



Netherlands 2004

Social activation experiments in the Netherlands

Comment Paper, EAPN





A Comments on the evaluation report

The method:

It is a pity that the evaluation gives only the opportunity to an expert to collect secondary data, not of the most recent for some of them, and not to lead a complementary research including meeting with people concerned.

More over, there are important lacks in existing data: we do not know the number of people concerned, the figure are 'based on the evaluation of (sub) samples of SA experiments for minimum income recipients ; not necessarily representative for all SA projects around the country'.

The report then remains highly theoretical. Even if some theoretical tools given are very useful for analysis and discussion, one can ask if it does reflect the reality on the ground.

Such important evaluation could contend one academic expert report and one other gathering more directly the voice of people concerned, prepared by a NGO. We hope that Dutch organisations representing people experiencing poverty will be participating at the seminar.

The content

Since the project seems still to concern a limited number of person ('no more than 3,5 % of the potential target group'), it is difficult to draw conclusions.

The use of the notion of employability is subject to question: this notion seems to be underpinned by a point of view from which the person is responsible for its own unemployment.

The statements regarding the links between freedom and capability are interesting, since they show that making choices can be difficult for some people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, but can be dangerous if used to support the limitation of choice for people. It should better been argued for an increased support and capacity building to help people making their own choices.



B Comments on the Netherlands SA schemes

- First it is to stress that EAPN has been calling for years for a commitment of public authorities to provide jobs and activities likely to increase social inclusion, consequently we welcome the positive action taken by the Netherlands in that direction, and do not underestimate the positive results raised by the expertise.
- Moreover, these experimentation shows how important are the personal factors to be taken into consideration when talking about inclusion.
- But assessing this experimentation as well as its transferability is difficult without a broader picture of the situation and policy in the Netherlands. Here we have more questions than comments:
 - It seems that there was an evolution in the last few years in the activation practice of The Netherlands from social activation with the objective of inclusion through socially useful activities to a more labour market orientated activation. How such an evolution can be explained? Did this SA experimentation have an influence on policies operating at a larger scale, or on the contrary, did this experimentation –as suggested by the report- have been strongly influenced by the evolution of main policies?
 - How does this experiment fit in the broad situation regarding unemployment: what impact does it have on unemployment figures? How concretely are selected the participants at local level?
 - In parallel with these personalised schemes, to what extent collective work is organised? If EAPN welcomes tailor made approach, the importance of groups should not be undermined, in terms of empowerment and problem solving.
- Then, regarding the SA itself, lots of questions of importance remains:
 - In the Netherlands, such matters are managed by local authorities: what are the monitoring and regulation means at national level? (It is surprising not to know the number of people involved!)
 - Concerning activities such as voluntary work, work trial placement, what is the quality of the work offered? What are the conditions, entitlements? What consideration do people receive? In terms of income, does participating to this scheme concretely increase their standard of living or does it make them kind of ‘working poor’?



- Concerning training and care: what is the quality and adequacy of the activity proposed?
 - Is there a risk that these subsidised workers substitute for regular workers, weakening the organisation concerned? More generally, it seems important that clear distinction is made between voluntary/paid work in NGOs to keep the specificities of each.
 - In these 'work-related' activities, what kind of support do these people receive to help them sustain the effort made? This experiment does not seem to include a support by persons or bodies distinct from the administration, which can be very useful for the people concerned to deal with public authorities.
 - What are the results of this experimentation in terms of gender? What is the percentage of women involved in the SA, and what is the percentage of women who drop out?
 - In terms of individual rights:
 - What is the quality and accessibility of information they are given, regarding especially the fact that they participate in an experiment and that rules may change...
 - What are their possibilities to appeal on decisions regarding their situation in the schemes?
 - What monitoring of their conditions of activity is guaranteed?
 - Did organisations representing the interests of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion participate in the definition of this experimentation? Are they involved in the follow-up? Did a public debate happen at local or national level on this experimentation?
- A very important point is that compulsion seems to play a quite important and increasing role in this experimentation. More information should be gathered about the concrete sanctions and means of pressure used. Anyway, it should not lead to compulsory work, and infringement of human dignity. Incentives should rather be positive ones.

C Link with activation policies in the other Member States

EAPN is paying attention to activation policies on going in Member States. We already stressed the following points:



- There is a tendency to see employment as the main factor for inclusion, and policies tend to push benefits claimants back to work at 'any price'. This can have negative effects regarding inclusion.
- Moreover, the need to create jobs in order to fight unemployment and social exclusion should be born in mind.
- Some activation policies are based more on the need of economy than on the needs of people to live in dignity.
- Compulsion is used in some schemes with the effect of increasing poverty and social exclusion, by way of cutting benefits and jeopardizing the relations between benefit claimants and social services.
- Schemes aiming at bringing people back to work or social activities should pay attention to their effect on family life and the type of childcare provided.
- Broadly, incentives to take on work are more often negative than positive. 'Trap based' ways of assessing schemes should not be developed, since they do not take account of psychological factors, and more often lead to benefits cuts.
- On the contrary, EAPN pledges for positive incentives, access to sustainable, quality, decently paid jobs, an approach based on access to rights to all, specific action aiming at giving people in difficulty the support they need, participation of all relevant stakeholders.
- *(Comments from the French network)* In France, the new 'Revenu Minimum d'activité' created a new link between minimum income and integration in employment. It is strongly criticised by associations working in the field of insertion since these contracts do not give the right to the same level of social protection as other workers, neither to some financial incentives to work.



The French policies should get inspiration from the Dutch experimentation for:

- giving a stronger emphasis on the importance of the ‘contrat d’insertion, and widen the field of activities likely to be taken up in the framework of this contract,
- supporting subsidised jobs in the non profit sector,
- creating financial incentive to voluntary work for people receiving minimum income.

Important question being raised and debated in France:

- the recognition by the public opinion of the difficulties for some people to go back to work, but their aspiration at employment and social recognition,
- the need to design subsidised/ protected/ inclusive jobs so that they do not weaken the opportunities to take on a ‘normal’ job,
- The importance to address the work force shortages in some specific sectors: these shortages feed in the feeling of the public opinion that unemployed people do not sincerely wish to reintegrate the labour market.