

The Path to Lisbon

The European Anti-Poverty Programmes from the 1970s to the 1990s

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1. Introduction

Poverty and social exclusion have been on the policy agenda of the European Union since the first enlargement in 1973. This article describes and evaluates the relevance and impact of these programmes, for both EU policy and for the policies of the member states. In so doing, it seeks to draw out some of the lessons for research and policy today.

2. Antecedents: Poverty and Social Inclusion

The first European poverty initiatives were championed by Ireland. At the Paris Summit of 1972, Ireland and the other candidate countries met with the existing six member states to consider how the enlarged Community should go forward. The oil crisis had not yet struck; Europe was basking in almost three decades of sustained economic growth. At the same time, however, there was a sense that its citizens did not feel great enthusiasm for the European project; the Community therefore needed a »human face«. It was Ireland that proposed that this should include a commitment to combating poverty: what eventually became the first European programme to combat poverty, part of the 1974 Social Action programme (Dennett et al. 1982).

Why had Ireland hit on this particular proposal? Ireland had of course long suffered substantial problems of deprivation, not unconnected with its relationship to Britain. However, in 1971 there had been a conference in Kilkenny which considered the extent of such poverty and how it might be addressed by appropriate social and economic policies. That conference had, as one of its points of reference, a research paper by Séamus Ó Cinnéide (1972). It was the concerns fuelled by the Kilkenny conference that eventually found resonance at a European level.

The Irish had hoped to enshrine poverty as a permanent part of the EU policy landscape. Germany in particular blocked those aspirations. Instead a small pilot programme was approved after all-night sittings, for just two years: later extended to five, subject to an evaluation of the programme being included. The Germans were concerned that they might become the principal paymasters for a programme that might expand and expand. Equally however, they were concerned that this programme set a new precedent, in committing the Community to the well-being of a social group defined by reference to their conditions of life, rather than their relationship to the labour market, the limit of the existing mandate of the European institutions in social policy.

The first European anti-poverty programme (1975–80) included as its principal element a number of locally-based pilot projects, intended to demonstrate innovative methods of combating poverty. Many had various forms of research and

evaluation to accompany and illuminate the action. They drew upon the rich variety of methodologies of action-research that had developed during the 1960s and 1970s: some from the American War on Poverty and the British Community Development Project (CDP), others from German critical theory, others again from Italian traditions of de-institutionalisation (Room 1986, Ch 4). More significant in some countries – Italy, for example – in stimulating national debate were the nine national reports on poverty and anti-poverty policy, accompanied by a first attempt at estimating levels of income poverty in the various member states according to a common methodology (European Commission 1981). Alongside the action projects and these national studies, researchers such as Peter Willmott were responsible for cross-national studies on particular aspects of poverty – in his case, unemployment, social security and poverty in France, Germany and the UK (Mitton/Willmott 1983). It was, moreover, this first Poverty Programme that sponsored the first of a series of reports on the perceptions of poverty held by citizens in different European Community countries in the mid-1970s, with attitudes in the UK in particular particularly harsh (European Commission 1977).

With the European Parliament calling for action not words, the Commission planned the second programme (1986–89) with cross-national action-research projects as the centrepiece. These provided some valuable models of cross-national policy learning (Room 1993). Although the programme had no research element as such, studies of national policies were commissioned as part of the evaluation of the action programme, echoing the national reports of the first programme. As part of the same evaluation, O'Higgins and Jenkins (1989) ventured a new estimate of the total number of persons and households across the Community falling below a poverty line defined, as in the Commission's 1981 report, as 50% of mean equivalised disposable income in each of the countries concerned. This in turn prompted the statistical office of the Commission, Eurostat, to begin a programme of work on the long-term improvement of poverty indicators, initially by working with national statistical offices to use household budget surveys for producing comparable data on low income groups.

The third programme (1990–94), as well continuing the cross-national action-research, saw the reinstatement of a series of cross-national studies. Also of significance was the »Observatory« on national policies to combat social exclusion (Room 1991; 1992; Robbins 1994). This Observatory, involving a network of research institutes, was a response to the 1989 Council of Ministers Resolution, which had committed member states to combat social exclusion (Council of Ministers 1989). Like the other activities of the third programme, it was brought to an untimely end, when in 1994 the German government insisted that with poverty and social exclusion never an explicit part of the EU Treaties, such actions were inappropriate.

We now consider in somewhat more detail the two main elements of these programmes: on the one hand the action projects, on the other the efforts to compare national poverty rates and policies.

3. Dilemmas of European Social Reform

The first and second European programmes gave pride of place to small »experimental« action-research projects. This was in part because the Commission understood

well the need to build a constituency of support for such programmes across the member states. It testified also however to the provisional and time-limited nature of the »experiment« and the lack of any larger and more long-term policy commitment.

In these respects these European programmes were not unlike their predecessors in the American War on Poverty of the 1960s, from which indeed they borrowed much of their language and rationale. Like the American programme, the European programmes involved small-scale projects intended to explore new methods of social provision, which if successful could then be applied more generally (Marris/Rein 1974; Dennett et al. 1982). These programmes have obvious political attractions because they demand only a limited commitment from government. The resources they involve are small; and governments are careful not to commit themselves in advance to implementing the recommendations that emerge. Moreover, in the European case at least, the quasi-scientific aura of the »pilot experiment« was intended to protect such initiatives from national governments' jealous preservation of their own powers, in a field where the European Commission had only a very restricted mandate for intervention. Yet if anything, this merely underlines the relevance of the American experience: for there, too, the Federal government had resorted to »pilot experiments« in part in order to fend off the hostility of local power structures.

Nevertheless, even before the first of the European programmes was launched, in the mid-1970s, disillusionment and cynicism had set in. Action-research had not, it seemed, lived up to its promise; and the collaboration between research, action, and policy-making had been less than wholly successful, at least in the US and UK (Lees/Smith 1975). Marris and Rein (1974) provided the classical analysis of the dilemmas and tensions which this collaboration encountered. They pointed out that action-research projects launched in the anti-poverty field were addressed to – and demanded collaboration and legitimation from – three different audiences: the social scientific community, policy-makers at local and national levels, and, finally, the disadvantaged communities themselves and their indigenous organisations. The action-research projects had then simultaneously to confront – in many cases unsuccessfully – three »dilemmas of social reform«. First, the scientific demands of rigorous evaluation were frequently in tension with the changing political and practical demands imposed on the action-research by its masters and clients. Secondly, although it was politically necessary for the action-researchers to retain a broad-based commitment from policy-makers, the action-research frequently affected these policy-makers' practical interests in very different ways, putting in question the conventional lines of demarcation between them and the terms of reference within which they initially sought to constrain the projects. Finally, action researchers needed to maintain and develop involvement by the local communities with whom they were working; but this, too, was a delicate and politically contentious task, when most of the key decisions which affect the lives of these people remained outside the projects' remit and control.

These same dilemmas have pervaded the experience of the European programmes, albeit taking forms specific to that political and institutional context. To take the last-mentioned first, the European programmes at least paid lip service to »participation« by the poor communities themselves in the design and implementation of the action projects. Interpreted as self-help and voluntary effort, »participation« was attractive to Member States with liberal and conservative governments; interpreted

as community action and solidarity, it helped to make the programmes palatable to governments of the Left. Yet the gap between what seemed to be promised and what was practically feasible was a recurring irritation in the European programmes, sapping the morale of project workers and project users. For many of the latter, »participation« seemed to offer a new deal: with the project setting out to engage their interest, to win their trust, and to provide them with opportunities to become full participants in society. It made the programme a moral enterprise as well as a scientific one. The termination of the projects at the end of each programme, without an assured preservation of these new opportunities, commonly aroused the moral indignation and shock not only of the project workers but also of the »target group« concerned: emotions that were variously directed at project workers, evaluators and Commission officials. Because of the small scale of the projects, this frustration has seldom if ever boiled over into the expressions of community discontent which Marris and Rein recorded in their account of the American experience; but its intensity was none the less.

The second dilemma which Marris and Rein (1974) highlighted was concerned with the task of enlisting and maintaining the support of key policy-makers and power-holders; and, indeed, of ensuring that the »lessons« of the action-research would be »multiplied« by these decision-makers and applied more generally. In the European programmes, what has been striking is, first, the significant variations between countries in the expectations held of the programme by national governments, the key decision-makers who might have been expected to multiply the fruits of the programmes. Equally significant has been the »mismatch« between the government departments (national and European) which have had responsibility for selecting projects and for managing the programme and the policy areas highlighted by the action-research as most relevant to combating poverty. Which government department led on the European programme varied considerably between countries, reflecting on the one hand the policy preoccupations in national debate and, on the other, the eagerness or otherwise of the more and less powerful departments to take on what was variously perceived as a burden or an opportunity. In France, for example, the principal government department concerned was also responsible for the government's programme of emergency relief: involving emergency accommodation and feeding, training and rehabilitation. The projects which France submitted to the Commission in 1985 bore the marks of this national programme; other significant public programmes, also concerned with poverty and the social development of urban neighbourhoods, were omitted.

In the UK, the responsible department was concerned with personal social services and, not surprisingly, so were many of the projects submitted and approved for the UK. This departmental responsibility also structured the expectations of the UK government with regards to the benefits of the programme. Officials and their political advisers were interested, first and foremost, to know whether the programme and its evaluators had demonstrated more cost-effective and efficient methods of supplying social services, using objective and quantifiable measures. They also looked for arguments in favour of shifting services away from local authority control and into the voluntary sector; methods for evaluating the qualitative element in policies; and evidence to help them resolve current policy debates, for example, on community care. However, at a time when poverty was, in an increasing number of

cases, associated with changes in the labour market and economic restructuring, it was perhaps inappropriate to judge an anti-poverty programme primarily in terms of the lessons it generated for personal social services.

At the level of the European institutions, what was striking was the relative isolation of the poverty section of the Social Affairs directorate from other arms of the Commission, concerned for example with employment and training policies, regional development, and equal opportunities. Only towards the end of the second programme, in the late 1980s, did the officials concerned develop these links in any deliberate way. The political weakness of the Commission throughout this period meant moreover that as far as national policy-makers were concerned, the Commission was always reluctant to press on them any of the clear policy lessons emerging from the poverty programmes. Equally, at the level of the individual projects, it was rare for the Commission actively to champion their achievements in the projects' negotiations with local decision makers.

Finally, what of the dilemmas of rigorous evaluation, faced with the changing political and practical demands imposed by political masters (in particular the European Commission) and clients (most obviously the projects)? Although this dynamic political environment may mean that the evaluation of action research must forgo the conventional canons of »scientific« evaluation, it does not follow that all claims to rigour must be abandoned (Room 1986, Ch 3). Nevertheless, few of the action-research programmes, at national or European level, avoided their evaluators suffering considerable anguish in their efforts to maintain their professional self-respect, at the same time as they sought to demonstrate their practical »usefulness« to both projects and policy-makers. And in the European programmes, as in some of their national predecessors, these strains at times resulted in high levels of internal conflict and threatened the programme concerned with major political disruption.

As this European experience therefore revealed, confirming that of the earlier programmes in the Anglo-Saxon world, the objectives, organization, and implementation of »experimental« social interventions do not go uncontested. They are shaped by the wider struggle for power between different social groups, engaged in promoting or resisting particular plans for social change. Thus, to the organiser of these European programmes, »cross-fertilization« between projects working in different countries may have appeared as a means of testing out particular methods of social provision in different contexts, with a view to assessing their more general relevance and limitations. Project workers themselves often took a very different view. For many of them, »cross-fertilization« was of value principally to the extent that it allowed them to build up political alliances and campaigns on a cross-national basis. Working methods developed elsewhere were of some interest, if they could be cited as precedents for reform when projects confronted decision-makers in their own countries; but projects were unlikely to give high priority to testing out, on their home ground, innovations developed elsewhere, in the service of scientific rigour and national policy-making. The challenge which faced those responsible for European programmes of cross-national innovation was, therefore, how to mobilise broader movements and lobbies of this sort, as part of the process of stimulating institutional reform, rather than regarding them as a distraction from an experiment.

To the programme organiser, similarly, »evaluation« might appear primarily as a means of rationally assessing the costs and benefits associated with new methods of social provision. It is the cost to the public purse that was of principal concern to national policy-makers: a programme of pilot projects is of interest if it can demonstrate ways of cutting those costs. Project workers in contrast were often more interested in exposing needs that are not being met by existing services and whose »costs« therefore lie where they fall, rather than being a charge on the public purse. The evaluation exercise, rather than providing dispassionate evidence on which new policy initiatives can be based, may instead expose the competing assumptions which these different actors hold about the scope and responsibilities of public policies. Here the challenge was to construct, from the social policy scenarios which emerged from this pooling of different national experiences, not only scientifically rigorous assessments of project effectiveness, but also politically feasible arguments for institutional reform, capable of mobilising a constituency of support across the Community.

4. National Poverty and Policy

Within this series of initiatives, how were poverty and social exclusion conceptualised? During the 1970s and 1980s, the EU had been operating with a notion of poverty broadly indebted to such writers as Townsend (1970). Poverty was to be defined in terms relative to the living standards customary in the society concerned, and the resources required for participating within it. This was operationalised in terms of a financial poverty line, defined relative to the income distribution of each country, as the principal point of reference for purposes of cross-national comparison. Financial poverty lines, defined in relative terms, also drove the efforts of Eurostat to improve the cross-national comparability of official statistics. In contrast, the action projects that had figured prominently in this series of European initiatives had provided a picture of poverty which was multi-dimensional, rather than just financial, and which was concerned as much with the processes by which poverty was generated as with the outcomes. Nevertheless, to add to research was only a secondary aim as far as these projects were concerned, and neither statisticians nor academic researchers gave their efforts in this regard much attention.

By the 1990s, however, in part under the influence of Commission President Delors, the EU authorities were increasingly couching their concerns in the language of »social exclusion«. In part this was a semantic shift: on the one hand the enthusiasm of Delors and the French government for the language of inclusion, on the other the long-standing sensitivity by many national governments, including notably the UK and Germany, to the suggestion that poverty could be found in their countries. Nevertheless, this was also a shift of some substance, involving perhaps five principal elements (Room 1999):

- it offered a multi-dimensional notion of inadequate living conditions;
- it was concerned with dynamic processes: on the one hand, changes in the poor population between one time period and the next; on the other, investments in future consumption and security, not just current consumption;
- it recognised that people's living conditions depended not just on their personal and household resources, but also on the material and cultural collective resources to which they had access;

- it focussed attention on the relational as much as the distributional dimensions of stratification: on the one hand making explicit that consumption and investment take place within particular social relationships; on the other, recognising that relationships are themselves a component of human well-being, and their breakdown or absence can therefore be a deprivation;
- it directed attention to those individuals, households and communities who were suffering multi-dimensional disadvantage and the degradation of the collective resources and relational links on which they could draw: long-term and maybe even irreversible, except perhaps in face of special and disproportionate interventions.

If the conceptualisation of poverty and social exclusion was changing, so also were the preferred methods of measurement. During the 1980s Eurostat had promoted the use and comparability of national household budget surveys for purposes of producing Community-wide poverty estimates. During the 1990s it moved on to multi-dimensional and inter-temporal data instruments, in particular through the new generation of panel studies that were now emerging. At a national level, there was a growing number of such panel surveys, along with research studies which analysed their data. Various attempts were made to set alongside each other the findings emerging from different national panels and to draw comparative conclusions (Leisering/Walker 1998; Goodin et al. 1999). These showed that most poverty was short-term: there was plenty of income mobility, although many of those who escaped from poverty remained on its margins and might subsequently descend into it once more. These panel studies also identified those most at risk of falling into poverty and staying there: people who are poorly educated, unemployed or disabled, and lone mothers. Factors related to employability were crucial in determining who escapes. From 1994 onwards, these national panel studies were complemented by a new European Community Household Panel (ECHP), data from which became a key instrument for social monitoring at European level.

Nevertheless, some of the other conceptual shifts set in motion by the debates on social exclusion were much slower to re-shape the data instruments and methods of measurement that were being promoted by the European authorities. Action projects working in local communities had been a prominent feature of these European programmes, and researchers concerned with social exclusion were giving increasing recognition to the collective resources within those communities, which helped to shape the living conditions of individual households (see, for example, some of the contributions to the 1994 seminar on the measurement of social exclusion sponsored by the European Commission and the UK Department of Social Security: Room 1995, Ch 8-11). However, notwithstanding the interest of the EU authorities in area-based policies, there was little attempt on their part to develop data instruments which would bring together measures of household and neighbourhood resources. So also, while the European Community Household Panel allowed some analysis of the social relationships and networks on which people could call for support, this was very limited, compared with the pioneering work done by such researchers as Paugam (1995; 1996).

Finally, the research into poverty and social exclusion conducted under this series of European initiatives was oriented to a shifting agenda of theoretical and policy purposes. The earlier programmes were concerned with information gathering and exchange of good practice in action-research, but without any very clear over-ar-

ching theoretical or policy purpose. Poverty and social exclusion were absent from the research and policy agenda of the EU, save for these special programmes, and national agendas showed enormous variation. However, as the pressures towards a strengthened European social dimension developed in the late 1980s, this situation also began to change, with the Commission drawing in part on its experience with these pilot programmes when preparing proposals for the social dimension.

The 1989 Council of Ministers Resolution on social exclusion brought these issues one step closer to the main EU policy agenda. Under the resolution, the Commission as already mentioned established an Observatory. This was meant to monitor how far member states were honouring their Resolution commitments, to assess the effectiveness of national policies to combat social exclusion and to highlight examples of good practice for purposes of cross-national policy learning. However, whatever the progress in monitoring final outcomes (poverty rates etc.), the EU authorities had made next to no progress in establishing a common approach to monitoring policy outputs and effectiveness. The Observatory was therefore heavily constrained in what it could do and in general limited itself to describing policy intentions and recording social conditions.

During the later part of the 1990s, the EU policy agenda shifted still further, as did the direction of the international and comparative analysis of social exclusion which EU policy makers would henceforth sponsor. Social exclusion became a formal concern of EU policy under the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997. At least as important, however, was the Lisbon process, the so-called open method of coordination (OMC), which developed during 2000, and which took policies for social inclusion as a major point of reference.

5. Lessons for Lisbon

In March 2000 the OMC was established as the central tool of policy coordination and cross-national policy learning in the economic and social transformation of Europe. It had three principal elements: indicators to benchmark national performance, comparative assessments of national policies and the exchange of good practices.

As we have seen, these were also key elements of the poverty programmes of the 1970s – 1990s. Indicators of national poverty rates were developed and applied from 1980 onwards, with Eurostat then working towards the harmonisation of statistical indicators later in the decade. National reports in 1980 and subsequently – and later the reports of the Observatory – provided a comparative assessment of national policies that opened fresh debate in a number of countries, with public hearings at national and European levels. From 1975 onwards, cross-national networks of action projects were involved in exchange of good practice and the building of cross-European federations. The OMC has in some degree systematised and mainstreamed these elements. That earlier experience however suggests questions and lessons for the OMC.

First, cross-national policy learning is likely to be contentious, interest-driven and politically uncomfortable. Poverty comparisons cause embarrassment to national governments, as they are deployed in domestic debate, and as cross-European poverty initiatives expose national performance to wider scrutiny. Opposition parties and interested civil society organisations are not slow to take advantage.

For cross-national policy learning to be fruitful, it is better to start with the problems that countries confront, and from there to search for relevant good practices, rather than *vice versa*. It is moreover better to allow diverse local agendas and politics to drive cross-national learning, instead of seeking to distil European »best practice«. In turn, that is likely to require support for cross-national networks of practitioners and administrators, »epistemic communities«, as repositories of good practice.

Those earlier European projects and programmes in many cases started out by dealing with individual deprivation and wellbeing. Typically however the focus shifted to welfare administration and urban governance and then to political economy. That earlier experience resonates therefore with central themes of the original Lisbon vision: social and economic development are interdependent; social policy is a productive force; poverty and social exclusion must be addressed in conjunction with economic restructuring and development.

The OMC is intended to embrace a wide range of policy actors. The previous programmes display some of the dilemmas of social participation in social reform: notably on the part of practitioners and local communities, using these European initiatives to call their local and national governments to account.

Finally, these programmes suggest that cross-national policy learning will require political courage on the part of the European policy makers responsible. It is not surprising that European social policy development has seen heroic periods but also periods of quiescence, as windows of opportunity open briefly but then close again, depending on the wider dynamics of European politics (Kingdon 1984, Ch 8). Purposeful opportunism is perhaps the best that can be hoped for. Nevertheless, positive support for social and economic renewal may be necessary, if public engagement with the European project is not to be lost, especially in the hard times that now loom (Room 2007).

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