

A social Europe for all

False promise or feasible reality?

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Taking into account the available data on poverty and inequalities in Europe and the daily reality of at least 80 million people living below the official EU at risk of poverty line, it has to be doubted that the idea of a social Europe as it keeps reappearing in EU policy talks and papers is anything other than a false promise. Although poverty and social exclusion have been on the EU's agenda, the direct impact that has been made in this area has been very low.

Since its foundation as an independent network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and groups involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the Member States of the European Union in 1990, the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN) has been lobbying to put and keep poverty and social exclusion high on the political agenda of the EU. Bringing together 25 national networks and many European organisations EAPN aims to promote and enhance the effectiveness of actions to eradicate poverty and to prevent social exclusion and inequalities. In doing so the network aims to empower people experiencing poverty and is committed to lobby for and with people and groups facing poverty. EAPN is a key civil society actor on the European scene and one of the main partners of the European institutions on the European strategy to combat social exclusion. The network has consultative status with the Council of Europe, and is a founding member of the Platform of European Social NGOs. It lobbies for the integration of the fight against poverty and social exclusion into all Community policies, ranging from Structural Funds and employment policies through to economic and monetary policies and builds alliances with relevant actors to create a stronger voice in favour of social inclusion.

EAPN sustains links with the research sector in order to enhance knowledge of poverty and social exclusion within the EU, keeps under close review and critically assesses Community policies and programmes likely to impact on groups facing poverty and social exclusion and develops proposals to influence the Community institutions. Throughout all its activities EAPN seeks to bridge the gap between EU institutions and decisions and the concrete realities of people experiencing poverty. All of the networks' activities are built on the conviction that poverty is a denial of fundamental human rights and a failure to respect and protect human dignity and that it arises from complex and multidimensional processes that cannot be dealt with in isolation or on the margins.

For many years EAPN has been critically contributing to and assessing the various agendas and processes that were introduced to bring about a more social Europe. This article intends to give a rough overview and review of some of these processes and to also voice some of the growing concerns of EAPN and other civil society actors with regard to their lack of effectiveness as it becomes even more visible in the

light of the current crisis. Taking a lobbyist's rather than a mere academic perspective and thus putting emphasis on our continuous efforts to lobby for more substantial changes with regards to the EU's general future strategy and the necessity to more effectively fight poverty, social exclusion and growing inequalities, we will assess the latest Council conclusions that include a concrete poverty reduction target and highlight overall strategies as well as some concrete measures and instruments that will need to be developed and implemented to ensure social progress even in a time of crisis.

A constant struggle

According to a recent Eurobarometer survey one European in six reports a constant struggle to pay household bills and three quarters believe that poverty has increased in their country over the past year (Eurobarometer 2010). The lack of political energy to bring about visible results in the fight against poverty and social exclusion is obvious, even if EU policy papers keep proclaiming a »social vision« for Europe's future. The high number of people living below the statistical poverty line and the reality of a large number of people in the EU experiencing material deprivation are indicators that the EU has failed its goal »to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty« by the year 2010 as it was proclaimed at the Council of Lisbon in the year 2000.

This is mostly due to a lack of political commitment and partly due to the lack of appropriate instruments: The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the field of social inclusion as it was introduced ten years ago was meant to function as a key instrument to bring forward the EU's Social Inclusion Agenda. As the EU has no legal competence in the area, Member States agreed to co-ordinate their policies for combating poverty and social exclusion on the basis of a process of policy exchanges and mutual learning. From 2001 to 2005 the method, which before had already been used in the employment field, focused on social inclusion. Since 2006, three policy areas are jointly addressed through this process, now known as the streamlined »Open Method of Coordination on social protection and social inclusion«: The OMC involves the agreement of EU-level common objectives and indicators, the development of National Action Plans on Social Inclusion, replaced 2006 by National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion, a Community Action Programme (replaced by the PROGRESS Programme in 2007), and Joint European Reports documenting the outcomes of the process and highlighting key challenges ahead. Its ambitious objectives (which were also revised in 2006) originally included guaranteeing access to rights and resources for all, introducing measures to protect the most vulnerable groups, investing in the prevention of poverty and exclusion and mobilising all relevant stakeholders. But its implementation has proven to be too weak to make a decisive impact. The bi-annual National Action Plans on Social Inclusion¹ which were meant to report national progress and planned strategies and actions and later were replaced by so called Strategic Plans on Social Protection and Inclusion became a reporting rather than a planning exercise in the majority of EU member states. They usually lacked both a strategic approach in the fight against inequalities and the necessary budget provision to implement the foreseen measures. Peer reviews on social inclusion which have been organised from 2004 to support the OMC process have enabled ministries from a number of interested member sta-

tes to present, discuss and learn from »Best Practice« examples in various specific areas, such as »Rough Sleeping«, »Women's Poverty«, »Over-indebtedness«, »Active Aging« etc. While they have worked well as exchange seminars they have however rather failed to become real mutual learning exercises. The lack of courage to also address »bad practices and failures« and the missing efforts to transform the presented »success stories« into transferable analytical tools for poverty reduction policies have prevented concrete follow up of these meetings.² The official Joint European reports by the Council and the Commission have mostly summarised but hardly critically analysed the results of the plans and the process so far, although they have highlighted some of the key challenges at European and member state level with the issues of child poverty, homelessness, migration and active inclusion (see below) being at the focus of the more recent reports.³

In 2007 the Commission launched its plans for an Active-Inclusion-Strategy, taking what could be seen as a more »holistic approach« in the fight against poverty and social exclusion and addressing specific policy objectives, which indeed are of high importance. These objectives include the introduction of adequate minimum income systems, guaranteed access to high quality social services and active labour market policies. The strategy suggests to deepen social policy cooperation at EU level by adopting a set of common principles that should guide the implementation of these three strands of active inclusion and their subsequent monitoring and evaluation, while fully respecting the different situations and needs of the member states. This might sound promising at first sight and was regarded as an important step forward by anti poverty networks, but at the time of writing the Commission has not identified the necessary means to ensure a real follow up of the active inclusion principles.

There are also serious contradictions to be found with regard to the promotion of access to high quality social services on one hand and EU policy priorities and measures in the area of services of common interest on the other hand. And there is a clear deficit in implementing social policy objectives into the Lisbon agenda of growth and jobs and its continuation in the more recent Europe 2020 Strategy.

Growing concerns

Yet, people's concerns with regard to growing inequalities in Europe cannot be overlooked and even official EU papers can no longer deny the fact that the positive effects of economic growth are questioned by »a significant number of European citizens [who] see globalisation, liberalisation and the drive for greater competitiveness as much as a threat to their well-being as a facilitator of it« (Liddle/Lerais 2007, 5). Intending to get closer to its citizens and to appear to taking seriously their concerns, »An Agenda for European Citizens« (European Commission 2006) was launched by the Commission in spring 2006, including what is called a »Single Market review« and a »social reality check«. With regards to the latter a Consultation Paper written by a think-tank for the president of the Commission, José Barroso, was published to launch »a debate on Europe's social reality« and the aims of »building a new consensus on the common social challenges facing Europeans« and to »strengthen the partnership between the European Union and its Member States in the delivery of the Lisbon Growth and Jobs Strategy« (Liddle/Lerais 2007, 6).

Although the paper clearly did not move away from the overarching growth and jobs strategy, it symbolically »reduced« it from an end to a means to an end with the end being identified as the well-being of European citizens. The aim of creating a »social vision« for Europe however stayed vague and even if it was to be understood as a serious intention with regards to guiding Europe's future policies it kept being undermined by other policy objectives, such as the liberalisation and privatisation of public services, the reduction of employment rights through the application of the concept of »flexibility« and the reduction in social expenditure as part of fiscal constraints to meet the convergence criteria.

Meanwhile the worst economic crisis the EU has been facing since the 1930s led to a number of policy packages that run the risk of further increasing poverty, widening inequality and undermining social cohesion for decades to come. Many Member States' decisions on how to recoup public deficits are seriously undermining social protection systems with NGO services being also under threat. Without the implementation of alternative and more equitable solutions developing synergy between the exit strategies from the crisis and reducing poverty and inequalities at the same time, the fear of a growing gap between the rich and the poor as it was raised by a great majority of EU citizens (Flash Eurobarometer 227 2008) will become painfully true.

At the same time the Europe 2020 strategy as reflected in the EU's Spring Council agreement of June 2010 holds on to an overall growth and job strategy despite critical remarks by civil society stakeholders such as the EAPN but also the Commission's Social Protection Committee arguing that growth does not always and necessarily deliver on poverty and exclusion (European Anti Poverty Network 2010, 3f). Moreover EAPN also repeatedly has voiced its concerns regarding the lack of a clear vision for Europe's future that puts people first and shows how »the European Union's new strategy for jobs and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth« (European Council 2010, 2) will deliver true social progress and mainstream social objectives.

Such a vision has been formulated in 2009 by a broad coalition of European social, environment and development NGOs together with the European Trade Union Federation in their joint »Spring Alliance Manifesto« (Spring Alliance 2009). Putting people and planet first, the manifesto includes seventeen concrete policy proposals in five key areas. It suggests to establish more inclusive societies, to preserve and restore ecosystems, promote green and quality jobs, assume global responsibility and to improve democracy. In doing it calls for a major shift in the EU's strategic direction and urges the EU »to put the economy at the service of its people and the planet – instead of the other way round« (Spring Alliance 2009, 1).

Seen in this light the most recent EU's Spring Council agreement to make poverty and social exclusion a key priority for the next decade could be assessed as just another false – or at least pretty weak – promise. However, it doesn't have to be this way. The fact that an ambitious and concrete EU Poverty Reduction Target was also adopted at the June Council could be understood as an indicator that the fight against poverty and social exclusion will be taken more seriously from now on.⁴ It will now depend on the consistency of national targets which are still to be set and on the real changes they will bring about, whether the Europe 2020 Strategy will provide a key contribution to combat poverty, inequalities and social exclusion. And it will have to be seen how serious other objectives will be taken, such as to strengthen collective

endeavours and partnerships with developing countries to support the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and to take measures to counteract global climate change as it is promised in the Council conclusions.

Social progress in a time of crisis

Despite the general disappointment with the lack of vision and all criticism regarding the ineffectiveness of the EU's inclusion strategies and more specifically on the OMC process, EAPN won't give up to keep lobbying for a more social Europe. While we will keep highlighting that more substantial changes are needed, we will also continue to work on improving the strategies, measures and instruments that are already in place. Experience has shown that even a weak instrument such as the OMC at least contributes to keep social policy issues at the agenda and can be used as a spring board for lobbying activities with regards to strengthening the development of real National, Regional and Local Action Plans on Social Inclusion in terms of both content and process. In order to become more effective, the OMC, however, clearly needs new tools, more participative mechanisms, more clear-cut targets, recommendations and evaluation. In addition to this the goal of greater social cohesion and sustainable development as defined in various EU documents has to be reinforced and the continuous »growth-and-jobs«-strategy again needs to be critically assessed in this light. If the goal of a sustainable social Europe is to be taken seriously substantial changes need to be introduced also in the scope of developing future economic strategies and in many other areas of strategic policy planning. Models of good governance as they have slowly started to be applied for the OMC and SPSI (Social Protection and Social Inclusion) process have to be strengthened. In addition to this a social impact of the policies undertaken has to be made so that it becomes clear who gains and who loses and policies can be amended appropriately.

The proposed Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative of developing a European Platform against Poverty is expected to ensure economic, social and territorial cohesion and to raise awareness and recognize the fundamental rights of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. However to be effective the platform must be engaged in developing an explicit EU strategy to deliver. Whilst the common objectives of the Social OMC remain strongly relevant, the new context of the Europe 2020 requires the development of a more visible strategy with concrete objectives, measures and timelines. The platform would have the responsibility for implementing and monitoring the EU strategy, building on the strength of the existing Social OMC and prioritizing prevention as well as the alleviation of poverty and reducing inequality. Key to deliver will be ensuring synergies with the other objectives and targets in the Europe 2020 strategy and embedding effective mainstreaming of social inclusion objectives across the whole of the strategy.

In the current time of crisis social ambition is being increasingly lost. Despite the recent financial-economic developments and a number of highly visible indicators that the »growth-and-jobs«-strategy has failed to deliver a more social Europe it is often stated that there is no alternative to the existing socio-economic system.

There is thus a need to keep claiming that social progress is possible even in a time of crisis and that we have to and can do more with regards to promoting better equality and a good life for all. Fighting poverty and social exclusion thus needs to

become a priority aim not only for »social« policies in the narrow sense. A broad policy of the »social« needs to be promoted to ensure that all policies (economic, financial, trade, infrastructure, economic, education, health ...) contribute towards the elimination of poverty and to ensure that people experiencing poverty won't pay for the current crisis.

Dynamic reflections about alternative solutions need to be further promoted and alternative measures of progress, wealth and progress such as set out in the Commissions »Beyond GDP Initiative« need to be pursued.⁵ At the same time social standards need to be urgently implemented. The challenge on how to define what adequate social standards might mean at EU level, how they could be defined and introduced in all member states in a way that would strengthen the fight against poverty across Europe while respecting the diversity of social systems and approaches, will be addressed at an EAPN Conference organised in autumn 2010 with the support of the Belgian Presidency of the EU. The challenges that will be raised at this conference need to be taken up by all EU institutions and member states. Concrete proposals by civil society stakeholders such as the EAPN networks and critical economists that have been developed in the last years need to be taken into account here. Minimum standards will have to be defined in »labour relations including setting minimum wages, work protection, maximum working times and related issues, as well as minimum standards for social income and access to high quality social services« (Euromemorandum Group 2007, 46). Such standards clearly will have to be different depending on the socio-economic context in the various member states but also need to reflect the real needs of people living in poverty in these countries and the levels of income and services that are needed to lift them out of poverty. A process of dialogue between EU institutions, member states, people experiencing poverty, social researchers and the general public to agree on »sets« of essential goods and services needed in each member state for a life in dignity thus has to be started across Europe. This could be pursued as a part of a strengthened OMC and should be put on the agenda of the EU and National Platforms against Poverty thereby drawing on experiences on developing reference budgets for households as they have been made and assessed in the framework of a recent EU PROGRESS project.⁶ In addition to this an EU Directive that requires member states to provide adequate minimum income schemes to guarantee the resources needed for access to a dignified life would provide an important step forward in European cooperation to ensure high level social standards. The EAPN conference in the autumn will provide information in relation to the legal base that could be used to support the introduction of such a directive. Additional stress should be put on the application of international instruments such as the European Social Charter, the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the UN's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which would amount to a strong basis for social standards. This would demand the introduction of clear monitoring and support processes and could possibly lead to a reinvigorated OMC process and a reinforcement of a rights-based approach to fight poverty, inequalities and social exclusion.

Breaking stereotypes and stigmatization will remain a precondition for effectively fighting poverty and social exclusion and thus also needs additional attention and initiative. Understanding the reasons behind poverty and information on what it means to live in poverty in Europe today needs to be created. In addition and in the

context of increasing questioning of social welfare models, emphasis needs to be given to the benefits for the whole of society of having high level social protection systems and the importance of rights based approaches as the corner stone of our social systems. It will thus be crucial that the many initiatives that have been started in this area during the current EU Year against poverty and social exclusion will be continued beyond 2010.

Over and above all these initiatives innovative ways to further improve the current democratic processes have to be explored. The increasing disconnect between citizens and the priorities of the Governments elected to represent their concerns has to be recognized as a warning. The role of Governments to ensure that nobody is left behind must gain priority over their role in ensuring competitive markets and economic growth. At the same time existing and new forms of participative governance need to be strengthened and developed to help to confront and to bridge existing democratic deficits and to better involve citizens in the decisions that affect them.

Not least existing inequalities and the growing gap between poor and rich need to be addressed and tackled and the responsibilities for the impact of EU policies on the global dimension of poverty need to be more fully recognized. A great number of studies, publications and discussions have drawn attention to the broad evidence of the many problems today's societies are facing due to persisting inequalities (e.g. Wilkinson/Pickett 2009). Nonetheless there is still little focus on reducing inequality and safeguarding a better distribution of income and wealth in official EU policy papers and strategies. If decision makers however are serious about wanting to eliminate poverty they will need to focus on and start tackling social polarization.

At the same time the interconnectedness of the struggle against poverty globally and the fight against poverty in Europe has to be taken into account. The roots of the crisis, the politics of greed, growing inequalities, deregulation, the primacy of the market over social rights are part of a global phenomenon even if the impacts are unevenly spread.

All this has to be pursued with a close view on the daily realities of people experiencing poverty, encouraging direct participation of the people concerned in the definition of concrete proposals and monitoring of anti-poverty policies. The growing number of »participation projects« and participative processes including people experiencing poverty that have been started across Europe have to be acknowledged as positive small steps that can bring about big changes for the people involved (European Anti Poverty Network 2009). Initiatives such as the annual European meetings of people experiencing poverty and similar processes on member state level thus must not be seen as »events« and they must not be taken as opportunity to just pretend to give voice to people experiencing poverty without taking them seriously but rather be incorporated in policy development and monitoring strategies. Only then would the EU's intention to get closer to its citizens also include the many millions of people experiencing poverty and in combination with the proposals mentioned above could be taken seriously as an honest attempt to work towards a social Europe for all. And only then will it be possible to turn the many – and all too often false – promises concerning a social Europe into a visible reality and a good life for all.

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Notes

- 1 From 2005 on they were combined with national plans on pensions and health and long term care, thereby forming three chapters of what has been named the »Strategic Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion«
- 2 For more information on the Peer Reviews on Social Inclusion and Social Protection, see <http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu>
- 3 The latest Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion, supported by country profiles and other documents can be downloaded from: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=757&langId=en>
- 4 The Council agreed on an EU target to reduce poverty and social exclusion by 20 million, based on a combined aggregate involving 3 indicators: 60 % median income, material deprivation and jobless households.
- 5 For further information, see <http://www.beyond-gdp.eu>
- 6 See <http://www.referencebudgets.eu>