poverty.

We had much positive feedback, like the message of support for our demands on the Commission consultation from the leader of the Flemish liberal party, as well as congratulations on the campaign and expressions of support from the Belgian Representation to the EU, the federal social integration agency, and Green and socialist MEPs.

The Belgian government's response to the European Commission's Communication on active inclusion was discussed at our quarterly meetings with the federal social integration agency, when the agency pledged to make contact with other departments in a bid to get a positive response. Unfortunately, problems in putting a new federal government together prevented the ministers involved from replying in time, so the Belgian Representation to the EU volunteered to keep working for

a positive Belgian response. We have sent them the EAPN position. The Belgian Network also asked the Social Integration Minister to take the matter forward personally and make sure that a response goes in to the European Commission, even after the deadline. Hopefully, the final result will be as positive as in the 1st round in 2006.

The Belgian Network has also proposed adding minimum income to the topics that will go into the next Strategic Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2008-2011. Practically, we want all minimum allowances to be brought up to at least the poverty line level. This suggestion was taken up in the NAP 2006-08, but only for minimum pensions, arguing the moral unacceptability of the state forcing people with no other means of income to live below the poverty line.

We argued that what holds good for minimum pensions also holds good for all sub-poverty minimum allowances. Our case was accepted and supported by all participants, and will be proposed at the inter-ministerial conference on social integration that will decide on the new strategic report. And this is something we will be following up at the fortnightly meetings of the "Actions" Working Group of the Strategic Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion.

Ludo Horemans  
EAPN Belgium

## SPOTLIGHT ON EAPN BELGIUM

Mirroring the Belgian federal set-up, the activities of the Belgian Anti-Poverty Network (Belgisch Network Armoedebestrijding - EAPN Belgium) are split up between 3 regional groupings: the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels networks.

Federal government and European-level policy issues are monitored and addressed by the Belgian Network, which keeps the regional network member organizations briefed on EU policy developments.

The Belgian Network's European Policy Working Group handles the national preparations for the annual European Meeting of people experiencing poverty. This is done through 5 national meetings and a series of regional meetings attended by people experiencing poverty and representatives from various federal agencies. The Group also takes part in several larger-scale briefing and discussion forums each year on federal and European policy developments.

EAPN Belgium leverages these internal network activities in meetings alongside other players of the "Actions" working group set up by the Belgian federal government to prepare the Report on social protection and social inclusion strategy. The Belgian Network also has quarterly meetings with the Belgian Social Integration Agency to discuss the process and progress on tackling poverty and general government policy.

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