

Ireland 2007

The NAP Inclusion Social Inclusion Forum

Short Report



On behalf of
European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities



The Peer Review was held in Dublin (Ireland) on 15-16 November 2007 and was hosted by the Irish Ministry of Social and Family Affairs. In addition to the host country, seven peer countries took part: Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, the Slovak Republic, Spain and the United Kingdom. Also participating were stakeholder representatives from the European Anti-Poverty Network and ATD Fourth World, together with representatives of the European Commission's DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.

1. The policy under review

Social inclusion receives high priority in Ireland. A special Cabinet Committee chaired by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) develops policy in this field and monitors its implementation. In 1997, Ireland was the first EU country to adopt a National Anti-Poverty Strategy. This currently sets targets for income adequacy, education, employment, housing and accommodation, health and combating urban disadvantage and rural poverty. The present **NAPinclusion (2007-2016)** adopts a **lifecycle approach**, the key groups being:

- children;
- people of working age;
- older people;
- people with disabilities.

The Community and Voluntary Pillar has social partner status in Ireland, but it is recognised that this pillar does not speak for everyone in the community and voluntary sector, nor for all people living in poverty. So the **Social Inclusion Forum (SIF)** was established to give people and organisations who are not involved in the social partnership process, as well as local government representatives, a space where they can meet together with senior policy-makers and departmental officials to discuss the development, implementation and review of anti-poverty policy. Held annually, the first three SIFs were attended by 200-300 people. The peer reviewers were among those taking part in the fourth one, held on 15 November 2007.

The **Social Inclusion Forum** is divided into:

- plenary sessions;
- roundtables;
- workshops.

The first plenary hears inputs from high-level keynote speakers, including the Minister of Social and Family Affairs. During the roundtables, participants are assigned to small groups. They are asked to respond to a number of written questions and to provide brief feedback to the second plenary. The subsequent plenary discussions are recorded and later transcribed. Participants can then choose to attend one of a number of themed workshops (e.g. on children, older people, people of working age, integration of migrants). These feature inputs from experts, to which the participants can respond. Detailed notes of each workshop are taken by rapporteurs. A final plenary session of the Forum includes feedback on key points from the workshops, an overview of the day and a panel discussion. A detailed report of each Forum is published, which are available at www.nesf.ie. The SIF and the various consultations surrounding the NAPinclusion have been used by the Office for Social Inclusion to identify both existing social inclusion issues

that might not be adequately addressed and new, emerging policy issues that need to be planned for.

2. Key lessons and aspects of transferability

After attending the SIF, the peer reviewers discussed the lessons that might be drawn from it and the possibilities for transferring some aspects to other countries. Among the key points raised:

- Dialogue on social inclusion must be continuous. The preparation, resources and capacity-building that go into the SIF stimulate a whole chain of smaller events. The idea of using a national forum to catalyse smaller-scale, more local activities on social inclusion might well be transferable.
- **Joint ownership of the forum** is important. If government and NGOs are jointly responsible for the invitations to the event, this might help to achieve a productive balance. It was suggested that the time allocated for the various participants in the forum might be shifted more in favour of grass-roots speakers.
- In Ireland, there is strong **recognition of the role of civil society within social dialogue**. This is not the case in all the peer countries. Ireland's official treatment of NGOs as full social partners is unique. Furthermore, the importance of encouraging the widest possible participation was stressed – for example, by reimbursing expenses and providing childcare facilities at forum venues.
- The **quality of participation** is equally important. Capacity-building is here a key issue – for people experiencing poverty, and their representatives, but also for government officials, social workers and other participants.
- There is a need for **feedback on the results of people's participation and on what has been achieved** since the previous SIF. At each SIF, there could be reporting back on the progress achieved on a number of key points from the previous forum. Another suggestion was that participants be sent a table showing the progress made on each issue.
- As regards the **people participating in the forum**, a distinction needs to be made between people experiencing poverty, those that represent them, and those that provide services to them.
- It is also important to ensure that NGOs participating in the forum process are **representative** and cover the whole spectrum of social actors.
- **Social inclusion policy is multidimensional**. There is therefore a great **need for coordination**, which is sometimes difficult to achieve. The SIF is unique, but some peer countries have structures with a similar function. Others, though, are still considering how to involve the social actors in the process.
- Strong and high-level **political commitment** is crucial to the SIF process. It is important that high level policymakers participate and that the results of the forum are presented

to a group of senior officials.

- **Information, consultation and participation** are key to successful social inclusion. The Irish policy is a good example of how to achieve these aims.
- It is important that the type of **language** used in events such as the SIF should be close to that of the people participating in them. Jargon and long strings of initials should be avoided, as should the temptation to rewrite people's contributions to forums. The Irish practice on this is exemplary: SIF reports preserve contributors' original formulations – often in direct quotes.
- At participatory events like the SIF **practical arrangements are very important**. The peer reviewers particularly appreciated that participants in working groups were seated around round tables with a facilitator being present to lead the debate. This invited equal participation of everyone. Another important consideration is that enough time needs to be available to allow for a real exchange of ideas.
- **Policy impact assessment** is an important part of policy development. The tools used by Ireland to measure that impact merit further examination by peer countries.
- **Social inclusion is a long-term process**. It therefore requires a lot of effort, resources and continuous commitment.
- A number of peer countries suggested that **the EU has played an important role in promoting participation of stakeholders, including people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion**. In this respect, over the years, substantial progress has been made. However, as was pointed out in the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2007, there is scope for further improving the quality of the participation, not least in the implementation and follow up phases. This Peer Review contributed to further reflection on what quality of participation is. Its results could feed into the preparation of the next round of national action plans on social inclusion 2008-2011 and of the European year 2010 of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.