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Social Inclusion cross cutting policy tools

Comment Paper, United Kingdom



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Social Inclusion cross cutting policy tools

Comments and Statements

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This note presents the UK's initial response to the Discussion Paper for the Peer Review on Social Inclusion: cross cutting policy tools. It has been prepared jointly by the UK's National Expert and the lead policy official, Chris Burston, who works in the UK's Department for Work and Pensions.

1. Relevance of the strategy to the UK

Poverty and social exclusion are complex and multi-dimensional problems and it follows that they can only be successfully tackled by means of a wide ranging and multi-faceted strategy. The UK's approach to tackling poverty can be summarised as *work for those who can, support for those who cannot*. For people of working age who are out of work, the strategy focusses on the return to work, including tackling any barriers to the individual's return to the labour market. Tackling child poverty by helping parents return to work, supporting them in work by, for example, increasing access to childcare and increasing financial support for families is an important part of the strategy. The UK Government also seeks to tackle poverty in later life by improving pension provision and saving for retirement, extending working life and through the pension credit. A focus on vulnerable groups, including disabled people and people from ethnic minorities includes tackling discrimination through equal opportunities legislation and targeted schemes to overcome disadvantage.

Such a strategy must, of necessity, involve a wide range of policies and delivery mechanisms. In addition, by its nature, a successful social inclusion strategy has to engage with – and respond to – the views of people experiencing poverty and grassroots and community organisations. In this regard, the development of the UK's National Action Plans has placed particular emphasis on the fourth of the Nice common objectives in this field – mobilising all relevant bodies. Although the UK Government has made progress in this field, with the vital support of key non-government organisations (NGOs) including EAPN, there is still a considerable 'implementation gap', in particular in relation to the engagement of local and (particularly in England) regional government in the process.

The question of how to make progress in this area, as well as the related question of how to improve the participation of civil society in the development of social inclusion strategy, is very relevant as we in the UK (in common with other member states) prepare our social protection and social inclusion report.

2. Assessment of Similarities and Differences

Overall, as the thematic expert's background paper comments, the issues that are being addressed in this Peer Review are the same in most, if not all European countries, in particular the general and, perhaps, theoretical tension between government issues and governance issues (para 2.3.4). The universal requirements for any good strategy – rationale, objectives, analysis, monitoring, evaluation and feedback – are also clearly evident in the French approach. However, we detect from the documentation received so far a number of more specific points of similarity between the approach of the host country and that of the UK and a few specific differences – primarily of a practical nature.

2.1 Similarities

It is clear that in France, as in the UK, social exclusion is tackled through a complex web of policies and delivery mechanisms and that there is an awareness that this complexity can be a barrier to producing the desired outcomes. The division of responsibility between central, regional and local government appears to be broadly similar in both countries, as is the increasing focus on local solutions and the search for new ways of de-centralising power and decision-making. At a national level in the UK, a recently appointed Social Exclusion Minister and a Cabinet Committee on Social Exclusion, supported by a social exclusion taskforce of officials co-ordinates action. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is responsible for the Government's child poverty strategy and many of the policies and services which tackle poverty in working age and later life. DWP also has responsibility for *Opportunity for all* - the UK Government's annual poverty report – and the UK's National Action Plan (NAP) on social inclusion.

As in the UK, it appears that in France, the National Action Plan and the open method of co-ordination are seen as offering new ways of approaching strategic problems in the social inclusion field. Effective links between the UK Government, devolved Governments and local government have been developed in the context of the NAP. This has enabled the UK strategy to respond to local issues and to build on local innovations. The NAP approach is also being followed in developing an anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland and in a Welsh local authority. A focus on engagement with civil society and people experiencing poverty has led to a wide engagement with grassroots organisations over the past year through the Get Heard! process.

2.2 Differences

Inevitably, there are specific differences in the systems of government in the two countries which are perhaps most obvious at national level. As mentioned above, responsibility in the UK for the social protection and social inclusion strategy is split amongst a number of Departments, whereas there seems to be more of a centralised unit in France. The de-centralised approach in the UK reflects the division of responsibility between 'central' Departments (such as the Cabinet Office) with responsibility for co-ordinating the work of Government and Departments focussed on delivery, such as DWP. In practice, the UK's focus on joined up action across Departments and evidence-based policy development mean that organisational boundaries have less impact on the strategy than might at first sight appear.

On a more practical level, it appears easier in France to create new structures to address the problems of poverty and social exclusion – and there are indications that money may be more readily available to take these matters forward. In the UK, much of the progress that has been made in developing engagement and partnership with civil society and across government had been informal and achieved by ‘bending’ existing mechanisms and budgets.

The mechanisms for co-ordination at local level also seem to be different in France. In the UK, *local strategic partnerships* (LSPs) have been developed, initially as a means of re-generating deprived neighbourhoods. The intention was that, led by local government, partnerships between key bodies at local level would be able to develop innovative solutions to local problems which drew on synergies between different policies and services. These LSPs, which have now spread to most areas in England, do not have a specific focus on social inclusion but in practice this is a key aspect of their work. Building on LSPs, the government has introduced a number of further initiatives aimed at linking local and national strategies, including Local Area Agreements and the Cities Strategy (in which DWP will work with local government to tackle worklessness).

3. Transferability

For the UK delegation, there appear to be a number of possibilities for transfer of the policy/strategic approach. These include:

Learning from the operation of the CNLE: in the UK we are in the process of establishing a Stakeholder Group for the NAP, which builds on the experience of the SPTF but which will engage with officials from across government and is intended to have clearer visibility at Ministerial level. Issues which we need to tackle include establishing the legitimacy of this group in a crowded policy arena, getting “buy in” from senior officials and Ministers and issues relating to the running of the Group.

The feasibility of a national monitoring centre (or ‘observatory’) on social inclusion in the UK – and the extent to which other structures in the UK, in particular the social exclusion taskforce and independent research bodies such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation serve the same function.

The use of indicators in the field of social inclusion is an area of particular interest in the UK – we regularly report on 60 indicators in *Opportunity for all* – and we have a wide range of targets which are relevant to the field of social inclusion. Discussion of the French approach – and in particular the use of these tools to support co-ordination and partnership – has potential for transferring good practice.

The paper prepared by the thematic expert helpfully places the French strategy in the context of historical developments: an understanding of the way that the strategy has developed provides an important context for policy transfer.

More generally, the prospect of discussing issues of governance, partnership and engagement with civil society in a transnational context clearly offers significant possibilities for mutual learning and reflection. In this regard, the national paper and the background paper from the thematic

expert raise some very interesting issues around the process of participation which we look forward to discussing during the Peer Review.

4. Important Questions

The UK delegation has the following questions:

- In the context of the French strategy, how are outcomes influenced by:
 - policy documents, such as the social inclusion DPT?
 - structures at national, regional and local level, including in particular the CNLE and the observatory?
 - national conferences?

How is the departmental commission for social cohesion being developed and what are the proposed links between this commission and the regional and local tiers?

How does the outcome of local conferences and forums influence action at regional level (in particular, the regional charters) and national level?

How are budgets linked to the policy tools – and is there any mechanism for linking evaluation of outcomes to future budget decisions?

What are the links between the approach taken by the French government in this area and the open method of co-ordination – in particular, what are the links with the NAP?

How are the views of people experiencing poverty reflected in developing policies at all these levels and what is the impact of these views on policies and actors?