



Italy 2004

Preventing the Risks of Exclusion of Families with Difficulties



Minutes

Peer Review Meeting
Rome
24-25 February 2005

on behalf of

 European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities





Peer review of two projects within the framework of Italian Law 285/97 to promote the rights of children and adolescents:

- *The Mowgli project for the provision of home and financial assistance to families in difficulty in Cigno Mountain Community, Valle Biferno, Campobasso.*
- *The Centro Pollicino for the support of foster care, adoption and child sponsorship, in Rome.*

Day 1

On behalf of the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Director General for Employment **Ms Lea Battistoni** welcomed all the peer review participants to Rome. She noted that Secretary of State Ms Maria Grazia Sestini was regrettably not able to attend the meeting due to other commitments.

Welcome address

The Director General for Social Policy **Mr Giovanni Daverio** pointed out that the peer review meeting formed part of a debate on social inclusion that is of central importance to social policy in Europe, founded on the principles of solidarity and reducing inequalities in society.

The European Union's ambitious Lisbon Strategy sets out a clear agenda for economic growth and social development, with social inclusion as a central element.

During its presidency of the EU, the Italian government drew attention to the role of the family and called for innovative measures to support families and safeguard the rights of children. The European Commission's second *Joint Report on Social Inclusion* (2003-05) confirms the importance of family policies in this context. Family solidarity is strong element of the Italian approach.

Prevention of social exclusion is important in the Italian context, and recently the emphasis has started to focus on delivery of general policies with a long-term perspective.

In Italy, poverty relates not only to economic factors but also to vulnerability. The Mezzogiorno region, for example, in the south of Italy, is poorer than other parts of the country. Social exclusion is having a major impact in both metropolitan and rural areas, and larger families are especially at risk. A close relationship exists between welfare systems and the protection of minors in families.



The Italian government's *White Book on Welfare*, published in 2003, recognises that families are central to the promotion of social inclusion, for maintaining the relationship between generations, and for protecting the most vulnerable members of society, including elderly and disabled people and children. In this sense, families are not merely a set of individuals but also a place where resources can be put to better use. Families are an important element in welfare policy, although not the only building block.

This is not related to any ideological view of the family, but simply to the successful pursuit of social inclusion. In the face of growing challenges to the stability of the family, including demographic changes, expanding existing services is necessary, but is not sufficient. Italy is aiming to adopt a wide-ranging and integrated approach to assisting families as part of the social fabric, and is therefore undertaking a reform of the welfare system, by:

- Adapting tax systems to take account of the needs of families;
- Developing comprehensive local services to cater for their needs, and in particular the needs of young children;
- Developing measures to reconcile professional life and family.

Unfortunately, Italy is lagging behind many of its EU neighbours in terms of services for children from 0-3. Average coverage of care facilities is only 7%, although in some parts of the country it reaches 24-25%.

The government put aside €300 million for support to new couples starting families, as well as resources for workplace crèches and other measures.

Many women in Italy now work outside the home and do not have the time they need to care for children. In the workplace, maternity is frequently viewed in terms of lost productivity rather than a benefit for society. The Italian government has therefore set out to promote flexibility in the labour market, with part-time jobs to enable parents to combine work and childcare.

Italy has been undergoing a major restructuring in the area of social policy, with the implementation of Constitutional Law 03/01. This innovative measure delegates activity to the regional rather than the national level. Central government provides a general framework but it is up to the regions to define needs and priorities, which are implemented through local plans (*piani di zona*).

Mr Daverio said the peer review meeting reflects the good practice being carried out at local level, building also on a strong horizontal and vertical relationship between different players, both public and private, including local associa-



tions and voluntary workers. All these actors are instrumental in addressing the needs of families.

In conclusion, Mr Daverio said Italy is giving priority to the rights of young people and raising awareness, recognising that large families are most vulnerable. The government has developed a *National Plan for Childhood and Adolescence*, which prioritises reducing school drop-out rates, child labour and juvenile crime. At a ministerial meeting in Lucca in 2003, the 29 countries present issued a joint document on fighting child labour in collaboration with schools and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). At national level, the government is committed to implementing the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to give every child the opportunity to benefit from family life, through promoting networks for family support and special measures for disadvantaged children. Children are better off living in families than in institutions, and temporary childcare arrangements should be based on family structures – Italy is therefore promoting foster care and adoption.

Mr Daverio said the plan aims to reinforce the relationship between institutional players and develop interventions on behalf of families and society. Specific targets for the short, medium and long term, with appropriate indicators, accompany each objective. The government is assessing progress, with the aim of achieving synergy between families and the programmes offered to them.

Introduction

Ms Marie-Anne Paraskevas, from the European Commission's DG Employment and Social Affairs, thanked the Italian government for hosting the peer review meeting, demonstrating its commitment to fighting social exclusion.

The primary goal of the peer review process is mutual learning, said Ms Paraskevas. Representatives from the peer countries expect to learn how their colleagues have been able to respond to the needs of families in a society that has been undergoing major change. They expect a frank and objective account not only of what works well, but also of what does not work as planned, or not at all. The host country, in turn, can benefit from the comments of the peer group members, and from similar experiences in their respective countries. The second objective is to facilitate the transfer of successful policies. This places a special responsibility on the participants – especially those close to policy-making in their own country – as key actors in this transfer, in view of



their privileged access to information. This can also be supported through wide dissemination of results, via a website, newsletter and specific reports. Countries are not called on to compete, said Ms Paraskevas, but to understand why certain policies are successful and whether they can be adapted to different cultural, institutional and economic contexts.

The third objective of the programme is to improve the effectiveness of policies and strategies. This is a vital challenge, since social inclusion policies are still met with some scepticism, if not criticism, in many circles, where economic and employment growth are viewed as the only way to tackle poverty and social exclusion. The Peer Review Programme should look for success stories, or at least inspiring stories.

Two other instruments exist under the Open Method of Coordination. The Transnational Exchange Programme promotes the exchange of good practice between at least three Member States (plus Bulgaria, Romania and the EEA). It currently supports 31 projects involving more than 150 local authorities, NGOs, research bodies and service providers in networking and exchanging information. The Commission is currently evaluating the latest round of proposals submitted by 18 February for projects due to start in the summer.

The peer review meetings organised by the Social Protection Committee also examine Member States' National Action Plans for social inclusion (NAPs/Incl) to assess how successfully each one translates EU common objectives into national policy.

Finally, Ms Paraskevas reaffirmed the Commission's view that social objectives remain central to the Lisbon Strategy. The new Social Policy Agenda draws particular attention to the need for intergenerational solidarity, in which families play a crucial role.

Ms Battistoni agreed that at a time when the EU is preparing for the second phase of the Lisbon Strategy, it is important that social inclusion should be maintained as a priority for action. Both national and European governments have neglected young people's welfare, in particular, in recent years.

Peer review manager **Mr Kai Leichsenring** made a presentation (see annex 1) outlining the objectives of the meeting:



- to present and discuss Italian policy in the field of social inclusion;
- to present and evaluate the Italian policy analysing two models of good practice;
- to visit one model of good practice in Rome;
- to discuss key issues and assess the transferability of the Italian policy (model projects);
- to identify shared conclusions;
- to evaluate the peer review.

He emphasised that assessment of the peer review process itself makes an important contribution to the success of future meetings.

An example of good practice in preventing and combating social exclusion of families and children at risk

Introducing the first model of good practice, the **Mowgli** project for the provision of home and financial assistance to families in difficulty in Cigno Mountain Community, Valle Biferno, Campobasso, the president of the *Comunità Montana* (a grouping of local municipalities), **Mr Michele Liguori**, said he was proud that the project had been chosen for review.

In the wake of the Law 285/97, the *Comunità* decided to act more incisively in support of families and individuals in difficulty, by setting up a programme of solidarity. The authority covers some 10,000 people in ten municipalities – the smallest with only 150 inhabitants. A psychologist (Ms Paola di Sabato) planned the project, which establishes a chain of solidarity for families with more than one problem, all of them unemployed. She pointed out that work is an important factor in enabling families to support themselves and overcome other problems.

Mowgli is run by a regional cooperative consortium: *Consorzio Molise Solidarietà*. President **Ms Maria Santoianni** said the project, based in a relatively poor community, set out to establish a network for synergy between all social actors responsible for the welfare of children, which would remain in place after the end of the two-year programme. Local authorities, juvenile courts, schools etc were together accountable and responsible for resolving problems, to avoid families being passed from one body to another.

The project centred on two important activities:

- intervention in the homes of families at risk of exclusion, identified by social services;
- general play activities for children.



Each family has a single file, based on an evaluation by social workers and a psychologist and reports sent to the central office (*Centro Infanzia*) in Casacalenda, which formulated, implemented and evaluated a personal plan of action.

The centre also had a support fund, to relieve temporary financial problems, granting vouchers for families' specific needs.

The project ran recreational activities for young people in each municipality, and 'spaces' where families could meet to exchange views (*Spazi Famiglia*). One locality lacking facilities for adolescents, for example, set up a meeting place for 14 to 19-year-olds. Services are based in municipal or school premises. "Schools were very interested in helping the families out. This is quite unique because in the past it did not happen," said Ms Santoianni.

Another activity – a summer camp for teenagers – brought together participants from different municipalities and enabled each of them to find out what others were doing.

The project advertised for and hired specialist staff. It launched its own continuous education programme with a view to establishing a common language and overcoming communication problems between different actors. Ongoing evaluation allowed for readjustment of activities, which were always developing and never static, concluded Ms Santoianni.

Comments from the peer group

In the first round of comments and questions, **Ms Heidi de Pauw**, Secretary General of the stakeholder network Eurochild, said she was glad to see the project balanced recreation and education. Eurochild's analysis of the Member States' NAPs/Incl in 2004 found too much emphasis on education and work, and too little on sports and cultural needs. She asked whether children are directly consulted on issues affecting them.

Eurochild is an international, non-profitmaking organisation, funded by the EU social inclusion programme, which works to defend the rights of children and fight child poverty through lobbying European institutions on behalf of its member organisations. "We want the voice of children to be heard at international, EU and national level," she explained.

Peer group members had a number of other **questions** about the Mowgli project. **Mr Nicos Peristianis** from Cyprus wanted to know what kind of educational help was offered to children, and whether providing recreational activities en-



tailed building new sports centres, which would be expensive. Cypriot government representative **Ms Annita Koni** queried how the project contacted and involved families at risk.

Mr Marian Preda from Romania asked about targets and results. Did 'before' and 'after' figures exist on issues such as child abandonment, fertility rates (especially low in both Italy and Romania), and delinquency? "It is important to know what you get for the money spent by public institutions," he insisted.

Ms Maria Keller-Hamela from the Nobody's Children Foundation in Poland wondered what happened if families failed to benefit from the scheme or underwent a major crisis. Did they continue to participate or were they referred to other services? **Ms Yvonne Mallia** from Malta was interested in how the project went about uniting a range of players around a common goal. In her experience this is difficult to achieve, especially when it comes to shifting responsibility from one to another. How did the organisers assess the quality of services provided?

Project psychologist **Ms Anna Falciatore** pointed out that Mowgli was not guided from the 'top down', but formulated in response to families expressing their own needs. Therefore activities were very flexible, and changed as demands changed. Ideas included a painting workshop, and spaces for families and children to meet.

Families who took part were already known to other agencies. They were often confused about whom to approach to resolve their specific problems, and what they could expect in return. The first three to five meetings therefore included a review of what help the family had received and from which service, each having a specific function to fulfil at a given period in the family lifecycle. Only after this did the family sign an agreement with social workers, formalising a commitment to participate in the project.

Funds were allotted in the context of an agreed programme. "We did not want a system that just gave money and that's all. So families also had to take responsibility for the use of funds," explained Ms Falciatore.

With regard to the children, she said that they were "active protagonists" in the meetings, and did express their own wishes. It was important for children to have a 'listening space', which did not exist in some families because the parents themselves were not heard when they were children.

Ms Falciatore said the Mowgli project was not designed to resolve major family crises, and in this event responses needed to be reshaped to bring in other



services. These might include schools, social services, parishes, or even the local mayor. Marginalisation in small towns was less serious than in metropolitan areas, and these networks were often already involved and constituted a reference point for locating families in need.

However, encouraging such players to work together was a major problem. Different institutions (educational, social etc) use different languages. The project had to find the physical space to enable them to sit round the table to negotiate and redefine their roles. "We needed to get to know one another. This may seem elementary, but it was a fundamental step," she noted. "We needed to create space for joint action." This was the most difficult part of the preliminary work, which took a lot of time to complete.

As to results, **Ms Santoianni** pointed out that the project's budget was very modest: €90,000 in total, and all spending was accounted for. Mowgli gave assistance to 13 households in the six municipalities of the *Comunità Montana*, and some 300-400 young people participated in activities.

Ms Paraskevas added that help tends to be targeted at disadvantaged families with special needs (unemployed, immigrant etc), whereas many families that are relatively well off economically still lack the capacity to address the social problems facing their children, such as learning difficulties. These children go without integrated support. "This is a big problem. Social exclusion is not only financial, it also means not being integrated into society," she observed.

Ms Battistoni suggested that Italy may have a better level of social integration than some other EU countries, partly due to the important role of the family in society. However, Law 285/97 was designed not only to address economic problems, but also to implement all the rights set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, regardless of families' financial status. She pointed out also that 100% of projects in Italy are formally evaluated. However, when funds are mobilised at local level it is not always easy to account precisely for how many people have benefited.

Presentation of the discussion paper and main questions

Thematic expert **Mr Yuri Kazepov**, from the University of Urbino, made a presentation (see annex 2) supplementing his discussion paper already distributed to participants, and addressing three topics:



- Overview of the Italian welfare system
- Law 285/97 and its legacy
- Social policy prospects in Italy

1. Overview of the Italian welfare system

The **welfare system** is characterised by a high level of subsidiarity. It follows the southern European model, in which the family and social networks play a very important role in supporting individuals, but do not receive extra resources. In Italy, the geographical divide between north and south permeates all aspects of life. One third of the Italian population lives in the south, but two-thirds of poor households are found there. Almost one in three large families lives in poverty.

Italian pensioners consume almost two-thirds of national resources: a much higher proportion than in most Member States. Furthermore, the impact of social policies is quite small: cutting poverty rates by only 3%, compared with the UK for example, where one third of the population is poor, but social policies have had a 10% impact.

2. Law 285/97 and its legacy

Law 285/97 was groundbreaking from many points of view. It demanded vertical and horizontal integration, and addressed the previously neglected policy area of young people. It represented a major economic investment, allocating some €700 million to children's policies between 1997 and 2004.

The law was based on the premise that protection is not enough: prevention is the key aim, reinforced through empowerment and participation of disadvantaged families. This made 285/97 one of the most innovative laws in Europe over the last ten years. However there was a risk that it did not really address hardship, since the financial support allocated to individual cases was quite small: €500 a year did not make a significant difference for a large family, for example.

Thus, the most innovative element of Law 285/97 related to the involvement of different actors. Its success must be measured on how far it met the needs of neglected target groups: families and children. Law 285/97 did this, but has not been complemented by other measures.



It brought about the involvement of stakeholders in areas where this was something new, forcing them to start thinking in a different way. This in itself was an achievement. Across Italy, over 50,000 social workers were involved in 3,000 projects each year, reaching 1,350,000 recipients.

All of the actors had different roles:

- The **State** was responsible for allocating and monitoring funds, and training and support through the **National Centre for documentation and analysis of childhood and adolescence**;
- The **Region** did the planning and administration, and issued guidelines and approvals;
- The **local authorities** drafted local plans, and were responsible for getting stakeholders around the table and negotiating 'programme agreements'.

Italy's constitutional reform of 2001 (Law 03/01) transferred much greater powers to regional level. Referring to comments already submitted by the peer review participants, Mr Kazepov identified some of the potential risks of unbalanced **vertical subsidiarity**, and the complex situation that now applies: Since regions are the main actors, national law is no longer a uniform reference point. Furthermore, the government has yet to define minimum levels of social support across the board. This is a major problem since there is a risk of growing regional divergence. Where national and regional laws do not coincide, regional legislation tends to take precedence, with the risk of increasing differences between regions. The potential problems of **horizontal subsidiarity** relate to guaranteeing consistent quality of local services and access for isolated communities.

To sum up, Law 285/97 introduced three main innovations:

- Networking activity
- Regular integrated evaluation
- A three-year programme with guaranteed funding

Critical issues

- Italy's North/South divide makes it difficult to achieve uniform results: i.e. results considered a failure in one area could be seen as a success in another.
- Lack of expertise entailed a catch-up process in adopting a new approach to work. Weak contextual analysis made it hard to assess concrete results in a context where there is little tradition of such evaluation.



3. Social policy prospects in Italy

The legacy of Law 285/97 is still relevant since it has been institutionalised in Law 328/00 on integrated social services. This is also an innovative measure designed to define a coherent vision for social assistance policies and co-implementation among stakeholders.

The four-year testing period for Executive Order 237/98 on RMI (a means-tested minimum-income provision) ended in 2002, but also left a legacy with regard to the need for a last safety net.

Law 285/97 fostered a new approach that was not passive – merely limited to the distribution of money – but focused on integrating families into society through training, education, employment etc. However this big change is at risk, largely because minimum standards have still not been defined. The future is uncertain because with regions now the key players in social assistance provision, rights and entitlements may be subordinated to budgetary limits. Whereas in some countries, social rights are enforced by law and must be met, even if the providers overspend, this is not the case in southern Europe.

“After a vibrant period of social policy innovation in Italy, we are now in a wait-and-see period,” concluded Mr Kazepov.

Transferability

Finally, he highlighted some of the most transferable elements of the policy:

- The methodology of a bottom-up approach;
- Laws giving clients rights. In the past, Italian social assistance has been subject to personal favour and ‘recommendation’. This perception has now changed, setting a process in motion which would be difficult to stop;
- Facilities for promoting the participation of stakeholders.

Discussion

Ms Battistoni elaborated on the Italian context, explaining that Law 285/97 came into force at a time of change, before devolution. Since then things have continued to evolve, with Law 328/00 encouraging regions to develop social inclusion agenda and action plans.

The shift from a centralised to a regional approach brought a complicated procedure for the transfer of powers from national government to local authori-



ties. Now, the state earmarks funds and local authorities decide on appropriate policies. She recognised that a gap exists between rich and poor regions, but said local stakeholders have a better understanding of their own situations.

Ms Koni found this fresh thinking very impressive, and queried how the new vision of cooperative action was communicated.

Ms Adriana Ciampa from the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy explained that Law 285/97 also set up an instrument for disseminating information and good practice. The **National Centre for documentation and analysis of childhood and adolescence (www.minori.it)** (*Centro nazionale di documentazione ed analisi per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza*) runs an up-to-the-minute databank and carries out training and technical assistance. It has already published two manuals. This is a very important resource, she pointed out.

Mr Kazepov added that the centre supplied much of the information for the peer review discussion paper. Information available from the website puts Italian policy into a European context.

Ms Paraskevas stressed the importance of the funding offered under the Italian legislation. The Commission is asking all Member States to stipulate the means accompanying measures in their NAPs/Incl, since without funds, they run the risk of remaining on paper and never being implemented.

Ms Battistoni commented that the Italian context allowed for the constructive use of European Social Funds (ESF). However, she was concerned that with the redistribution of funding following EU enlargement, Italy would find it more difficult to access support for social exclusion measures.

Mr Leichsenring listed some of the key issues arising from the participants' comment papers:

- Mainstreaming of projects;
- How to target projects: what means of assessment?
- Education and training e.g. project management;
- Evaluation: what social indicators to use? This is important for the purposes of European comparisons, but often difficult because of the different definitions applied;
- Benefits of foster care;
- Prevention;



- Involvement of families and children;
- Enhancing local partnership: how to get local authorities to participate actively? Providing funds is one answer.

Foster care and adoption in preventing social exclusion of children and families

Mr Francesco Paolo Occhiogrosso, President of the Youth Court in Bari, outlined the legal context in Italy. Law 184, passed in 1983, establishes a child's right to live in a family. Reforms in 1998 and 2001 in conformity with Articles 20/21 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child mean that a child deprived of his/her family has the right to be adopted or to receive assistance from an institution. Such assistance should be exclusively in the interest of the child.

Foster care in Italy is complex and undergoing change, with new measures required to counter social exclusion and protect minors. The main legal principle is a commitment by national and local government not to abandon families at risk. The last 20 years have seen the closure of a large number of institutions, together with recognition of a child's right to know his/her roots. Adopted children are no longer children with no history.

Mr Occhiogrosso explained that foster care is temporary, while adoption is permanent, in the case of abandonment. However, temporary/partial adoption may also take place if a child is not totally abandoned. Existing laws may not be adequate to address the specific problems of international adoptions, he added.

Fostering offers temporary help to children with difficulties. Fostering families may be couples or single people. They must have space to accommodate the child, and be ready to help him or her and to maintain contact with the family of origin. Fostering may be consensual, when the birth parents enter the arrangement voluntarily, or judicial, if it is decreed by a juvenile court. It may be residential or on a day-care basis. The maximum period is two years, although the court can extend it if necessary.

Adoption, on the other hand, takes place only when a child is abandoned by the birth parents. After a one-year trial period, the child becomes legally part of the new family. Adoptive families must comprise a man and a woman, aged between 18 and 45 and married for at least three years.



The third option of 'soft' or **partial adoption** is for children who are not totally abandoned, and allows for some contact with the birth parents to be maintained. A growing number of cases fall into this category. A survey carried out by the Florence-based *Istituto degli Innocenti* indicated that 58% of fostered children do not return to their families of origin. It was therefore appropriate to ask whether normal foster care addresses their needs, or whether it would be better to enable these children to be adopted after a period of fostering, without losing contact with their birth parents. The system is experimental but useful, offering children more certainty about their future.

Mr Occhiogrosso also addressed the question of **international adoption**. He noted the 1980 Hague Convention on international child abduction, followed by worldwide action against trafficking in children. In Italy, a court decides whether a couple is acting in the best interests of the child adopted from abroad. If so, the adoption is ratified in the country of origin.

At the time of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, many children from the region were invited to come to Italy for three months in the belief that this would help them psychologically and physically. However, there was criticism of the wisdom of transferring them to Italian families for a short period of time, during which they received a lot of attention, if they subsequently had to return to institutions in their own country. Where possible, children hosted in Italy should maintain contact with their family of origin.

Commenting on the impact of international adoption in **Romania**, **Ms Alina Marinoiu** said the country last year adopted a new law creating a national office for adoption. The focus now is on national adoption and on encouraging Romanian families to care for children. Foster care families receive an allowance, and children are fostered for 12 months before adoption takes place. International adoption is now the last resort, and criteria are very strict. "We try to stop this movement of children out of Romania," she explained.

New legislation on social services and child protection seeks to develop an integrated system of support for families taking care of children and dependents, and to supply funding to poor regions. After communism, many Romanian children lived in bad conditions in large institutions. Since then, alternative services have been established, and the number of youngsters in institutions has fallen from 80,000 in 1991 to 10,000 today. "We are proud of this," she added.



Money is a problem, and the government is trying to build a system of benefits that does not create dependency, to identify problems and evaluate impact, so as to make improvements.

Mr Preda emphasised the importance of a country's children. After 1989, the birth rate in Romania fell to 60%. Children are a vital resource, and without them there will be long-term problems in funding of pensions. Therefore the country is seeking to boost fertility rates through assistance to families, and looking at successful policies in countries like Iceland and France.

Ms Koni expressed pride in **Cyprus'** successful fostering programme. Foster families are recruited by social welfare services and receive payment. The country has recently introduced group fostering for up to five or six children. Foster parents also receive allowances towards rent, of where fathers stay home to look after children. Families are visited by social workers, who talk to children by themselves in order to ensure good standards of care. She asked how foster families are recruited and approved in Italy.

Mr Bryan Magro from **Malta's** Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity said a new law on foster care has been introduced in the last five years, and carers receive a weekly allowance. Malta has experience of international foster care, but is very wary, since it uproots children from their education, culture, health system etc. Difficulties reintegrating into the family of origin may make this a very negative experience for the child, and there is a fear of exploitation by adults who cannot adopt. Malta is currently developing policies in this area and is therefore very interested in the experiences of other countries.

Mr Occhiogrosso explained that fosterers in Italy receive a small allowance. There is now a move, in France for example, towards 'professional fostering', where people give up other work and take on fostering as their professional activity. This is not usually the case in Italy.

The hardest children to 'de-institutionalise' are those with disabilities, and professional fosterers might be better able to look after them. However, there is also strong opposition on the grounds that economic motives could become more important than humanitarian ones, undermining the benefits of care.

Local authorities select fosterers from the families who volunteer, and Mr Occhiogrosso said he had no reason to doubt the efficiency of this procedure.



He agreed that international fostering presents difficulties. Solidarity-based, short-term hospitality could be used as a loophole in Italian law, for example, to enable potential adopters to 'trial' children and send them back if unsuitable. There need to be strict international criteria.

The role of municipalities in preventing exclusion of children and families – the case of Rome

Ms Raffaella Milano, Municipal Councillor responsible for social policies, said Law 285/97 was very important in earmarking funds to develop services for children, as well as opening up a dialogue between different institutions working in this field and establishing networks.

Rome's *Centro Pollicino* (Tom Thumb) aims to be the single reference point in a large city, offering support to social workers and resources for citizens to fight children's social exclusion. It promotes adoption, foster care, and international support projects. A double-decker bus takes information out to different localities.

Foster care is especially important. Rome has closed all children's institutions two years in advance of Italy's legal deadline of 2006. *Pollicino* also organises fostering for adolescents, disabled and immigrant children, and works with complex care cases.

Families of origin must be supported. It is often very difficult for them to accept sending their child to another family when they are in difficulties, to the point that many would prefer an institution, so mediation between the families is crucial, and the social worker handling the case plays an important role.

The centre also helps families in the juvenile court, and going through the phases of international adoption. This is a lengthy procedure, and rightly so – just as when a child is born into a family. The centre offers support to prevent families being isolated. Following the recent Asian tsunami, *Pollicino* was a source of reference for people who wanted to bring orphaned children to Rome. "We pointed out that it was not appropriate, and that the priority was for them to grow up in their own communities with their own families, if possible," said Ms Milano. "Therefore the best method of support was from a distance." This is part of promoting a culture of the rights of the child, which may not conform to some people's initial emotional response of wanting to give hospitality in their own home. Therefore it is also a means of educating people on human rights.



The centre promotes professionalism in the social and justice services for children and adolescents. It is important to start with the needs of each individual, and create a network of response.

Thanks to funding from Law 285/97, Rome has succeeded in building a long-term comprehensive project in place of isolated one-off initiatives, to meet the grave problems many children face – and not only in the poor suburbs. This is great step forward, she concluded.

Site visit

In the afternoon, the peer review members boarded the 1959 London double-decker bus – now cheerfully decorated with storybook characters – which the *Centro Pollicino* uses as its mobile meeting place. It took them to the site visit at the centre itself.

During the journey, *Pollicino* coordinator **Mr Stefano Vicini** explained that the centre's policy is actively to go out and find clients. The bus is used to host meetings, with adults on the upstairs deck – which has a screen and projector – while children can play on the computers downstairs. The 2001 legislation gives preference to foster families with children, so clients often bring their children with them. Training courses are also held in the evening or at weekends, when childcare is required.

Rome's banks meet the bus's running costs – it does not cost taxpayers anything.

At the centre, the visitors divided into two working groups, to study the two projects in greater detail.

Working group I: the Mowgli project

Ms Elvira Battista, from the *Consorzio Molise Solidarietà*, explained that her Aladdin cooperative was in charge of the Mowgli project in 2000 and 2001, after the planning was concluded. They added the training activity for the social workers involved. **Ms Falciatore** said continuous training was intended both as an instrument for improving workers' skills and as a way of having a better knowledge of the local community. In the event, all the social workers taken on came from the local community itself. Training was focused on objectives and methodology of evaluation and of implementation.

Ms Battista added that after training, local social workers were able to improve the programmes of intervention and to cope with unexpected problems. Fur-



thermore, they acted as motivators, and publicised activities in the local community. She outlined the most complex part of the project: the networking activity. The main aim was to involve many actors, using their own language and objectives, in order to give them a common goal.

Ms Falciatore said many meetings were convened between local players from different services (local civil servants, volunteer family associations, social workers, health administrators, parishes, etc), in order to define short-term common goals. Every player took responsibility for a part of the project, signed an agreement, and arranged periodic evaluation meetings with other stakeholders.

This methodology was used for all the activities, such as family rooms and recreational centres. Thus, networking became the first goal since it provided information on local resources and made the project a collective undertaking. European stakeholder representative **Ms Maryvonne Caillaux** from ATD Fourth World commented that in her experience the poorer a potential recipient is, the harder they find it to enter the welfare system: they are often afraid that social workers will take away their children. How did the consortium deal with this problem? **Ms Falciatore** stated that networking activities and coordination with agencies serving poorer children, such as parishes and schools, helped to reach this target group.

Ms di Sabato said that at first local administrators were afraid of making social interventions in the home, finding it difficult to confront the enormous problems of families with multiple difficulties. As a first step, they needed to change their thinking, replacing pity with strategies for family development. When multi-problem families noticed that social workers were overcoming their own fear, they in turn became more open-minded.

Peer review members asked a number of questions.

How did workers cope with juvenile delinquency or foreign unaccompanied minors? How did they manage the difficult task of involving fathers?

Ms Falciatore said generally the project did not handle emergencies, but worked in the community to combat prejudice, setting up a meeting centre for adolescents. All the disadvantaged children in the area had families, even if they have problems of integration (e.g. Roma families).

Involving fathers was a problem. All family members must sign the agreement with social services, but this measure was not completely effective. The organisers tried to involve grandfathers, who usually had influence over fathers, and in such cases grandparents acted as parents for the whole household. It required a continuous redefinition of objectives.



Mr Preda said he was very interested in the project, because it operated in a small community. In Romania, more than 40% of minors live in the countryside. He asked about the funding system.

Ms Santoianni explained that the regional authority made a call for projects in line with certain guidelines and requirements. Only municipalities and mountain communities were allowed to respond. During the first three years, no co-funding was required, but in the last year local authorities had to contribute an additional 10% to the regional input. The future is uncertain, because the 285/97 fund has been included in the National Social Fund (under Law 328/00), not fully implemented at regional level. At the moment continuity is one of the weak points, since local authorities lack resources of their own.

Mr Liguori said the 285/97 fund was a national fund allocated at regional level. Local authorities proposed projects, and when the region agreed to allocate money, they searched for a partner through a public call. Local authorities in Molise will now apply for support from the National Social Fund. Unfortunately, Molise was the last Italian region to approve the Regional Social Plan, in December 2004. For the next three years funding is not a problem, because national funds allocated to Molise between 2001 and 2004 have not been spent yet.

Ms Ciampa noted that in the six years 1998-2003, Law 285/97 funded 6,000 projects, and Law 328/00, the new framework for social services, inherited its good practices. The implementation of Law 328/00 is becoming stronger, but since resources are shared among all social policies and allocation depends on regional strategies, there is no guarantee that policies for children will get priority.

Working Group II: *Centro Pollicino*

Mr Vicini outlined the work of the centre, set up three years ago.

Child protection means not only defending but also guaranteeing children's rights. This does not imply supplying exactly the same services to all, but does mean offering equal opportunities.

Law 149/01 affirms a child's right to live in a family. The first priority has to be to resolve problems *within* his/her own family. The child should only be placed in a home if foster care is not available, and should only be deprived 'temporarily' of his or her family of origin. An important debate is now underway to define when a minor is temporarily or 'permanently' abandoned. Children under six years should always be placed in 'family-like' structures.



Pollicino provides information on

- Adoption
- Becoming foster parents
- Sponsorship of children or cooperative projects abroad

It aims:

- To decrease the number of children in institutions. The first objective *must* be to help families with difficulties so that children can stay within them. The centre does not set out to increase foster care by taking children out of their families of origin, if this can be avoided.
- To decrease the time a child spends outside a family environment.

Its activities include:

- Promoting foster care, in cooperation with a national awareness building campaign, through advertising, posters, the bus, and meetings in different localities.
- Educating families. Around 10% of applicants are selected as fosterers.
- Managing a database of volunteer families and a register of voluntary associations working in foster care in Rome.
- Reviewing applications from the 19 municipal districts of Rome, which are responsible for children's welfare.
- Placing children in foster care.

Where a family has serious problems and there is a risk the child may be harmed, workers seek first to get agreement by explaining that a period in care will help the whole family.

The route to (consensual) fostering involves getting a request for care, identifying a family from the database, a first meeting with social services responsible for the child, meeting the foster family, meeting the parents, and finally getting everyone together around the table. A programme is then prepared, which all the parties sign. Parents must undertake to attend consultations if required; otherwise it is regarded as permanent rather than temporary abandonment.

If a judge makes the care order (judicial), the foster and biological parents do not meet. The family of origin meets the child in a neutral environment.

Mr Vicini summarised the challenges of foster care:

- the temporary nature of the arrangement should not mean uncertainty for the child;



- foster parents must meet children's needs without replacing their real parents;

"Our aim is to create a sense of belonging, acceptance and love for a finite period of time," he concluded.

Peer review members asked a number of questions:

Why does the centre turn down so many potential fosterers during the selection process? What is the foster family's motivation? If all institutions have been closed, what happens in the event of the foster care breaking down? ? What if the child cannot return to his/her natural parents after two years, especially if the foster family is not interested in adoption? Are there opportunities for international fostering?

Psychologist **Ms Teresa Cacciapuoti** explained that it was not so much a selection process as a question of getting families to evaluate their availability, motivation, time, space, and willingness to devote themselves to the child. "As a psychologist, I need to know the family's reasons for taking part," she added. Families that do not become fosterers can also give help in other ways.

Mr Vicini said that after two years a judge can extend the care. Voluntary care must anyway be renewed every year, although judicial care can last longer. The law obliges social services to reassess the situation after two years and notify the court. Every case is different, and if the child cannot return to the family of origin after two years, it may be necessary to question whether foster care is still the right solution. In this case the foster family may be asked to adopt, or the child placed elsewhere. If the foster family does not want to adopt, it will be asked to help settle the child with another family. The only final constraint is that voluntary foster care may not last longer than ten years.

Rome has closed down large institutions, but not all residential homes. There are currently 290 children in foster care, and about 500 in 94 residential homes with professional staff. This is too many, and reflects a shortage of suitable foster families. However, voluntary fosterers are not available for some children with severe problems or disabilities, so a structure of this sort is indispensable.

Peer review participants expressed a lot of interest in the motivation of foster families and the relative merits of voluntary and 'professional' fostering.

In **Bulgaria**, fosterers are usually related to the child. At one time, there were over 3,200 related foster families compared with only 25 unrelated. In **Poland**



also, only 20% of fosterers are unrelated. However, a new, experimental scheme is offering training and support to professional fosterers who receive a salary and expenses. It is usually the court that decides to place a child in care.

In **Ireland**, all foster parents are professional in that they receive, training, support, and a salary of €300 per week per child.

In **Romania**, it was crucial to find a better solution for the many children in institutions. A new system of foster care in families was developed, with foster parents receiving a small allowance (€50 a month). This increases if the child is disabled, but is still not enough. Professional foster care is being developed. There is now a network of 10,000 volunteers around the country, selected and trained by social services. Up to three children may be fostered in one family.

Giovanna, a *Pollicino* foster parent, explained that she and her husband had a happy home together and decided some years ago that they had the financial and emotional resources to help a child in need.

Mr Vicini said foster parents in Rome receive €312 per month plus exceptional expenses. However the question is being addressed in other parts of Italy. In an experiment in Milan, for example, families are paid €1,200 per month if one of the parents is designated as the full-time carer. At *Pollicino* this is seen as a negative development.

Roman foster families do receive training. **Ms Cacciapuoti** said fosterers are often eager to help people less fortunate than themselves, and look for an experience that will enrich them emotionally. The centre holds group meetings to explain legal aspects, dynamics of relationships, the role of social services, the rights and duties of the foster family, and to share experiences. During initial training, the family can change its mind at any time. If they go ahead, support continues throughout the period of fostering.

As regards international fostering, **Mr Vicini** said proposed legislation is currently under discussion. At present, he gave the example of a single Italian woman who has been caring for a boy from Belarus who wants to be adopted, but the law forbids it. There are always risks attached, and the danger is that children will not want to return to their country of origin. People seeking to adopt are often not known to social services and could even be criminals. He drew attention to the dilemma between helping individual children in the short term, and trying to create a better world with fairer opportunities for all.



Unaccompanied foreign minors are usually over 15, and very difficult to approach. Their own families often send them abroad to earn money. One of the few examples of care for this group is in Milan, where employers support a 'bed and breakfast' project.

Ms Stefania Capocchetti outlined the centre's self-help support groups for foster families. The first one was created in June 2004 and met every 15 days for the first six months. It now meets once a month. Meetings last two hours on Saturday mornings, while children are entertained at a local primary school. They enable foster parents to share experiences and resources and to tackle problems. They underline the positive contribution of individuals, thus raising self-esteem and creating a virtuous circle.

Participants may be single or couples, with a maximum of about 20 people per group. The group includes one psychologist, as facilitator, who observes both verbal and non-verbal communication. All sessions are confidential, and no one is judged or criticised.

Plenary session: feedback on key issues

Participants shared their conclusions on some of the main points from the two projects:

Centro Pollicino

- different structures for fostering exist in different countries;
- concern over issue of international fostering;
- support for efforts to reach out to citizens before they apply for services: 'foster care marketing';
- involving families in decision-making.

Mowgli project

- cooperation between different services;
- good work can be done with small amounts of money;
- all participants need to be responsible/accountable;
- bottom-up approach/local selection of priorities;
- consulting families.



Day 2

Three working groups on the transferability of good practices

Mr Leichsenring listed the key questions for the working groups to answer:

1. What is your general assessment?
2. Which aspects could be transferred?
3. Could Italian approaches be adopted at EU level?

Working Group 1: Facilitator Ms Adriana Ciampa

Within the framework of implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Italy set up a **National Observatory for the Protection of Minors**. **Ms Ciampa** wondered if other countries had similar organisms.

Ms Irena Dankova said that in 2000, Bulgaria set up a special State Agency for Child Protection, which works in cooperation with ministries to develop policy and supervise services. These are implemented at local level by Child Protection Departments of the Social Assistance Agency.

Ireland has recently carried out a major overhaul of family services, which used to be very basic, said **Mr Jim Mansfield**. New initiatives cover support for families, adoption, residential care, fostering, and child protection. The many large institutions for children have been successfully closed, although it is not realistic to close all small residential homes (three to four children).

Ms Caillaux said ATD Fourth World is an international organisation working *with* the very poorest people. Their children's future is often their top priority. Taking account of family continuity is crucial, even when the child is not able to live in the family.

Mr Preda said that more than 40% of rural areas in Romania lack social workers, so projects aimed at support for small communities are particularly relevant.

Ms Keller-Hamela admitted that big institutions with 100 or so children still exist in Poland, describing this as a source of shame in the twenty-first century. Foster families need a lot of support in caring for difficult children, so the Italian foster care model could be transferred, if funding were available.

Mr Domenico Vacaro from the *Comunità Montana* specified that project workers receive two levels of training: a specialist four-month course for those with secondary level schooling, and a master's degree on child protection for graduates.



Ms Paraskevas informed the group that funding is available for training and social development from the ESF, but applicants must go through their own national ministries. She added that the Commission is examining how better to diffuse the findings of the peer review in order to have a greater impact on public awareness.

Ms Ciampa said funding problems also exist in Italy, where spending is capped by the EU Stability and Growth Pact. Funds are allocated to the regions according to agreed criteria based on the number of children and the number of institutions. Many of Italy's almost 9,000 communes have less than 1,000 inhabitants. Some projects set up under Law 285 have now become permanent services with mainstream funding.

Many of Romania's 3,000 municipalities consist of a few villages, said **Mr Preda**. Social workers prefer to work in cities. How does Mowgli recruit staff and resolve problems of distance? **Ms Santoianni** said the communities in Molise are not very remote, but there is a problem reimbursing volunteers e.g. for travel expenses. **Mr Mansfield** said governments must be pushed to make funding available, and not just in response to crisis situations, as happened in Ireland. **Ms Keller-Hamela** agreed, pointing out that children have less power because they cannot vote.

The group also discussed how to involve fathers in childcare projects, and give grandparents an active role in family life. It emphasised the need to empower families to take ownership of projects, and build self-esteem over the long term.

Working Group 2: Facilitator Mr Yuri Kazepov

The group discussed:

- the 'professionalisation' of foster care, with Malta strongly of the view that it should remain a voluntary activity, to ensure that humanitarian motives prevail.
- the need to evolve common standards to govern different projects, and fair funding criteria.

Ms de Pauw wanted to enable children themselves to have more control over policy, and wondered how this could be achieved at EU level.



Working group 3: Facilitator Mr Kai Leichsenring

Vertical integration is not so relevant to Cyprus and Malta, being small countries with centralised services.

Ms di Sabato talked about the problems the Mowgli project experienced in networking between local authorities. Some players drew back at an early stage and this caused conflict. Thematic expert **Mr Eduardo Barberis** said that fragmentation is a real problem in Italy, with more than 8,100 municipalities. Strengthening local partnership has been a major advance for Italian policy-making in the last 15 years, even if not all measures have been successful. **Mr Leichsenring** said incentives may be needed to promote networking.

Ms Mallia was interested in the role of volunteers, who are widely used in Malta. **Mr Barberis** said voluntary associations are active in Italian social policy in general. **Ms di Sabato** added that family programmes draw on all available resources, including volunteers. However, social workers are the main actors, employed jointly by several municipalities, since small local authorities cannot afford the expense by themselves.

Referring to the *Pollicino* project, **Ms Koni** suggested that NGOs could train and select foster families, with the government responsible for legal and financial issues.

There was disagreement about the fairness of a one-year 'trial' period for families and children before adoption. **Mr Vicini** said although screening is carried out in advance, only the child's physical presence can show whether the adoption will be successful. Working in juvenile courts for nine years, he had matched some 250 families and children. In most cases the trial adoption year had a happy ending. **Ms Marinoiu** said Romania has a similar adoption law, with foster care designed to test if the family is suitable for the child, not the child for the family.

Exchange of working group results

Group 1

Transferable aspects

- Mowgli is a model for small communities (especially relevant to Romania);
- Involvement of a range of local actors;



- Bringing services closer to families rather than waiting for families to establish contact.

Relevance at EU level

- National and cultural differences mean it is not appropriate to apply a universal EU-wide model. Flexibility is required, to adapt initiatives to local circumstances.

Group 2

Transferable aspects

- Establishment of a national fund to support regional initiatives, helping to overcome inequalities arising from decentralisation;
- Empowerment of children – adopting a new vision with children as the central focus;
- Cooperation between stakeholders;
- Prioritising support for the family of origin – all peer countries share the aims of the UN Convention.

Relevance at EU level

Different countries have specific needs, but the Open Method of Coordination is important and should be streamlined. Cyprus proposed the development of mechanisms for transfer of good practice at EU level, and for international fostering.

Should be opportunities for EU funding – use of ESF.

Group 3

Positive points

- Methodology of partnership between actors, leading to added value through integrated services, transparency;
- Favourable impact on the community – creating spaces for contact;
- Involving families and children;
- Developing a common language between stakeholders;
- Ongoing evaluation;
- Involving small municipalities and offering incentives for them to work together;
- Bottom-up approach, starting with assessment of families' needs;
- Autonomous self-help groups.



Transferable aspects

- Enthusiasm and dedication of workers – although there was uncertainty about how exactly this could be transferred;
- Partnership between public and private sectors;
- A role for NGOs in recruiting and training foster families;
- Participation of the psychologist as part of the team;
- One year ‘trial’ period before adoption;
- National legislative framework with funding.

Relevance at EU level

The group suggested that new projects might be tested in two countries and then, taking account of specific circumstances, experiences and lessons learned could be extended to others after two years.

The EU could also adopt a Europe-wide policy for supporting families. This would be a tool for combating poverty and would therefore bring economic benefits and resolve wider problems in society.

Mr Leichsenring pointed out that the Peer Review Programme offers opportunities for making cross-border contacts with a view to presenting EU project proposals. It would be interesting to evaluate how successfully this has been exploited.

Ms Paraskevas said the Commission encourages such partnerships by inviting all project promoters to Brussels once a year to network and evolve new initiatives.

National desks dealing with employment issues could also have a social unit, with workers trained to handle questions on social inclusion, pensions and health, for example. To qualify for ESF support, projects must involve three Member States. However, funds are also available to help countries exploit the results of projects.

Mr Leichsenring concluded by identifying four key requirements:

- Resources
- Networking and partnership
- Empowerment of stakeholders
- Documentation



National Centre for documentation and analysis of childhood and adolescence

Mr Ermenegildo Ciccotti, scientific coordinator of the *Centro nazionale di documentazione ed analisi per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza*, outlined the work of the centre, under the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

It employs 30 people plus consultants. Its role includes collecting documentation and running a database, carrying out research and compiling statistics, promoting events and conferences, and making proposals for legislation.

It keeps records of up to 6,500 projects carried out between 1998 and 2002. The national database covers 140 indicators on children and adolescents in Italy, in 19 areas including demography, family, poverty, justice, health, and violence.

The European database covers 70 indicators for the EU-15, as well as a number for the new Member States.

The centre carries out research as requested by the National Observatory.

It has developed software for monitoring child abuse, underway this year in Venezia-Friuli, Lazio, and Calabria – three very different regions with different provision of services – with a view to extending the research later.

Two other research projects have been called for, on:

- Minors outside the family;
- Education services for infants (kindergartens etc).

Law 285/97 provided for training within local authorities on evaluation procedures etc, and enabled the setting up of networks that still exist.

Ms Ciampa drew attention to the work of the informal group of ministries responsible for infants in the EU-15, also open to observers from the new Member States, which has discussed the problems associated with international adoption and legislation on adoption. The next meeting is in Luxembourg in April 2005.

Ms Paraskevas highlighted also the EU informal group on children's rights, with representatives from the Council of Ministers, the Commission and the European Parliament, which aims to coordinate work in this area, and to support lobbying on behalf of children. The new EU Constitution includes a reference to mainstreaming children's rights, and therefore provides a stronger support framework.



Final session: key aspects for transfer and lessons learned

Partnership and involvement of different stakeholders was seen as crucial to the new European social policy vision, providing for both streamlining and subsidiarity.

In **Romania**, said **Ms Marinoiu**, the Ministry of Labour, Social Solidarity and Family organises meetings with stakeholders to examine problems and solutions. The Italian experience could form the basis of a future proposal.

Mr Preda said the most interesting aspects were taking services to families, especially in rural communities, and networking. Given the shortage of resources, Romania has to focus on how to transfer ideas without major cost implications.

Mr Magro said **Malta** is currently amending its adoption legislation. It could usefully consider transferring three elements from Italy:

- a legal basis for fostering, similar to the Italian Law 149;
- the principle of 'soft' adoption;
- a national prevention programme.

Ms Mallia felt there were a number of lessons to be learned on the way services are planned and delivered, in particular using a bottom-up approach and networking.

Ms Keller-Hamela from **Poland** identified the national fund for child support, the documentation centre, and the partnership with local communities as potentially transferable.

Ms Dora Hennessy said **Ireland** is currently developing a strategy on family support and has already considered many of the issues discussed, such as partnership and developing a common language. She agreed that projects must be needs-led rather than services-led, coupled with flexibility and ongoing evaluation. The strategy will be finalised soon and she promised to keep the peer review participants informed. Reports from the family support project *Springboard* were also available. **Mr Mansfield** also highlighted the importance of partnership between stakeholders, both private and public, and taking services to the community, which requires careful planning.

Mr Peristianis from **Cyprus** praised the peer review concept and said he found the event interesting, innovative, and well organised.



Ms Radosveta Mitkova Abadjieva from the **Bulgarian** National Social Rehabilitation Centre said that partnership is the key. She wondered about the possibility of getting existing funding sources together to fund social policy projects, not only for children and families but for all individuals at risk. **Ms Dankova** said Bulgaria needs tools to encourage a partnership approach and involve all service providers, especially for families with difficulties and children at risk. The first priority is capacity building, to encourage the formulation of coherent local strategies.

Ms Abadjieva announced that the first project partnership from the peer review meeting had already been agreed

Mr Vicini proposed an international exchange not only of documentation but also of workers involved in different projects, and suggested the EU could offer financial support to facilitate this.

He added that *Pollicino's* approach of being open to the population is fundamental, and he appreciated the peer group's support for this principle. Some of the best ideas currently implemented by the centre arose from similar meetings that facilitated an exchange of ideas.

Ms de Pauw said one of Eurochild's objectives is to build contacts and transnational exchange between NGOs in different countries. However, obtaining project co-funding is often a big problem since NGOs have few resources of their own.

She promised a wide dissemination of information from the peer review among Eurochild member organisations via the bulletin and website, and suggested that any participant country seeking an NGO partner for a project proposal could advertise in this way.

Ms Ciampa reminded participants that the Italian documentation centre is at their disposal, with its huge range of resources, through the website.

Closing the meeting, **Ms Paraskevas** regretted that the Commission's mid-term review of the Lisbon process failed to give as much weight to social priorities as to employment and growth, and hoped that the forthcoming EU Spring Summit would readjust the balance. Belgium's Prime Minister had already insisted that the social pillar must be maintained.

While active labour measures are very important, getting people into work is not the only key to social inclusion, and she gave the example of couples in



some countries who, even with two salaries coming into the household, face many problems in their daily lives and are at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The Commission's new Social Policy Agenda (2006-2010) has two main axes: employment and social cohesion, and intergenerational partnership. She drew attention to the Partnership for Youth programme currently underway in Member States. The new EU Constitution will be another important contribution to sustaining progress.

A Commission Communication later this year will review the six objectives of the Open Method of Coordination on social inclusion in order to make it more focused and effective from 2006 onwards. It will pay special attention to preventing child poverty and supporting the caring capacity of families. The peer review meeting helped to highlight ways to assist families at risk of exclusion, and its findings will therefore play a role in refocusing the social inclusion process.

Summary of transferable aspects

- The building of horizontal and vertical networks to offer integrated services – identified by the projects as one of the most difficult and time-consuming elements.
- The enthusiasm and commitment of the staff involved.
- The 'bottom-up' approach and empowerment of families by involving them in identifying needs and ways to meet them.
- The principle of actively taking support and information out to people, rather than waiting for them to ask for help.
- The overall objective of keeping children in their own home or maintaining contact with the family or origin.
- Prioritising prevention of problems as cheaper and more effective than treatment.
- A central funding source established at national level but allocated locally according to specific needs.
- The use of small amounts of money to make a difference to communities – many of the peer countries highlighted difficulties in obtaining funds.
- The setting up of a National Documentation Centre on childhood and adolescence.
- The presence of a qualified psychologist as an integral member, but not the leader, of self-help groups.