

SESSION D: TAKING FORWARD THE EU SOCIAL INCLUSION PROCESS

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Introduction

Tony Atkinson, Bea Cantillon, Eric Marlier and Brian Nolan must be congratulated on Chapter 6 of their report. It is a very helpful and forward looking contribution. It raises most of the key issues that need to be addressed in the future development of the EU Social Inclusion Process. It reflects well many of our perspectives in the Commission so I will just concentrate on three aspects: the common objectives, the format of the NAPs/inclusion and the exchange of learning.

Before going into the particular issues there are three points I would stress that we should bear in mind as we consider the future orientations of the Social Inclusion Process.

First, it is important to be realistic about what the OMC can achieve. It plays an important role in promoting greater social inclusion but it does have limitations and we should not expect the impossible of it. It is only one tool and it may also be useful to explore other complementary ways of promoting greater social inclusion. For instance, one could explore further the possibility of setting minimum standards in key areas such as reintegration in the labour market or minimum income schemes.

Secondly, it is important to remember that the Social Inclusion Process is still relatively new. Progress has been made and we should be trying to consolidate and build on successes rather than radically changing the process at this stage of its development.

Thirdly, there are, in my view, 5 key dilemmas or challenges that we will need to address as we try to strengthen the process for the future. These are:

- How can we make the NAPs/inclusion more focussed and strategic while maintaining a multi-dimensional approach?
- How can we maintain a balance between prevention and alleviation, and between a universal and targeted approach?
- How can we maintain a balance between a focus on policies and on processes?
- How best can we ensure a distinctive and dynamic identity for the NAPs/inclusion within a streamlined OMC on social protection and social inclusion?

- In order to better embed or mainstream the NAPs as a strategic process in national policy making how can we better reconcile the different time frames of the NAPs process with national policy making time-frames and procedures?

Common objectives

The Common objectives are key to the whole Social Inclusion Process as they provide the agreed political framework from which everything else in the OMC should flow. In this regard I would make several points.

The report tends not to give enough attention to the common objectives. While the question of indicators, targets, analysis and monitoring are all important they are secondary. That is to say they should flow from and link back to the objectives. If we get the objectives right then we are much more likely to get the other aspects right.

I agree with the report's proposal for two-tier objectives as this allows for simplification in terms of a few headline objectives while preserving the detail that is needed within the particular strands. However, the report could be more specific on the content of those tiers. The first tier might have three or four overarching objectives. These would aim to:

- encompass the three strands of the streamlined OMC (i.e. inclusion, pensions, health care);
- cover both policy and governance issues; and
- link to the “new” Lisbon strategy on growth and jobs and to the sustainable development strategy.

How exactly they should be framed will need careful consideration. However, by way of illustration, the first tier might look something like the following:

- (i) ensure social protection systems in all their dimensions are adequate to prevent and eradicate poverty and social exclusion and to promote greater social cohesion;
- (ii) ensure social protection and social inclusion policies contribute to achieving sustainable economic growth and high levels of employment;
- (iii) ensure good governance arrangements are in place which will “mainstream” social protection and social inclusion at all level of governance

The second tier of objectives should be broken down by each strand (i.e. inclusion, pensions, health care). The social inclusion strand needs to reflect the multi-dimensional nature of social exclusion and to take into account the 7 key policy areas that have emerged as priorities to date in the social inclusion process (i.e. access to employment, adequate social protection, decent housing for all, access to good quality education and health and long-term care services, child poverty and discrimination and integration of ethnic minorities and immigrants).

It will be important that these second tier objectives should include detailed objectives in relation to process/governance issues as is the case with Objective 4 in the current objectives. In particular they should cover: political and administrative arrangements for co-ordinating and mainstreaming social inclusion in national policy making; arrangements for “proofing” all policies from a social inclusion perspective; links between different levels of governance; arrangements for mobilising all relevant actors; arrangements for monitoring and reporting (including specifically to national parliaments); requirement to develop national strategies on indicators for social inclusion; arrangements for capacity building.

New format for NAPs

In my view page 157 is perhaps the most important part of the whole report. I agree that a new “strictly objective driven” format for the NAPs is needed. This will allow MS greater flexibility to select key issue and to adjust their NAPs/inclusion to national circumstances, which is in fact already happening to some extent. It will encourage more Member States to move from just reporting on policies to developing a real strategic action plan. Developing a plan than then involve a clear three-step process.

Step 1: I agree strongly with the proposal in the report to use common objectives as a framework for rigorously analysing key poverty/exclusion challenges and for assessing strengths and weaknesses of existing responses in relation to these challenges. In other words this implies using a multi-dimensional approach to assessing the state of play and identifying most urgent areas requiring attention.

Step 2: The next stage is to select a **small** number of key policy objectives (i.e. 3 or 4) where new or additional action is essential and where effort will be concentrated. Outcome targets should then be adopted for each of these objectives. Clearly these are for Member States to choose and justify. However, it may be worth considering having one issue that is common to all NAPs/inclusion. For instance, given the emphasis on child poverty in the existing NAPs/inclusion and in the conference report, this could be made a requirement for all. Also, given that access to health care and pensions will already be covered by the other two strands of the streamlined process it seems to me logical that these should not be made key policy objectives in the social inclusion strand.

While I think it is sensible that Member States may choose which policy objectives they will focus on, I think that they all should have to specifically spell out how they will address all the objectives in relation to governance. This will help to ensure two things. First of all it will mean that, on an ongoing basis, all Member States have to mainstream poverty across all policy areas (not just the ones they are concentrating on in their NAPs) thus ensuring a multi-dimensional approach. Secondly, it will mean that they are linking their NAPs into national

policy making processes and are involving the different levels of governance and ensuring participation of relevant actors.

Step 3: This should outline what actions are proposed in order to achieve each of the 3 or 4 selected objectives. In doing this it will be important to insist that the approach to each selected policy issue is truly multi-dimensional and that actions are integrated and reinforcing. For instance, if addressing the question of tackling child poverty it would be important to take into account employment, income support, child care, education, social and health services, housing and environment, child protection, access to sport, culture and recreation etc.

Overall I think that that the report makes a strong case for maintaining within the streamlined OMC a distinct process to develop a NAPs/inclusion. This is consistent with the approach taken by the Social Protection Committee up to now. However, it will be important that the NAPs/inclusion is then brought together at Member States' level with the equivalent strategic reports on pensions and health care. An overarching section drawing out common themes between the three strands could be included before submission to the Commission.

Strengthening exchange of learning

The exchange of learning and best practice is an increasingly important aspect of the social inclusion process where real value is added to efforts of Member States. Developing this further and improving the dissemination of learning will be very important in the future. It maybe also needs to be linked more with training and capacity building to achieve its full effect.

I agree with the suggestion in the report that such exchanges should focus on both policy and process questions. In this regard the new Community action programme, PROGRESS, should build on the existing experience of the Community action programme on social exclusion, particularly in relation to peer reviews, transnational exchange projects, thematic studies etc. In addition, it might be worth considering each year selecting one or two key issues and then (on the basis of transnational comparisons and drawing on research, exchange projects, NAPs etc.) to prepare a Commission report on good practice in that area. This might even suggest minimum standards or benchmarks that Member States should work towards.

One final point. I am not convinced of the proposal in the report to go back to the EU Poverty Programme model of demonstration projects. I think that this could distract from the more strategic approach we have now developed. Of course, in some countries, especially many of the new Member States, there are real difficulties about funding innovative projects. However, I believe it would be better to explore how in the future we can use Structural Funds more creatively in

support of social inclusion objectives and the development of new and innovative initiatives.