

## **The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU2020 (Brussels, 14-15 January 2014)**

### **Effective stakeholder engagement and the participation of people experiencing poverty in policy<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **1. Introduction**

In the EU we are going through a period of growing discontent with serious questions being asked about the democratic deficit at EU and Member State level. There is a complete agreement on the failure to deliver on the Europe 2020 target on poverty and social exclusion, with poverty levels growing, but little sense of urgency about finding real solutions. There is also a growing sense of frustration and anger among people experiencing poverty and their organisations that their voice is not being heard and that it is not valued in informing the policies and solutions to the problems that face us.

As the EU Year of Active Citizenship ended in 2013 and we enter the year of EU elections in 2014, when people will have some say on the future of the EU, it is essential that at EU and Member State level that more than lip service is paid to stakeholder engagement and that it is essential that the issue of democratic deficit is addressed so that people can have a real chance to have a say and inform how we can develop a more equal and social Europe.

EAPN therefore welcomes this Peer Review on the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020. This Peer Review is critical in drawing attention to the need to make progress on the key issue of stakeholder engagement and in particular the participation of people experiencing poverty in EU Policy and specifically the Europe 2020 semester process, the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion, and now in the Social Investment Package.

The Discussion Paper presents the EU policy context, and clearly highlights the important role that stakeholder engagement can play in the development of better policies. Despite the increasing emphasis on stakeholder engagement in Europe 2020 the evidence shows that in many countries this engagement has in fact been limited and of poor quality.

This peer review offers an opportunity to look at and discuss an example of stakeholder engagement and how it can be strengthened but also how we can strengthen stakeholder engagement more broadly in tackling poverty and social exclusion through the Europe 2020 strategy. In particular it is an opportunity to look at how we can ensure the meaningful participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and their organisations in this process.

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The discussion paper and its Annex clearly outline the evolution that has taken place in terms of governance and stakeholder involvement in the development of policies to address poverty and social exclusion. EAPN has consistently placed a large focus on the participation of people experiencing poverty and their organisations in this engagement. From our perspective this engagement was at its strongest in the initial years of the development of the social Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the Lisbon strategy. The Common Objectives included a clear objective on mobilisation of all stakeholders including people experiencing poverty as part of the process of developing and monitoring the implementation of the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion. This objective was based on the clear understanding that effective policy to address poverty and social exclusion could only be developed through this mobilisation and engagement. One of the overarching Objectives for the National Action Plans for Social Protection and Social Inclusion from 2006-2010 was 'Good governance, transparency and the involvement of stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring of policy'.

Putting in place the EU Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty in 2001, based on a national preparation process, became an integral part of the EU social inclusion process. Over the years a lot of learning has taken place in how these meetings can have an impact as an effective part of the social inclusion process. However, while the Meetings will continue into 2014 their future is increasingly uncertain, with less support from the European Commission, weaker political commitment, and a lack of clarity as to what formal role the Meetings have in informing the decision making process.

EAPN continued to promote and monitor engagement and the participation of people experiencing poverty throughout the Lisbon OMC process. We have continued this role since the beginning of the Europe 2020 Strategy (particularly the NRPs and CSRs) and also in the National Social Reports coordinated by the Social Protection Committee.

EAPN's latest analysis of participation in the 2013 NRPs drew the conclusion that 'although some consultation processes took place in several countries, overall participation in the NRPs 2013 has been extremely weak, as in 2012<sup>2</sup>'.

In the following section of the report we will present some of the opportunities for strengthening stakeholder engagement and participation of people experiencing poverty and their organisations in the Europe 2020 process.

## **2. Engagement throughout the Europe 2020 Semester by all Member States**

Stakeholder engagement should be continuous throughout all elements of the European Semester process and not only limited to one or two key moments. The European Commission is increasingly recognising the importance of this engagement, although primarily as a way of getting support for its economic reforms. While this is a narrow perspective on stakeholder engagement it provides an opportunity for developing more meaningful participation in the Europe 2020 semester process. The recent Annual Growth

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<sup>2</sup> Widening the Gap: EAPN Assessment of the National Reform Programmes 2013, September 2013. <http://www.eapn.eu/images/stories/docs/NRPs/2013-EAPN-NRP-Report.pdf>



Survey 2014 highlights the need to develop greater national ownership of the Europe 2020 process. It recognises that in order to increase this ownership and bring democratic legitimacy, engagement is needed with National Reform Programmes and the Country Specific Recommendations. The AGS specifically mentions the need for greater involvement of national parliaments, social partners and civil society in these areas. The AGS proposals need to be acted on across the EU Member States but also at EU institutional level. This must be done in a meaningful way based on real engagement whereby stakeholders must have a real opportunity to impact on the policies. The establishment of national platforms against poverty, linked to the European Platform, can play an important role here. This can also stimulate the involvement of national and regional parliaments. It is critical that this engagement is applied in the area of social inclusion and not only economic governance as currently envisaged in the AGS.

As highlighted in the discussion paper much improvement is needed at national level to improve on stakeholder engagement and the participation of people experiencing poverty and their organisations in the NRP and in the National Social Reports, when they are carried out. This is particularly important in relation to the social targets but also across all elements of the NRP, including in macro-economic areas as it is clear that social goals can only be achieved if economic policy is consistent with achieving these same goals.

EAPN has also protested against the exclusion of Member States with Memorandums of Understanding with the European Commission from the full Europe 2020 process and its targets. This has not only been very damaging in terms of the policies being pursued which were inconsistent with the goal of reducing poverty and social exclusion but also undermined the process of stakeholder engagement and democratic principles.

### **Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs)**

An area where stakeholder engagement needs to be increased is in the involvement of national actors is the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs).

The CSRs are key in informing the types of policies the EU wants to see implemented in each Member State in order to meet their commitments under Europe 2020 and Growth and Stability processes. EAPNs analysis to date is that while the CSRs have begun to include more social Recommendations they are still overly focused on macro-economic goals, often to the detriment of the social targets. EAPN, along with other organisations have begun to proactively engage with the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs). In 2012 and 2013 EAPN members proposed their own CSRs and these have been compiled and debated at EU level. EAPN as part of an Ad-hoc Alliance of NGOs presented their joint CSRs at a joint hearing in the European Parliament. This engagement in the development of CSRs needs to be expanded at national and EU level both in their development and then in their implementation. At national level the new European Semester Officers based in each Member States' Commission offices could play an important role in coordinating this engagement. Although their function is not clear beyond economic governance they could play a key role in helping to coordinate engagement and participation at the national level with national governments and stakeholders.



## **European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion**

The European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion is one of the seven Flagship Initiatives adopted in 2011 as part of the Europe 2020 strategy. One of the actions of the Platform relates to 'working in partnership with civil society to support more effectively the implementation of social policy reforms.' It emphasises that 'The participation of people experiencing poverty is now acknowledged as a catalyst for inclusion strategies'.

The Communication on the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion<sup>3</sup> stated that "NGOs have become essential actors in the fight against poverty and social exclusion and engage in regular dialogue with public authorities". It highlighted that "The participation of people experiencing poverty is acknowledged as a paramount objective of inclusion policies, both as a tool for individual empowerment and a governance mechanism". However it recognised that this partnership was uneven and at risk and therefore needed to be strengthened. As an action to addressing this Communication included a commitment to developing voluntary guidelines on stakeholders' involvement and to promote their implementation at national, regional and local level. This was included each year in the work programme for the Platform, but appears as postponed each year. The July 2013 report on ongoing actions under the Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion states the commitment to producing these guidelines is delayed<sup>4</sup>. These guidelines, if developed in consultation with the relevant stakeholders including people experiencing poverty and social exclusion would have provided clarity as to how the platforms could have been developed. EAPN has presented and lobbied strongly for its vision for how this could be developed. This vision was that the Commission should encourage Member States to establish a national platform against poverty which involves people experiencing poverty and anti-poverty NGOs, which would provide a forum for structured dialogue. Representatives from the national platforms, including people with direct experience of poverty, would then participate in the Annual Convention of the Platform against Poverty to exchange on progress and recommendations. National platforms could also provide a framework for into National Reform Programmes, National Social Reports and other areas of national policy development. The lack of such a structure for stakeholder engagement is a major weakness in the current implementation of Europe 2020 and in the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

## **Social Investment Package**

As highlighted in the Discussion Paper the launch of the Social Investment Package was a significant development in relation to social policy in 2013 and it reinforced the central role of stakeholder engagement. Member States are urged to strengthen the involvement of stakeholders at all levels, most notably with social partners and civil society organisations. The accompanying Commission Staff Working Paper on the implementation of the 2008 Active Inclusion Recommendation is more explicit and while highlighting some positive examples is generally critical of Member States engagement with stakeholders to date stating that there was 'no involvement or very little involvement to date'. As a result it recommends that Member States' "Engage relevant actors more vigorously in the development, implementation, and assessment of policies".

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<sup>3</sup> <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:0758:FIN:EN:PDF>

<sup>4</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=10456&langId=en>



It explicitly names those affected by poverty and social exclusion, civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations among the key actors to be engaged. This critical assessment by the Commission is extremely important as it highlights the gap that exists between the statements or ambition in terms of stakeholder engagement and participation of those impacted on by policy and the reality which in most cases involves a lack of any meaningful participation. However, the focus on stakeholder involvement in the SIP is primarily focussed at EU level in the EU stakeholder meetings, and the new SIP Road Map published in November 2013, makes no mention of the follow up of guidelines or this engagement.

### **3. The value of meaningful engagement**

As mentioned earlier we are at a key moment in EU history, where many are questioning the democratic balance in the EU with a shift in power towards stronger Member States and with its more vulnerable citizens feeling like they have even less of a say in their own lives. The EU needs to address this growing democratic deficit. Developing meaningful stakeholder engagement is therefore crucial across all policy areas at EU and Member State level.

The Discussion Paper presents nine reasons why stakeholder engagement is important in the development of policy to combat poverty and social exclusion. It clearly highlights that this engagement not only improves the quality of policies throughout the policy cycle but that it also enhances the legitimacy, ownership and democratic value of the policies. It also emphasises that the inclusion of people affected by the policies in the development of policies is recognition of their right to be consulted, and particularly for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion that it empowers them as active citizens.

People experiencing poverty and their representatives have an expertise that often policy makers don't have. This is complementary knowledge that can make policies more effective and efficient. Civil society very often works across sectors, promoting a comprehensive approach to sustainability of society and the well-being of its people. As administrative bodies are often limited in scope vis-à-vis other authorities, the holistic understanding and information from the ground that civil society brings to decision-making contributes to political responses that fit a strategic approach.

By giving a voice to those who are directly affected by policy-making, including in particular people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, governments, local authorities and agents, public bodies, business and any relevant actors whose decision impact on people's lives will not only benefit from the input and expertise of civil society organisations but this will also help strengthen the effectiveness of their policy responses and actions they undertake and ensure that the measures adopted will deliver better social inclusion, social protection, labour markets etc. In the time of crisis, amplified by the environmental and demographic ageing, such broad participation of citizens representing different population and age groups and their organisations will help reflect more accurately the needs and expectations of our diverse societies. Engaging in debate with grass-roots stakeholders can help to forge a consensus about the causes of the problems, the characteristics and the solutions. Being prepared to develop policies together, to acknowledge the difficulties and challenges, creates more trust and makes



citizens' feel that governments are more accountable to them for the decisions they take. Effective stakeholder consultation contributes to addresses the above-mentioned democratic deficit, by bringing decision-making closer to citizens. This helps to enhance their legitimacy.

The emphasis on engagement throughout the policy cycle is crucial from policy design through implementation to monitoring and evaluation. EAPN has highlighted the importance of poverty impact assessment of policies at their design stage i.e. identifying clearly the problems to be addressed, evaluating existing policies and proposing adaptations or new approaches that can be more effective. While there is little indication of the process itself being implemented in Member States it is crucial that as it does develop that there is effective engagement by people experiencing poverty and their organisations in the process. This must be done in a way which is workable but also effective in informing policy. It must also apply not just to social policy but also to other relevant policy areas including economic policy and the national budget process.

Anti-poverty and social inclusion organisations also have a key role to play in implementing projects. As organisations working directly in and with communities experiencing poverty and social exclusion they are often best placed to implement projects in a way which best meets the needs of these communities. While ownership of the projects remains with the community it is essential that these projects are closely developed in coordination with public service providers and linked to improving mainstream provision.

Getting stakeholders actively involved can also be one of the best ways of publicising and giving visibility to EU and national strategies e.g. Europe 2020 – as they can publicise them through their own communication tools, social media and in their advocacy and representation work. As visibility increases – so does public awareness of the issues, the constraints and the solutions.

In 2009 EAPN published 'Small Steps- Big Changes, Building Participation of People Experiencing Poverty'. This publication highlights the importance of meaningful participation and how it can be made a reality. It emphasises the role the meaningful participation of people experiencing poverty and their organisations plays in bringing about better policy outcomes and ownership. The book draws on a range of practical examples from EAPN members across the EU to illustrate its point.

The beginning of the book presents the Framework for participation in decision-making which was presented in the EU funded Mainstreaming Social Inclusion project carried out by the Combat Poverty Agency of Ireland and in which members of EAPN participated. This framework is highlighted in the Discussion paper. The stages of involvement as outlined in the framework range from no-information through information, consultation, participation to co-decision making. From this framework it is important to highlight the important place of information provision and consultation, but that these in themselves are not full participation. The difficulty is that in many cases this is what participation is limited or reduced to. According to the framework participation 'recognises the contribution made by all the stakeholders in the decision-making process equally and it provides individuals and groups with the ability to influence the process and to have their



views incorporated in the final outcomes'. Joint decision making is at the higher level of participation and will result in better decisions and greater ownership by those involved.

As a step towards strengthening decision making processes the European Commission should apply social innovation to looking at how to enhance stakeholder engagement in joint decision making. This would involve learning from existing examples of joint decision making and identifying policy areas or pilot projects which would be developed or enhanced through a process of shared ownership and joint decision making involving people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and their organisations. The learning from these should then inform how to strengthen more collaborative processes for decision making.

EAPN is currently working on a Handbook on Stakeholder Engagement which will be completed in the first half of 2014. This handbook will spell out in greater detail the value of stakeholder engagement, and in particular the participation on people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and their organisations illustrated with examples from across the EU. This handbook will provide common principles, concrete tools and tips to help policy makers take the important step to set in practice effective stakeholder dialogue, drawing on concrete inspiring practice – at the EU, national and sub-national level. The handbook will be an important contribution to enhancing the quality of stakeholder engagement at EU and Member State level.

#### **4. Key Elements for a successful approach**

The discussion paper presents a number of key elements for a successful approach to stakeholder engagement. These elements cover a range of crucial areas that have to be considered both if there is to be a real impact on outcomes in relation poverty and social exclusion and if people experiencing poverty and social exclusion are to be able to meaningfully engage in the process.

The outlined approach includes the key elements:

- political leadership and commitment to the process and its outcomes,
- that involvement of social stakeholders must not limited solely to social policy but include engagement on economic and environmental policy;
- there must be a formal structure, a clear remit and involve a broad range of stakeholders so as to ensure an in-depth discussion and a multi-dimensional approach and ownership;
- the process itself must allow time for meaningful engagement, invest in participation and involve open, transparent and accountable ways of working,
- demonstrate and can give feed-back on the impact, make outcomes visible and involve ongoing monitoring and evaluation.
- Invest in capacity building of administration, decision-makers and stakeholders- to learn more about each other, but also to develop their skills for participating better in this kind of processes.

While all of the above points are crucial to the effectiveness of participation of people experiencing poverty and their organisations it is important to emphasise some of them.

Where consultation processes do take place, including in relation to the NRPs and National Social Reports, the issue of impact is one which consistently arises for EAPN



members. This is also a question which arose in the 2007 Peer Review of Ireland's Social Inclusion Forum and again arises in relation to this review of the Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion. While recognising the value of dialogue at consultation events a lack of clarity on the impact undermines participation. At times a lack of any visible impact can give participants the impression that their input or participation is only an information or public relations exercise, ticking a box but not taken seriously or valued. This is particularly critical in relation to the participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion where the outcomes can have a direct impact on themselves and their community. A negative experience can foster disillusionment with engagement and distrust with government more generally. This can even be seen in the low voter turnout by people from communities experiencing poverty and social exclusion in elections, primarily due to the belief that their vote will not make a difference on their own lives. A focus on impact and on transparency in decision making must therefore be built in from the beginning of the stakeholder engagement and participation process. This includes:

- providing clarity on the actual potential of the process impacting on policy and its implementation;
- providing a clear strategic overview on the dialogue process, objectives/process and outcomes with a clear timeline;
- as much as possible providing feedback to participants on the impact of their engagement;
- where possible annexing stakeholder views in a transparent form (e.g. in France annexing stakeholder views to the NRPs);
- carrying out a regular evaluation with all stakeholders involved on how the process is working and what are the results.

While recognising the importance of a range of relevant stakeholders being involved in stakeholder events it is also key that the different levels of power which these stakeholders possess. While the outcomes of stakeholder engagement processes will often have a more direct impact on people experiencing poverty and social exclusion they usually have less control over the outcomes. This can inform how the stakeholders relate to each other. Some stakeholders may be much more familiar with meetings, conferences and to the language that is used. Some stakeholders e.g. business organisations and larger associations, have more resources to support their involvement in policy making compared to anti-poverty NGOs and can therefore have a greater opportunity to impact on decisions and outcomes. These are important issues to be addressed in planning and carrying out policy making and stakeholder engagement processes so that all participants have the opportunity to engage equally.

Ensuring that different stakeholders can participate effectively involves recognising that different methodologies are needed to support this participation. Ensuring the effective engagement of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion requires that adequate time is given to understanding of the issues and to respecting people's contributions. It will require good facilitation and less formal and more creative meeting and workshop techniques, working in small groups, etc. Crucially, if people are to participate in a larger or more centralised event it will require adequate time for preparation and working collectively in advance to prepare for this event.



Effective engagement of people experiencing poverty and their organisations in the development of national policy is only really possible if there is on-going support for local community organisations and their regional & national networks to work to empower people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to work collectively to impact on decisions and policies that affect their lives. It takes time and resources to build the capacity of people to participate in this way. Through this involvement many people become empowered to engage in wider consultations including those at national or EU level. Member States need to value and support this collective and advocacy approach as a basis for strong participative democracy and better policy outcomes. Supporting this process must be recognised as a matter of social investment in peoples' social and economic inclusion and that this investment is even more crucial at times of austerity. Unfortunately during the current economic crisis the opposite view has been taken across the EU. Resources to support participation and advocacy, where they did exist, have been greatly reduced. This also needs to be carried through to the adequate funding of EU anti-poverty networks to support engagement at this level.

While long term funding is essential for community development organisations to support capacity building and participation it is also essential for resources to be made available to ensure people can actively participate in specific participation events or processes. This includes funding for preparatory meetings and events and covering the costs of care, travel, etc. so that people are not prevented from taking part because of the direct costs involved. The issue of investing in capacity building is highlighted in relation to the Belgian Platform.

Crucially there is a need for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of stakeholder engagement and participation processes to ensure that they are effective and are meeting the agreed objectives. This should include a focus on impact. The importance of evaluation was highlighted in relation to the 2007 Peer Review of the Irish Social Inclusion Forum.

### **Examples of EAPN engagement**

Despite the weakness of stakeholder engagement throughout the Europe 2020 process EAPN members throughout the EU have continued to strive to develop and improve participation and engagement. In order to support the development of this engagement EAPN produced a Toolkit in early 2013 to support engagement in the process<sup>5</sup>. The following were some of the positive examples of engagement highlighted in the Toolkit.

**EAPN Germany** produced their own shadow report in 2012, on both wealth and poverty. This was timed to coincide with the release of the German Poverty and Wealth Report. The Network printed 20,000 copies, out of which 5,000 were sold on the street in a magazine/street paper format, in cooperation with Street Papers organisation, for the modest price of €1.50 each. The rest of the reports have been sent to key contacts and decision-makers, as well as to all EAPN Germany member organisations. The report was well taken up by the media as well, with 700 articles dedicated to the phenomenon, and it was also well picked-up at the EU level. For the Network, it was a very useful

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.eapn.eu/images/stories/docs/EAPN-position-papers-and-reports/2013-eapn-toolkit-stakeholder-involvement.pdf>



experience on how to work together with experts and people with direct experience of poverty, and on how to engage the general public on the issues.

**EAPN France** has contributed to the Opinion of the National Council for the Fight against Poverty and Social Exclusion. The opinion followed the structure of the NRP. This Opinion was attached in its entirety to the 2012 National Reform Programme sent to the European Commission. Thus, all their demands clearly appear in this Opinion. While it was not clear what was taken into account from this annex, it was still considered as a step forward.

**EAPN Luxembourg** reported that Caritas Europe, which is a member of EAPN, developed, together with their members, an alternative shadow National Reform Programme since 2011. Twenty three national Caritas organisations produced a country summary, following the format of the NRP, and made contributions on recent trends, policy developments and challenges to meet the targets, in 3 core areas: employment, education and poverty reduction, with recommendations.

**EAPN Denmark** started engaging as early as 2006, through awareness-raising projects on the National Action Plans, and conferences on poverty in Denmark. It developed a network of interested parties, including NGOs, civil servants, politicians from both sides of the spectrum. The European Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion in 2010 allowed for broadening the alliances and intensify the activities. Currently EAPN Denmark represents the civil society in the Government's advisory board for the Europe 2020 Strategy. There is a hearing process, including meetings, providing opportunities for input. Proposals have no effect immediately, but might have some impact on upcoming plans and reports. The Network proposed to the Government to support a stronger OMC, including shadow reports, awareness programmes, local and national activities.

Following the publication of NRPs in 2013 EAPN carried out an analysis of the NRPs including and analysis of stakeholder engagement. While the overall findings were negative, as highlighted earlier, there were some positives which can be built on.

**In Denmark**, an EAPN member is part of a contact Committee together with some 30 other organisations having short informal meetings with the Minister.

**In Germany**, stakeholders' engagement resulted in the extension of the NRP poverty section from half a page up to 3 pages. Furthermore, a discussion about the modification of the poverty reduction aim, starting from 2015, was announced.

**In Luxembourg** a standing Committee has been set up which is working with the Ministry of Family, and sub working groups have been created. Unfortunately the report highlights that even though one sub group has been focusing on homelessness, the NRP does not mention any action on housing.

## 5. Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020



The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020 is an important example of consultation on the poverty and social inclusion elements of the Europe 2020. It brings together a broad range of stakeholders to develop and monitor policy proposals to address poverty and social exclusion in Belgium as well as providing a forum to monitor and prepare for engagement in the EU Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion. A particular focus for the Platform is to support stakeholder engagement with the National Reform Programme and National Social Report.

The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020 meets 3-4 times a year, involving around 40 people. While it aims to bring together stakeholders from all levels of governance and a mix of public and private organisations it also works to actively support the engagement of people living in poverty and their organisations, especially the Belgian Anti-Poverty Network (BAPN). The Belgian Platform reports to the Interministerial Conference on Social Integration and secretariat support for the Platform is provided by the Federal Public Service for Social Integration.

An Open Platform Day is also planned to take place every two years. The first of these look place in March 2013 with approximately 150 attendees representing a similar broad range of stakeholders. These Open Platform Days focus on priority policy themes within separate working groups. In 2013 the opinions from the working groups on these themes were provided to the Belgian State Secretary for Social Integration and to the Prime Minister.

The Platform evolved from the Actions Working Group which was put in place during the period of the Lisbon Strategy to support the development, monitoring and evaluation of the Belgian National Action Plan for Social Inclusion. In developing the Platform learning from the 2007 Peer Review of the Irish Social Inclusion Forum was taken on board.

### **Analysing the Belgian Platform**

The Host Country Paper clearly presents a range of the preconditions necessary for the effective functioning of the Belgian Platform and also a summary of an informal joint analysis of the Platform carried out by the BAPN Europe 2020 Working Group and also the results of a formal online survey carried out by the Federal Public Service for Social Integration. This makes it possible to analyse the strengths of the Platform while also identifying areas that need to be addressed. It also allows for lessons to be drawn for the development on similar platforms at national level and their interaction with the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

The Discussion Paper's assessment of the Belgian Platform comprehensively picks up on many of these points. In this paper we will focus on a number of these strengths and areas that need to be strengthened.

### **Strengths**

- Belgian Platform provides an **opportunity for dialogue between a broad range of stakeholders** where they can contribute to the development of priorities for poverty and social inclusion elements of the NRP and NSR. It is also an opportunity to share information and keep informed on relevant EU policy developments. The meetings are



also organised in a way which encourages open dialogue where different members can contribute their concerns and views.

- There is **high level political commitment** to the Platform both in terms of its reporting mechanism to interministerial level and the direct engagement of high level officials. The involvement of a broad representation across regional and national government is also important in progressing measures to address poverty and social inclusion at all levels of governance.
- **Joint ownership** of the Platform meetings is achieved by including representatives from the BAPN Europe 2020 group.
- **There is a long term investment in participation and dialogue**, which resulted in the necessary experience, insight and knowledge on poverty and the effect on people. It also created relations of trust between officials and participants and eliminated difficult thresholds for people with direct experience of poverty to be able to participate actively and take the floor.
- Resources are provided to support the **capacity building of stakeholders** to prepare for and participate in the Platform. While resources are provided to support the capacity building of other stakeholders the grant provided to BAPN to support the preparation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion is of particular importance. The support for people to prepare is one of the key elements of ensuring that the participation of people with a direct experience of poverty in the Platforms is not tokenistic but is on a more equal basis to other stakeholders. It is also recognition of the time that is needed to build the capacity of people to participate in such meetings.
- **The provision of feedback** and reporting on progress is an important element in ensuring transparency in the functioning of the Platform. If done in an honest and clear manner it can help the different stakeholders to see the impact the meetings are having on policy and in particular the NRP and the NSR.

### Areas to strengthen

- **Impact on policy** appears to be a major area the Platform needs to address. Both the evaluations carried out by the BAPN Europe 2020 group and the Federal Public Service for Social Integration highlight that many participants do not see the Platform having an impact on policy. The BAPN evaluation also highlights the fear that the Platform is just 'window dressing' where government can claim to have consulted without this consultation having an impact on policy. As mentioned earlier the lack of impact is a major issue which has been raised over many years by those who have participated in processes at local, national and EU level. Over time if this is not addressed many stakeholders will not see dialogue and information sharing as sufficient reason to continue to participate in the Belgian Platform. This is particularly true for people with a direct experience of poverty and social exclusion might expect a positive impact for their communities. Some proposals to address this as follows:
  - It is clear from the objectives of the Belgian Platform that it aims to contribute to the drafting of the social inclusion elements of the NRP and to the NSR. If stakeholders are not clear that their input is contributing to the NRP and NSR, and to the policy impact that comes from it, then a review is needed to identify how this can be achieved. This review must involve all the stakeholders and a high level



political involvement and commitment. It is also important that there is clarity on the actual potential of the Platform to impact on policy. While this should be debated it is essential that the expectations of different stakeholders are addressed.

- Discussions on specific policy areas take place during Platform meetings and at Open Platform Days. A clearer link needs to be made between these discussions and the formulation or review of concrete policies so that there is a greater possibility to have an impact on policies. These discussions can also be supported by more specific interaction on specific policies outside these wider stakeholder events.

These proposals are closely linked to the suggestion arising from the formal evaluation by the Federal Public Service for Social Integration on formulating more clear objectives for the Platform, formulating concrete measures and recommendations for the government and organising of ex-ante evaluation of policy changes.

- **More specific focus on supporting the participation of people experiencing poverty to participate fully** is needed. The quality of participation is highlighted as a priority for the officials and other stakeholders involved in the Platform and the grant provided the BAPN is an important element in supporting participation of people experiencing poverty. However, the evaluation carried out by the BAPN Europe 2020 group highlights some issues that have a negative impact on the participation of people experiencing poverty. These include the late arrival of the agenda and the technical language used in meetings. There is need to constantly review and adapt the preparation for the meetings and how they are structured so as to ensure they create the opportunity for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to participate equally. This involves addressing the issues highlighted in the evaluation but also introducing a more non-traditional and creative format for meetings which ensures that there is ample opportunity for people to participate fully.
- To strengthen this focus, **a structured, long term sustainable financing of BAPN is necessary**. BAPN experienced severe budget cuts, is understaffed and is working on a yearly basis with the forthcoming yearly insecurity.
- **The Platform needs to be able to address economic areas within the NRP which have a direct impact on social outcomes**. It is clear that different economic policies will result in different outcomes in relation to poverty, inequality and exclusion. While recognising the challenges in addressing these within the Platform it is essential that it takes on this challenge. The Platform also needs to engage with the Country Specific Recommendations in advance of their formulation and in terms of their implementation.
- **The Platform needs to broaden the range of stakeholders**, especially the officials and policy makers not directly involved with social policies but responsible for the fields of economic policy, employment and labour market related issues, etc.
- **The high level political commitment still has to be strengthened**, though the officials (administration) is investing a lot in the platform, the engagement of policy makers is quite limited
- **The Belgian Platform needs a formal recognition by the Belgian Government** as consultative body on social inclusion policies and on other (macro-economic) policies that effect the fight against poverty



## 6. Conclusion

It is essential that strong measures are taken to address the democratic deficit at EU and Member State level which has grown over the past number of years. Much of this deficit relates to the fact that many people feel that they have less say in policies that are impacting on their lives. This is particularly true for the growing numbers of those experiencing poverty and social exclusion who have seen themselves as the victims of negative economic policies.

There is also a deep sense that despite the prominence that is given to stakeholder engagement in policy documents, including engagement with civil society and people experiencing poverty and their organisations that in reality this engagement has little or no impact on policy and in many cases is viewed as 'window dressing'. At the same time state and EU funding and supports for social NGOs, working at local, regional, national and EU level has been severely reduced.

Despite the failure of the Europe 2020 strategy to date people experiencing poverty and their organisations are still very anxious to participate in meaningful stakeholder engagement which will result in better policy outcomes. This engagement is essential if progress is to be made in the fight against poverty.

For this to happen changes need to take place and stakeholder engagement has to move from being an aspiration to a reality. The following are some of the recommendations from EAPN to making this happen.

### Recommendations

1. Deepen meaningful stakeholder engagement in the Europe 2020 process in order to increase legitimacy and accountability, including deepening the participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and their organisations.
2. European Commission should actively encourage Member States to establish national Platforms against Poverty and Social Exclusion to support the development and implementation of national anti-poverty strategies and to engage with the Europe 2020 process and National Social Reports.
3. Expand stakeholder engagement and participation to the whole Europe 2020 Semester process and beyond the development of National Reform Programmes to other elements such as the development and implementation of Country Specific Recommendations and the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion. The new European Semester Officers in the European Commission Office in Member States could help to encourage and support this engagement.
4. European Commission should actively encourage Member States to establish national Platforms against Poverty and Social Exclusion to support the development and implementation of national anti-poverty strategies and to engage with the Europe 2020 process and National Social Reports.
5. Progress the development of guidelines for stakeholder engagement which were presented in the Commission Communication on the European Platform against



Poverty and Social Exclusion. These guidelines should specifically identify people experiencing poverty and social exclusion as key stakeholders and address key weaknesses in the current process including how to strengthening the impact of participation on decision making processes. Early in 2014 EAPN will publish a handbook on stakeholder engagement, including common principles, which will be useful in informing these guidelines.

6. The Annual Convention of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion needs to be developed through greater stakeholder engagement and linked to existing participative processes such as national platforms against poverty and social exclusion and the Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty. It should be structured so as to facilitate more active debate among stakeholders and inject greater urgency on identifying how to make progress in achieving the targets for reducing poverty and social exclusion.
7. As proposed in the Social Investment Package the European Commission should begin the development of the 'knowledge bank' with Member States and Eurofound to help share learning. This should include sharing knowledge on stakeholder engagement in the policy process.
8. Member States and the European Commission need to actively invest in the work of local, regional, national and EU organisations representing people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. This measure will increase the capacity of people to participate in the development and implementation of decisions that impact on their lives and therefore support better governance and policy making.

