



Belgium 2005

Minimum Income and Social Integration Institutional Arrangements

Comment Paper, EAPN



on behalf of



European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs
and Equal Opportunities





1) Brief assessment of the possible relevance of the strategy/policy/measure to other EU countries

- Each part of the DIS measure can be of great help in the fight against poverty, and it is important that a wider perspective than only a minimum income is given to social assistance. But what is completely wrong in the construction of the DIS, is to make one element (mostly finding a job) a condition for another element (a minimum income), which is indispensable to live a life with a minimum degree of dignity. Except in case of fraud (when the recipient has other incomes which he hasn't declared), the suspension of the minimum income as a sanction is unacceptable from a humanitarian point of view. What are the consequences when one has no income at all? On the contrary no other alternative can be considered than to accompany and support as much as possible the recipient, so that he/she gets convinced – when the time has come and all other primary conditions are fulfilled – to accept a suitable and decent job.
- Many arguments for this statement can be found in the Discussion Paper and in the host country experts report:
- The system of „encouraging“ the CPAS by giving a supplementary grant (equal to 100% of the integration income – see Discussion Paper p. 14 below) when they end up with an employment project, works in the opposite way as a sanction for the CPAS if the DIS recipient isn't able to get so far and is „only“ able to answer to other types of integration projects. Pressure on the social worker and through him/her on the recipient to accept an employment project often happens in reality.
- By giving so much emphasis on employment and not in an equal way on other integration schemes (like voluntary work, health care, care for family members, education, training...- see host country experts report p. 9) the DIS measure is only partially an anti poverty instrument and thus an incomplete (and thus misleading) anti poverty instrument. Moreover the DIS puts more than before the responsibility on the recipients side and takes less into consideration the incapacity of the labour market to offer adapted and decent jobs to all labour forces. The responsibility of the actors on the labour market is never questioned. In this regard when the



Discussion Paper states that „the problem of long term independency can be solved only in the labour market, and would therefore need more relations with the private for profit actors“ (p. 19) we could eventually agree, but maybe in a slightly different way than the authors mean. We expect the labour market actors (especially the employers) to come to a greater commitment for better and more adapted jobs and job organisation so that the labour market is an instrument likely to provide a decent income through decent jobs, and that people have no longer to force themselves in family and person unfriendly work to fulfil the dominating role of profit in our economic system. We are still convinced that economy has to serve men, and not the contrary.

- Consequently to this, when the Discussion Paper talks about the results of the DIS and asks „how many recipients succeed in entering the „real“ labour market“ (p. 19 below) we think this is a very limited view in terms of social integration. We would support the emphasis the host country experts report highlights on collaboration with „third actors“ (p. 8 below) and the importance of social economy. Social economy should not be seen as an „unreal“ part of the labour market but its principles should be considered as a model for an adapted or reviewed labour market system.

2) Brief assessment of the potential transferability of the policy/measure (as a whole or parts of the approach) in other EU countries and of the likely conditions or obstacles for its application

- We want to emphasise the warning in the draft discussion paper (p.28) that „transferability is a tricky concept as well as a risky practice“. The DIS is meant as an instrument for social integration but only through employment. Much depends on the accompanying measures in the field of training, in looking for a job, for maintaining the job, and last but not least on other basic conditions to be able to take a job, like housing, health, childcare, family care, debts etc... This kind of surrounding measures have to be in place if DIS wants to be transferred to other countries. Also the quality of the labour market and the involvement of third actors on the economic scene like social economy initiatives are of great importance.



3) Note of any important questions about the policy/measure that are being raised and debated in the stakeholders' organisation

- For EAPN Belgium an important document has not been used in the Discussion Paper and is only mentioned in the references list of the host country experts document. Besides the evaluation of Ernst and Young, the Service against Poverty, Precariousness and Social Exclusion (a public inter-federal anti poverty agency, from now shortly called „Anti Poverty Service“) has held also an evaluation in particular with people experiencing poverty, but also amongst social workers. (see <http://www.luttepauvrete.be/publications/servicecpas.htm>). In this brief comment paper we only can summarise some elements or recommendations from this evaluation :
- time is an important element for the recipient to explore the measure (and his complexity) as well as for the social worker to learn knowing the situation of the recipient
- in depth study about non take up through interview of people experiencing poverty about it
- to develop criteria for CPAS concerning an individual project
- to evaluate the content of the individual projects and the reasons why people can't fulfil them
- to evaluate the impact of sanctions and their influence on peoples lives
- increase of the amount of the integration income and linking it to the living standard
- to evaluate the distinction in treatment for young people until 25 and other age categories
- to extend the measure to all categories of foreigners who reside on the territory
- The most worrying aspect of this measure for the associations of people experiencing poverty – which is also mentioned in the host country experts report (on p.5 below) – is the unequal position of the recipient in what is called „a contract of social integration“, Therefore a previous demand of the anti poverty associations, to split up the roles of accompanying on the one hand and of controlling on the other hand is crucial to establish a relationship of confidence between the recipient and the social worker. At the same time this would give a solution to the discretionary power of the social worker, which is mentioned so many times in both reports.
- The principal of „activation“ has gone through quite an evolution in the Belgian context. It started as a policy to activate the „death“ capital of allowances (minimum income and unemployment allowance). The recipient



could take his allowance with him as a loan subvention for the employer for a period of 6 months, stimulating in this way employers to engage minimum income recipients and long term unemployed. But through the years it became more and more a system of activation for the recipients themselves. Also in this way we moved from a structural view on poverty to a more individual responsibility (see also host country experts report p.4).

4) Key issues and main questions proposed for debate at the review.

- If empowering the recipients is one of the most important aims of minimum income measures, these schemes have to go along also with the fundamental and unconditional right to a decent living standard which implies a decent income (through work if possible, but if not by taking other responsibilities - like a learning process or training – or fulfilling a task which is useful for the society - like voluntary work, health or child or elderly care, cultural or artistic work...)

In the framework of the development of active measures throughout the EU, it would be relevant to define at the EU level the criteria of what can be considered as 'good activation', likely to improving personal, social and vocational skills and competencies and enabling to further social integration on a long term basis, respectful of individual's identity and self respect, which does not stigmatise the person nor undermine its social security.

- In the context of growing number of countries where local authorities are given increasing power to design and implement social policies and activation schemes in particular, how to reach a balance between local adaptability (local autonomy and responsibility) in the application of minimum income schemes and equal treatment for all citizens of the same country? How to guarantee that a long-term vision underpins such policies, when local budget, often yearly based, are at stake?
- In the current 'activation framework' where more attention is given to the efficiency of public social spending, how to avoid that a short term vision of the cost/efficiency balance of the schemes implemented is leading to more attention paid to the people who are the most likely to get back easily to work, to the detriment of the most removed from the labour market, with a negative impact on the fight against poverty and social exclusion.