

The NAPInclusion Social Inclusion Forum

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This paper sets out the European Anti Poverty Network's comments on the host and discussion paper, related to the Social Inclusion Forum (SIF). It incorporates the views of both the EU level and from EAPN Ireland who have been directly involved in the SIF process. Where specific comments are made from the separate organisations these are specified.

1. A brief assessment of the possible relevance of the SIF to other countries in the EU

1.1 Positive aspects

- The Social Inclusion Forum (SIF) could provide an important and positive example of practice in relation to objective 3 of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) for social protection and social inclusion: **mobilisation of all actors and stakeholders, including people experiencing poverty** in the development of social inclusion policies. The SIF provides a *formal* opportunity for a range of stakeholders, including policy makers, people experiencing poverty and groups representing them, to directly engage on specific issues related to addressing poverty and social exclusion outside of the more limited opportunities provided by the normal social partnership process.
- **The provision of resources to national anti-poverty organisations** by the Combat Poverty Agency to directly support the participation of people experiencing poverty and local groups representing them so that they have had *some* opportunity to contribute to consultation processes for developing the NAP Inclusion to prepare and contribute to the SIF even if they were not all able to participate directly on the day itself, is also a positive lesson.
- **The existence of the National Anti Poverty Network Programme and the Community Development Programme**, which supports the ongoing participation of people experiencing poverty in organisations capable of representing their interests is *complementary* to the support for the participation in the SIF. Without these programmes which provide on-going support for the participation of people experiencing poverty there would be a danger that the SIF could be seen as a window dressing *exercise*.
- **The participation of high level organisations** in planning the SIF are important in being able to attract representatives from Government Departments and agencies and other stakeholders to the SIF and offers a better possibility of mainstreaming the results into the social inclusion policy process at national level.

- **The interactive format of the SIF** with inputs followed by round tables and workshops. Also the opportunity for an anti-poverty organisation (in the past EAPN Ireland) to make a presentation at the beginning as a means of setting the scent is important.
- **The high visibility and profile given to a national conference**, held on a regular basis with the participation of high-level actors as well as grass-roots organisations.
- **The integration of the Community and Voluntary sectors as official social partners** could be seen as an important recognition of the role of these groups in representing and defending the interests of people experiencing poverty, exclusion and inequality.

1.2 Points to be strengthened

National perspective:

- While facilitators attempt to get the input of participants in the workshops the number of participant in workshops means that it is difficult for everyone to participate fully. It is also a difficult space for people experiencing poverty themselves to feel comfortable in making a contribution or getting involved in the discussion.
- While representatives from national and local government are invited and some do attend it is not clear to what extent these representatives are high level officials with influence in their departments or local authorities.
- The difficulty in assessing the impact of the consultation processes for the NAP Inclusion, including the SIF on policy as raised in the discussion paper is critical. During recent consultation processes have expressed their concern at being consulted again with little sense of how their input was having an impact of policy or what changes were taking place. Therefore, transparent feedback mechanisms need to be put in place. The annual Social Inclusion Report is a step in the right direction although the details behind the information provided in the report need to be available and also the opportunity for an open discussion on the issues.
- As highlighted in both preparatory reports there is need for a review of the Social Inclusion Forum to identify its impact on policy development and how it might be strengthened.

EAPN Europe perspective

A number of the points raised in the Host Country Report and the discussion paper and EAPN Ireland are critical in terms of ensuring that the objectives of the SIF are realised.

EAPN EU highlights 4 main areas:

- 1) Clarifying the Objectives
- 2) Reinforcing participative methodology
- 3) Ensuring policy impact
- 4) Monitoring and Evaluation of the SIF.

1) Clarifying Objectives

It is clear from the Host Country Report and the discussion paper that the perspectives of the Government differ from those of the participants particularly NGO's. Whereas the Government see it as primarily a chance to hear stakeholders views and to impart information, NGO's and people experiencing poverty are interested in the process in as far as they can input and have influence on the policy process. In EAPN's view the latter focus is vital as part of a dynamic governance process to developing and delivering effective social inclusion policy. If this is accepted, the Forum needs to ensure that the SIF is not a one-off event, but forms part of an integrated structure and process for policy development, which involves feedback on proposals made, as well as monitoring progress on policy implementation and priorities. This needs ongoing support for the organisations in which people experiencing poverty, exclusion and inequality participate such as has been provided through the National Anti Poverty Networks Programme and the Community Development Programme. It also needs to link more clearly to the other, social and economic policy- making processes.

2) Reinforcing participative methodology

The involvement of people experiencing poverty in preparative meetings, feeding into the SIF, is a positive step forward; particularly for providing vital resources to grass-roots NGO's to support participation. However, more could be done to support direct participation in the SIF, making it a place where people experiencing poverty feel comfortable, are listened to and their views taken into account. The experience in EAPN has highlighted the importance of "two-way" effort. Governments and other stakeholders need to be prepared to work in different ways and to move out of their comfort zone. The main SIF could re-look at its methods to enable more direct participation of people experiencing poverty in the meetings. This means understanding what motivates people to participate in this kind of event, the obstacles they face, their expectations and fears. It means ensuring that the process deliver results. Otherwise false expectations are raised, undermining future attempts to involve them in similar events.

The following proposals are drawn from experience from the organisation of People Experiencing Poverty meetings at EU and national level ¹:

- involving NGO's and people experiencing poverty more directly in the organisation of the SIF;
- providing training/information to help prepare participants on both sides;
- using people experiencing poverty "experts" or leaders in the workshop organisation (Belgium);
- ensuring a more balanced representation of stakeholders (more involvement of NGOs and people experiencing poverty. (UK participative peer review 2007);
- using more participative methodologies in the workshops and ensuring that participants are made to feel welcome and listened to, in all parts of the process;
- ensuring that all excluded groups are represented adequately (including black and ethnic minorities, migrants including undocumented migrants, older and younger people, disabled people, women, single parents...) and that the most vulnerable within each of the focus group are consulted (there is a risk that participatory meetings are made up of the most active excluded people);
- ensuring that adequate infrastructure and services are in place to enable participation: e.g. childcare provision or support, disabled access and support for older participants, language support, transport;
- considering the holding of smaller regional meetings with direct stakeholder involvement involving people experiencing poverty, which are more accessible to participation;
- ensuring a feedback to keep participants informed of what has happened, taking into account their expressed views.

3) Supporting Policy impact

The SIF could look at improving mechanisms so that NGO's and people experiencing poverty feel that their contribution has an actual impact on the development, implementation and review of policy to address poverty and social exclusion, ensuring it provides an effective two-way process and is not just one way consultation. This means addressing structured feedback, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, impact assessment and coordination with other initiatives promoting participation in social inclusion as well as the broader economic agenda.

¹ Reports of People Experiencing Poverty EU conferences (1-6) available on the EAPN website: www.eapn.org

Some proposals are:

- Structured feedback by Government representatives of the process and outcomes of the consultative process. Clarification of what has been taken up, what not and why;
- Link of the yearly SIF meeting to regional and local SIF debates, as part of a structured dialogue with decision-makers,
- Coordination with similar meetings to discuss the broader economic agenda/ with involvement of key government officials;
- The use of evaluation and poverty impact assessment of outcomes which can be reviewed systematically in the SIF;

4) Monitoring and Evaluation

- As highlighted by the discussion paper, the SIF structure would benefit from independent evaluation. This should entail the establishment of clear indicators on participation as well as the effectiveness in the achievement of objectives and impact assessment on social policy.
- Both the process for the development of indicators and for evaluating stakeholder responses, should draw on examples of participative methodologies e.g. EAPN BE project on participative methodologies for the development of social inclusion indicators.
- Giving visibility to results: a crucial element of the evaluation and impact assessment should be the discussion of SIF process and results in the national parliament.

2. A brief assessment of the potential transferability of the SIF (as a whole or in part) to other EU countries

- The SIF is a method that could be transferred to other EU countries but could be strengthened by addressing the issues highlighted above.
- Other measures to ensure that it engages people experiencing poverty and groups representing them from the planning stage should also be developed
- The size of the SIF is an issue for active engagement, particularly of people experiencing poverty of those unfamiliar with such a forum or method of working. Depending on the size and structure of Member States regional or local meetings could be held involving the range of stakeholders and using creative means to ensure active participation.
- The re-sourcing of anti-poverty, social inclusion organisations to support the active participation of people experiencing poverty and groups representing them in the SIF and the wider consultation on the NAP Social Inclusion is positive and should be encouraged in other Member States.

3. A brief assessment of the possible ways to measure the results or the impact of the SIF

As highlighted above, an independent evaluation needs to be carried out which includes the assessment of the perspectives of the stakeholders as well as an impact assessment on social inclusion policy and results. This evaluation should involve all stakeholders in an open transparent process and draw on participative methodologies and indicators. The effectiveness of evaluation would be affirmed by discussion of results at political level in the national parliament.

4. A note of any important questions about the policy that are being raised and debated in the European Anti Poverty Network

- The participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in policy development and ways of strengthening this participation are core to the work of EAPN. This is something that needs to happen at all levels of policy making but must be real and lead to change in policy and impact on poverty.
- The impact and outcomes from engagement with policy processes is an area which constantly needs to be monitored and reviewed.
- Information exchange about ongoing initiatives and the implementation of social inclusion policies should be established, so that local and regional policy-makers together with NGO networks share knowledge and experience to find the right solutions.
- The proposed policy measures on people experiencing poverty and social exclusion should be placed in a comprehensive framework, in consultation with NGOs, with expected outcomes, deadlines and a budget allocation, etc., in order to facilitate implementation and monitoring.
- The coordination with other key actions and measures promoting social inclusion and particularly participation needs to be underlined.
- In a broader policy context the level of engagement with policy, strategies and methods related to social inclusion and its impact on mainstream policy such as economic policy is an area which constantly needs to be addressed at a national level and in the context of objectives of the Lisbon Strategy.
- The re-sourcing of organisations representing people and communities experiencing poverty and social exclusion, mainly by the Government, is extremely important in ensuring that these communities have a say in influencing the development and implementation of policy. Recently the Irish Government, in its funding of these organisations, has been emphasising their role as deliverers of services and less as advocates for these communities. Limiting the capacity building and advocacy role of community organisations will have a negative impact on the capacity of disadvantaged communities to have a voice in influencing policy.

- Local funding for projects provides an opportunity to mobilise national networks to address excluded people's needs in a concrete way, i.e. drafting a proposal, with a budget, with deadlines. Although such funding sources do not represent important amounts, they are a good way to involve people experiencing poverty and social exclusion at the local level so they can learn about working with institutions. Structural Fund money, particularly the use of global grants through the European Social Fund could play a significant role in this.

5. The potential contribution of such the SIF to the content of the NAPs/inclusion

The objectives of the SIF should facilitate barriers and constraints to progress to be identified, solutions to them found and proposals for new developments and policies suggested and discussed. The SIF therefore has the capacity to have a direct impact on commitments outlined the NSSPSI and Ireland's National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2013, both of which are closely linked in terms of policy objectives and commitments. However, as stated in the discussion paper and above there is no transparent mechanism for ensuring that key messages and findings from the SIF are translated into policy outcomes, nor feedback to know what impact the SIF has in bringing about changes in these policy areas.

6. Key issues and main questions proposed for debate at the review meeting

National Perspective

- The SIF provides an important opportunity for all stakeholders to come together and engage with each other in relation to policy related to social inclusion. The key issue to address is how to develop the potential of the Social Inclusion Forum to ensure it is a positive mechanism not just for one way consultation but also for feedback and discussion on progress and for reviewing the impact, success and possible changes to policy measures. The possibility of organising events on a smaller scale at a local or regional level with the various stakeholders to complement the SIF and create greater opportunities for participation might be looked at as a possibility.
- In terms of good governance resourcing anti-poverty groups to ensure that disadvantaged communities and people experiencing poverty have a voice and the capacity to engage as key stakeholders in policy making is essential. It is important to look at the role of the state in supporting and resourcing such advocacy work not just in terms of the SIF but the wider policy process.

EAPN Europe perspective

- The SIF model is useful but should refocus its objectives away from information exchange to developing a model of participative democracy which inputs into policy development and delivery. It should draw on the findings and experiences of other measures which promote participation in the social inclusion policy. The challenge is also to look beyond one-off events, but see the SIF as one element of an entire integrated process.
- More efforts need to go into linking the social inclusion agenda with the broader overarching economic one. Links should be made both with the Lisbon process (eg the National Reform Process) and ensuring that finance and economic ministers and officials are drawn into direct debate with the people experiencing the results of their policies.
- The methods used are useful, but could be developed further, particularly in ensuring that all groups of people experiencing poverty are able to participate and engage in direct discussions with decision-makers and other stakeholders. This means reassessing methodologies, strengthening the infrastructure and services provided for the workshops, ensuring more balanced participation from target groups of people experiencing poverty.
- Evaluation and Monitoring linked to impact assessment is vital, and is likely to encourage greater credibility for the process as well as ensuring that it delivers on its objectives, but care needs to be taken to involve all stakeholders and make use of participative methodologies and indicators.

7. Main Questions proposed

1. What should be the main objectives of the SIF? Policy development or Information Exchange? If the former, what changes need to take place in the process and structure to ensure policy impact?
2. How can the monitoring and evaluation process ensure, that stakeholder views are taken on-board through participative methods and a systematic assessment made of impact on policy?
3. How to strengthen the participation of people experiencing poverty and organisations representing them in policy making? What lessons can be learnt from SIF and other examples of innovative methodologies, structures and processes which facilitate active participation of people experiencing poverty in the policy-making process?

What work could be done on indicators of participation (both in terms of participation in society and in policy making) that would allow for a better assessment of the impact of a tool such as the SIF?