

# National Action Plan for Social Inclusion Irish Social Inclusion Forum

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## 1. Bulgarian context

### 1.1 National Action Plan for social inclusion and the Bulgarian social inclusion agenda

The Bulgarian social inclusion agenda currently is set up on the 4 policy objectives of the first Bulgarian National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2006-2008 (NAP inclusion) in the frame of the OMC, namely:

- Equal labour market participation of the groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion;
- Ensuring equal access to services aiming at prevention of social exclusion and overcoming its consequences;
- Social inclusion of the most vulnerable ethnic minorities;
- Poverty reduction among the groups outside the labour force (and in particular children and elderly).

Following these objectives a number of measures are envisaged and are being implemented. There are 12 quantitative targets to be achieved till 2008 and a number of indicators to be used in measuring the progress. All the objectives provide for a very good coverage of the groups at risk of poverty and exclusion in Bulgaria (such as people and families living in poverty; vulnerable ethnic groups, in particular Roma; people with disabilities; people and families receiving social assistance benefits; unemployed, incl. also long-term unemployed; all groups of children at risk; people in institutional care; pensioners and elderly people, etc.).

### 1.2 Better governance

The overall coordination of the social inclusion policy is responsibility of the minister of labour and social policy. In the frame of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), a Social Inclusion Section responsible for the coordination of the NAP inclusion was set up within the Social Protection and Social Inclusion Directorate. There are many institutions involved in the plan's implementation both at national and local level. This imposes serious challenges in relation to the coordination mechanisms.

### *1.2.1 Current arrangements and practice*

For the purposes of better governance of the policy for social inclusion the key elements of the Bulgarian approach are as follows: transparency at the process of decision making and involvement of all interested actors (including the individuals to whom these policies are targeted) in policies development, consultation, implementation and monitoring; concordance of the actions of various institutions engaged with the implementation of measures; coordination of the activities; execution of permanent control on the process of implementation; information for citizens; interrelation between the activities of the central state authorities and the local authorities, etc.

The consultation with the interested actors is defined as obligatory under the actual Bulgarian legislation. To this end a number of consultative bodies are established, without the consultancy of which the adoption of certain documents is impossible, for example the National Council for Tripartite Cooperation, the National Council for Integration of People with Disabilities, the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues, National Council for Child Protection, Council for Social Assistance, etc. A key importance in the consultation process is attributed to the participation of the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria, i.e. the Bulgarian municipalities responsible for the local governance. The approach followed in Bulgaria allows for all interested parties (social partners, non-governmental organisations, representing the interests of various vulnerable groups in the society, local authorities, etc.) to take part not only in the process of consultation and control on the implementation of policies, but also in the process of their formulation. All legislative and strategic documents in the field of social protection and social inclusion are developed following this approach, including the Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion of the Republic of Bulgaria and the National Report on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2006-2008. On the other two governance levels – local and regional, the respective consultative bodies similar to the national model are set up.

With respect to the representative organisations there are specific rules for representation applied at national level with the aim to ensure equal representation of the civil society in policy-making. Apart from the nationally represented organisations, in the past years organisations which are not nationally represented but are very active in the sector of their activity are also included. Such organisations generate many good practices and methods. Number of Roma organisations and organisations providing social services might be stressed as examples in this respect.

- In relation to its efficiency and positive results the experience in applying such a model showed the following:
- More impartial and quality critical assessment of the current situation and more innovative and bold decisions.
- Wide participation of NGOs and other partners guarantees the improvement of the control on the implementation of the various sectoral policies.
- Gradual building of mutual trust between all the partners which enable greater openness, better flexibility and creativity.

- Ground for common understanding of the importance and the meaning of the partnership in relation to the common goals and the particular contribution of each party.
- Considering the need of establishing local models for social inclusion.

### *1.2.2 Measures in the frame of the NAP inclusion 2006-2008*

Although there is a relatively good basis (legally and also practically) there are still problems remaining to be solved in order to reach the goal of better consulting the policies and their better implementation. That's why - to the end of improving the coordination, the monitoring and the evaluation of the policy for social inclusion, measures are envisaged in the Bulgarian NAP inclusion which point in two main directions: Institutional arrangements; and Active involvement of all interested actors. Some of the measures under the second one are as follows:

- Increasing the public awareness for the implemented measures for the fight against poverty and social exclusion.
- Promotion of public discussions on the issues of social inclusion.
- Enhancing the capacity of civil organisations in view of their full-scale participation in the process of formulation and decision making, both at regional and municipal level.
- Assistance for direct participation of vulnerable groups into the activities aimed towards their social inclusion.
- Promotion of the social and civil dialogue at national and regional level.

### 1.3 Measurement of the success of the implemented policies for social inclusion

As we already mentioned above, there is a number of indicators to be monitored and targets to be reached in line with the monitoring process in the frame of the NAP inclusion 2006-2008. These indicators are in the frame of the policy measures themselves and those in the NAP inclusion set till 2008 (baseline – 2005 data) are as follows:

- Activity rate (the age of 15-64) - 65.6%;
- Unemployment rate - under 9%;
- Employment rate (the age of 15-64) - 59.2%;
- Vulnerable people included in programmes for vocational qualification - increase by 20%;
- School drop outs in mandatory schooling age - decrease by 10%;
- Children with special educational needs integrated into the mainstream general and professional schools – increase by 15%;
- Schoolchildren of Roma origin studying out of the segregated schools – increase by 10%;
- Persons dependent on social assistance - decrease by 5%;
- Persons in institutional residential care – decrease by 10%;
- People from vulnerable groups using social and health services within the community – increase by 20%;
- Total household income – increase at least by 15%;
- Income from pensions – annual increase by 5 %.

The main challenges faced by Bulgaria in measurement of the progress in social inclusion policy implementation are related to the following:

- Applying several new approaches such as setting quantitative targets, active involvement of all stakeholders into all elements of the governance concept, mainstreaming of the social inclusion agenda and integrated in and based on the objectives approach towards addressing the problems;
- Lack of experience in these new approaches which face the country before the need to learn some lessons and draw some new decisions and/or address in new manner some of the already visible fruits of the undertaken reforms.

Preparing reports analysing the quantitative and quality implementation of the social inclusion agenda is also a tool for better governance and in particular for better monitoring and evaluation. Nevertheless, particularly in the area of stakeholders' involvement there is a lack of comprehensive and persistent assessments in order to illustrate to what extent this involvement has influenced the policy-making and policy-implementation. The national experience gained so far, as well as the other countries' experiences, could be a good basis for further progress and adjustment of the policy governance models.

## 2. Relevance of the Irish Social Inclusion Forum (SIF) to Bulgaria and potential transferability of this experience

The relevancy of the Irish model in general to the current Bulgarian arrangements can be seen in the following main directions:

- Setting national targets, formulation of uniform national policy and guaranteeing its adoption at all levels of governance;
- Capacity building and involvement at all levels of policy making;
- Ensuring active participation of all relevant stakeholders in the process of policy formulation;
- Reflection of the objectives and the uniform national policy into different policy domains and creation of the mechanisms needed for the implementation;
- Coordination at national and local level between all relevant stakeholders;
- Creation and application of good mechanisms for reporting, evaluation, monitoring and analysis as well as opportunities for flexible management of emerging problems in relation to policy implementation;
- Creating a sense of ownership of the national policy in all relevant institutions and partners;
- Understanding the importance of each participant's role.

## 2.1 Relevancy of the Irish SIF

The Irish Social Inclusion Forum is an open forum, based on the principles of equal representation and participation. Such form of persistent and public participation of all interested actors in the social inclusion process is needed in Bulgaria. It relies on the fact that similar type of consultation is not unfamiliar to the Bulgarian policy-making process in the area of social policy as a whole and in particular in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. In order to improve it and to turn it to a sustainable model some measures are envisaged under the Bulgarian NAP inclusion 2006-2008. Such a forum as the Irish SIF could serve for the needs of better governance in all policy domains. In Bulgaria it could influence very positively the achievement of the social inclusion agenda goals. Similar forms of consultation could serve in Bulgaria as a guarantee for the best possible coverage of the risk groups in the forthcoming strategies and plans in this filed.

The problems faced by Bulgaria in the period of social and economic transitions are different and they required a great variety of measures. The target groups are also increasing thanks to the setting of a new social model and development of the society as a whole. There is an increasing societal need of higher publicity and transparency not only of the decision taken and documents approved for their implementation, but also of the real and actual results achieved. The need of individual and systematic approach towards each of the groups at risk also is increasing. At the same time the multidimensional approach in addressing the challenges replaced the separate and uncoordinated measures. In relation to that, the application of the SIF model in Bulgaria could improve the visibility and publicity of the process and could lead to better policies. It could be a response to the already recognised need of public debate on the issues of fighting poverty and social exclusion.

The state and municipalities are obliged to create conditions for active participation of the civil society organisations and social partners – creation of legal guarantees, elimination of the practical obstacles, looking for dialogue, raising policy awareness and awareness on the need of partnership, funding, trainings, and etc. Unlike from the state authorities, to what extent these organisations and partners will participate and how active they will be, depends mostly on them. For Bulgaria there is a tendency towards more active involvement and more constructive joint decisions. Despite that, there is a need to find the best possible way to enable the stakeholders, and in particular the beneficiaries of the implemented policies to actively participate. The SIF experience could be useful for that purpose because the direct involvement of groups at risk in the policies is one of the most substantial issues which are raised by the civil society principles.

## 2.2 Some main similarities and differences

Every country implements its strategies and policies in the context of the respective national circumstances. In the case of Bulgaria the background of the efforts is the substantial political, social and economic transition made in the last 16 years. Nevertheless, both similarities and differences with the Irish experience can be found. The more general ones are:

- At present Bulgaria is not so experienced in direct participation of vulnerable groups. Even when there is participation on behalf of the representative organisations the real

involvement into the process (both with ideas and follow up comments) it is not common for all of them.

- In Bulgaria the involvement of social partners is stronger than the involvement of NGOs and the groups at risk of poverty and exclusion.
- There is a lower participation of the regional level in the policy-making.
- In Bulgaria the institutional structure is not so extended and well developed. Even the multidimensional character of the social inclusion policy was recently recognised.
- In Bulgaria public consensus was reached on the main long-term priorities in social inclusion policy and there are being followed in a persistent and comprehensive manner.
- Participation of the local governments is improved in order to achieve consistency between the national and community priorities.
- There is coverage of all the risk groups in the course of the life cycle. (In the coverage of the risk groups one difference can be noted – The Roma ethnic group is one of the groups most threatened by poverty and exclusion in Bulgaria. Probably this was the group at risk whose problems gave the evidence for the need of a multidimensional strategic approach. This is the group benefiting from all policies in the frame of social inclusion.)
- We consider that the lack of a good understanding of the “language” of the social inclusion agenda is common for all countries. The accessible information, the accessible “dictionary” is one of the most important achievements of the open and equal dialogue. Bulgaria still faces a number of difficulties in this respect.

### 2.3 Potential transferability and contribution of the SIF to Bulgarian practice and to the objectives and the strategy of the Bulgarian National Report on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion

As every national situation differs from the situations in the other countries the possible benefits of such approach will certainly vary. Nevertheless, the approach applied by the SIF can bring more benefit than negative points for the national solutions regarding the consultation of the policies' beneficiaries. This applies even stronger to the national strategic reports as they present the most important priorities and the essence of the national policy on social protection and social inclusion.

With regard to the above mentioned it is still questionable if in Bulgaria a similar approach will make a contribution on policy and good dialogue or will give a room for further clustering of the different risk groups. Public dialogue has to exist but it must be also structured and recognised by all groups in the society. In Bulgaria a tendency of lack of common positions of the variety of representative organisations on key and general problems can be observed. Further more, there is a great number of NGOs which are not recognised to be representatives of the interests of the respective vulnerable groups by the groups themselves. That's why the transferability of the SIF

model will depend on the possibility for better recognition of the parties of this consultation process.

At this particular point we think that the SIF experience can be used in Bulgarian practice in several general aspects:

- Policy formulation and creation of sense of ownership of policies targeted at risk groups;
- Better consideration of the all necessary steps, policies, measures and implementation mechanisms through extended partnership and dialogue;
- Better targeting of the policies and better indicators for measuring the progress, and in this regard – better reporting/monitoring and measurement as a whole;
- Shared responsibility and ownership on the results of the implemented policies;
- Revision of the course of action on the basis of common understanding and agreement;
- Visibility, transparency and publicity;
- Mutual trust between the stakeholders;
- Better understanding of the substance and the meaning of the social inclusion process and the role of all participating parties.

### 3. Key questions

Our main thematic focus is on the best and working methods for active involvement of all stakeholders into the process of formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the social inclusion policy – local authorities, representative organisations, people at risk of poverty and exclusion. Here we see the role of the central national authorities to be crucial for establishing the best possible and balanced framework for promotion of this involvement.

Concrete questions on the SIF:

- What steps have been made to build a trust among the stakeholders participating in this forum?
- What were the most difficult issues to be solved in the way of succeeding to make the SIF a good practice and tradition in the consultation and dialogue process? What were the measures to solve these issues?
- How the equal involvement of all interested actors (e.g. the variety of target groups at risk, etc.) is ensured?
- What is the real and visible impact of SIF experience on the policy-making, -implementation and –monitoring and evaluation of social inclusion policy?
- What measures are planned to extend the forum visibility, impact and importance for the social inclusion policy, if any?
- What is the place of the SIF in the overall institutional framework set for the purposes of the social inclusion agenda (e.g. in order to its importance, role and integrity into the system, etc.)?