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## Fighting poverty and social exclusion among children: Some shared challenges for EU Member States

In our Newsletter No. 2-2007, we emphasised that a key priority for the streamlined EU Social Protection and Social Inclusion Process throughout 2007 would be to analyse in more depth the issue of poverty and social exclusion among children. In this context, we briefly described important initiatives and analytical reports that will feed into this in-depth examination. The hope is that this will lead to a successful outcome and that this can then provide an important model for analysing other key social inclusion issues at EU level in 2008 and subsequent years.

The national reports on tackling child poverty and promoting the social inclusion of children, prepared in the first semester of 2007 by the members of the European Commission's Network of non-governmental experts on social inclusion, are part of this analytical exercise. These reports examine the nature and extent of child poverty in each expert's country, describe and assess the overall policy framework for coordinating and developing policies for preventing and alleviating child poverty, analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the main policies, assess national arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the impact of policies and provide an extensive bibliography of available studies and reports on this issue<sup>1</sup>.

From the Synthesis Report, which the Network Core Team prepared on the basis of the 27 national experts' contributions, it is clear that

child poverty and social exclusion is a problem affecting all Member States and that in most EU countries children are at a greater risk of poverty and social exclusion than adults. However, there are also significant differences in the extent and intensity of the problem both between countries as well as between different regions and between urban and rural areas within countries. There are also important variations in the composition of child poverty and social exclusion. Member States where the proportion of children at risk of income poverty is highest also tend to be the countries where the problem is most severe and where urgent action is most needed. All this means that "there is no one simple solution to child poverty and social exclusion. Countries are at very different levels of development and need to develop policy packages which take account of these different policy challenges."

According to the authors of the Synthesis Report, even though there is a great diversity in the extent, intensity and nature of child poverty and social exclusion, there are a number of shared challenges which, although they do not all apply to every country equally, do constitute challenges in a significant number of countries.

<b>Fighting poverty and social exclusion among children: Some shared challenges for EU Member States</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>ACCESS for all</b>	<b>2</b>

<sup>1</sup> The 27 national experts' reports and the related Synthesis Report can be downloaded free of charge from: <http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net/policy-assessment-activities/reports/first-semester-2007>.



These shared challenges include<sup>2</sup>:

- the high number of poor and socially excluded children living in jobless households or households with a low work intensity;
  - the high risk of poverty and social exclusion faced by children growing up in lone-parent families and in larger families with three or more children;
  - the significant number of children living in households where one or both parents is in work but the income is insufficient to lift the family out of income poverty (in-work poverty);
  - the persistent gender inequalities in terms of access to employment, levels of remuneration and the sharing of caring responsibilities;
  - the low levels of income support for families with children in some countries;
  - the high risk of poverty and social exclusion faced by some groups of children such as immigrant children and children belonging to some ethnic minorities (e.g. Roma children), children growing up in institutions, children with a disability, children who are victims of violence, abuse and trafficking, children who are unaccompanied migrants;
- the high levels of early school leaving and school failure amongst children growing up in poor and socially excluded families;
  - the multi-dimensional nature of child poverty and social exclusion, which shows that income poverty and lack of resources are frequently associated with having poor health, living in inadequate housing and a dangerous environment and/or having poor access to key services such as health services, social services and child care services;
  - the lack of opportunities for many children growing up in poverty and social exclusion to participate fully in society and in particular in normal social, cultural and sporting activities.

These shared challenges and the evidence of the high level of poverty and social exclusion experienced by children across the EU demonstrate the need for a continuing priority to be given to this issue over several years if a decisive impact is to be made on eradicating child poverty and improving the well-being of children.

The shared challenges and the key conclusions put forward in the Synthesis Report, together with other outputs, including the in-depth report prepared by the EU Task-Force on Child Poverty and Child Well-Being and the recent responses of Member States to a EU Social Protection Committee (SPC) questionnaire on child poverty, will inform the Peer Review on child poverty that the SPC will hold in Brussels on 3 October 2007.

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<sup>2</sup> The full Synthesis Report, which covers all 27 Member States and addresses many more issues, can be downloaded from: <http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net/policy-assessment-activities/reports/first-semester-2007/synthesis-report-2007-1/>.

## ACCESS for all

### Malta's one-stop shop for social services

Celebrating its fifth birthday this year, ACCESS is a one-stop shop for social services situated in Malta's Cottonera region that brings together under one roof community services, a family and childcare centre, a housing authority, a day care centre for people with a disability, a social

security office, an employment and training centre and a computer technology learning centre. In June, expert peer reviewers from seven other EU countries and two EU social inclusion stakeholder networks visited the centre, as part of the European Commission's Social Inclusion Peer Review Programme. They found elements in ACCESS that might be transferable to other Member States<sup>3</sup>.



ACCESS is very much rooted in the community that it serves. Malta's Cottonera and Kalkara are among the most densely populated areas in Europe, and they have more than their share of social problems. There is a high proportion of unemployed people, early school leavers and households living on social benefits. The peer reviewers highly appreciated the shared vision and stated objectives of ACCESS. They were also particularly impressed by the advantages of grouping different social services together inside one building with a fairly open lay-out. Because a whole range of services are on offer, nobody is stigmatised by entering the building. And the juxtaposition of the childcare and job centres, for example, has obvious benefits for parents seeking employment. Also praised were the efforts made to consult and involve the clients at all stages. The clients themselves are obviously satisfied. The rate of self-referrals to the centre's services is very high. There are plans to establish similar centres in other areas of Malta.

A carbon copy transfer of ACCESS to other contexts would not work, the reviewers felt. But the principles underlying the centre could be adapted to different situations. Local community needs should be identified. Then, a resource centre can be set up with the services and facilities that match those needs. Providing holistic services for parents and their children is particularly important, the reviewers stressed. Quality guidelines for childcare have to be established and licensing systems must be in place. Most importantly, inspections and monitoring must be carried out to ensure that quality levels are reached. Nor should teenagers be forgotten. In particular, they sometimes need help with the transition from school to work. The eventual cost of not investing in young children can be very high, the peer reviewers emphasised. More funding needs to go into childcare in most Member States, notably in disadvantaged areas. ACCESS provides a very good model of a multidimensional approach to child well-being. The addition of healthcare to the ACCESS centre could make that model complete.

Points drawn by Malta from the Peer Review included trying to build services for children over the age of 3 into the ACCESS cooperation structure, working more towards having a child/family centre, and also possibly bringing in the health services, as advocated by a number of the participants.

The peer reviewers also discussed how to monitor and evaluate the results of policies regarding early childhood care and education. They exchanged views about the desirability of performance benchmarking. A number of countries gave details of their systems. It was felt that scientific evaluation can produce evidence that is very useful for guiding policy. Another issue emphasised was that social work needs to be high-quality and well-paid. To avoid the growing phenomenon of in-work poverty, people need to be supported by a range of social services, including care, education, housing and healthcare. Provision also has to be made for tackling two issues of growing concern within the Member States - financial exclusion and over-indebtedness. The problem-solving approach is another lesson that can be learnt from ACCESS. The community level is the best one at which to tackle the specific needs of service users. However, quality standards also need to be set, and their implementation must be monitored. Planning needs to specify who does what, as well as the budgets required. EU structural funds are now even more committed to supporting work on social inclusion. The ACCESS approach reflects a priority that is also found in the EU's social inclusion work, namely breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty.



Children having fun at the Smartkids Family and Childcare Centre in ACCESS

<sup>3</sup> The report and the minutes of this Peer Review and the papers that were prepared for it can be downloaded from: <http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net/peer-reviews/2007/access-cottonera-community-resource-centre>