

The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion EU 2020 (Brussels, 14-15 January 2014)

Developing policies to combat poverty and social exclusion – the Bulgarian experience¹

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1. The National Council on Social Inclusion Issues to the Council of Ministers

The overall organisation and coordination of the development and implementation of the anti-poverty and social inclusion policy in Bulgaria is realised by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy. The monitoring regarding the implementation of that policy is also in the authority of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy. Within the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy the Social Inclusion Directorate was established which assists the minister in the execution of these responsibilities. There is a broad spectrum of institutions engaged in implementing the policy at national and local level.

In order to improve the process of coordination and development of the policy for social inclusion in 2009 Bulgaria established the National Council on Social Inclusion Issues to the Council of Ministers (NCSII). The Council is presided by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy and includes deputy ministers from all involved ministries (Ministry of Education and Science; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Interior; Ministry of Regional Development, etc.) as well as the chairpersons of all involved institutions, representatives of the National Association of the Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria, representatives of the social partners, representatives of the organisations members of the European networks, the chairpersons of NGOs with proven experience in the field of social inclusion and representative of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

The Council is the body for coordination, cooperation and consultation in the development, implementation, monitoring and assessment of the state policy in the field of social inclusion.

The Council:

- discusses the proposed strategic priorities for social inclusion;
- makes proposals for development of projects of strategies, programmes, action plans and other strategic documents in the field of social inclusion and promotes the coordination in their development and implementation;
- gives opinions on draft strategic documents in the field of social inclusion;

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- facilitates cooperation and consultation with NGOs on the formation, implementation and monitoring of government policy on social inclusion;
- develops, discusses and approves the reports, analyses and assessments of the implementation of government policy on social inclusion;
- assists in monitoring the implementation of government policy on social inclusion;
- proposes, considers and approves measures to improve the process of developing, conducting, monitoring, evaluation, consultation and coordination of government policy on social inclusion.

The Council meets minimum twice a year.

Similarities and differences with the Belgian approach:

- Both models offer structured dialogue with relevant stakeholders. That provides valuable expertise when formulating and monitoring policies;
- The Belgian Platform has an open structure providing for different participant depending on the topics for discussion. The National Council in Bulgaria has a fixed number of members who participate personally in the meetings and cannot send substitutes;
- The Belgian model provides for participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. In Bulgaria they do not participate personally in the sessions of the NCSII. However they are represented by the European Anti-Poverty Network – Bulgaria that is a member of the Council.

2. Policy debate and activities of the National Council on Social Inclusion Issues to the Council of Ministers

The National Council plays a key role in the policy debate regarding the issues of poverty and social exclusion. Since its establishment in 2009 all of the strategic documents in the field of social inclusion were presented and discussed at its meetings including:

National Poverty Target

The Bulgarian target was developed by an interdepartmental working group as one common target – the reduction of the overall number of persons living in poverty and 4 specific sub-targets for specific groups at risk.

The national poverty target of Bulgaria is to reduce the number of people living in poverty by 260 000, or 16% of the poor people in 2008. The four sub-targets are:

- To reduce the number of children aged 0 – 18, living in poverty, by 78,000 (30% of the national goal and 25% of the number of poor children in 2008);
- To reduce the number of people aged 65 and more, living in poverty, by 52,000 (20% of the national goal and 10% of the number of poor elderly people in 2008);
- To reduce the number of unemployed individuals aged 18 – 64, living in poverty, by 78,000 (30% of the national goal and 25% of the number of poor unemployed individuals aged 18 – 64 in 2008);
- To reduce the number of employed individuals aged 18 – 64, living in poverty, by 52,000 (20% of the national goal and 22% of the number of poor employed individuals aged 18 – 64 in 2008).

The first session of NCSII was held in June 2010 when the Council discussed the proposal for the target. Members of the Council provided both written and oral



comments that were taken into consideration. On June 10, 2010 the proposal was presented and on June 28, 2010 it was approved by the Council. In October 2010 the National Target was approved by the Council of Ministers.

National Development Programme: Bulgaria 2020

The National Development Programme: Bulgaria 2020 (NDP BG2020) is the leading strategic and programming document which specifies the objectives of development policies of the country by 2020. The vision, objectives and priorities of the NDP BG2020 were defined on the basis of a socio-economic analysis and the comments received within the public discussions during the development of the document.

The document has eight key priorities. Priority 2 – Reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion was developed by interdepartmental working group established by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. The working group consisted of representatives of all stakeholders including members from the organisations and institutions of the NCSII. Priority 2 was presented at the regular meeting of the Council in April 2012. The members of the NCSII provided written and oral comments regarding the contents and the structure of the document. Most of the comments were taken aboard and Priority 2 was approved by the Council. NDP BG2020 was endorsed by the Council of Ministers in December 2012.

National Strategy for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion 2020

A National Strategy for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion 2020 was developed in 2012 with the participation of all stakeholders - representatives of ministries, agencies, social partners, NGOs working in the field of poverty and social inclusion and academic society. The development of the Strategy was one of the key measures in the field of social inclusion set out in the National Reform Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria (2012-2020). The Strategy was presented to the National Council on its meeting in November 2012. Most of the members of the NCSII were already familiar with the document since their organisations were heavily involved in the development process. The comments made by the members of the council were taken into consideration and included in the final document. The Strategy was adopted by the Council of Ministers on February 6, 2013.

National Strategy for Long-term Care

With regard to the provision of long-term care services the Council of Ministers adopted National Strategy for Long-term Care at the end of 2013. The members of NCSII were actively involved in the preparation of the final draft that was submitted for adoption by providing written and oral comments during the meeting of NCSII in November 2013. The Strategy includes measures aimed at deinstitutionalisation and expanding the access to services for elderly people and people with disabilities by creating an adequate network of community-based and home services; improving the quality of long-term services; development of special measures for the caregivers to dependent family members, etc.

3. Questions for discussion:

- How can one ensure a good mix of stakeholders covering all relevant policy areas?

Bulgaria has already ensured a good mix of stakeholders covering all relevant policy areas in the composition of the NCSII. It includes deputy ministers from all involved ministries as well as the chairpersons of all involved institutions, representatives of the National Association of the Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria,



representatives of the social partners, representatives of the organisations members of the European networks, the chairpersons of NGOs with proven experience in the field of social inclusion and representative of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

- What is necessary to ensure the effective involvement of all stakeholders and especially people experiencing poverty in the consultation process?

The state and the municipalities are obliged to create conditions for active participation of the civil society organisations and the social partners. However, unlike the state authorities to what extent these organisations and partners will actively participate depends on them as well.

Aside from the participation in the NCSII Bulgaria provides other opportunities for the stakeholders and the people experiencing poverty to be involved in the consultation process. One such possibility is the Portal for public consultations of the Council of Ministers – www.strategy.bg. All drafts of strategic and legislative documents are published there and are open for discussion to all. The drafts of strategic and legislative documents are also published on the web site of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. Another opportunity is the participation in the Public Council to the Minister of Labour and Social Policy. In addition the standard practice of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy when developing new or amending existent strategic or legislative documents is to establish working groups and invite all stakeholders to participate.

- How can one manage expectations and avoid disillusionment with the consultation process?

In order to avoid disillusionment with the consultation process there should be clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders. Special attention should be paid to the provision of relevant information during the consultations so that there are no unrealistic expectations among the stakeholders.

- How can one increase the impact of stakeholder consultations on all policy areas (including economic) that impact on poverty and social inclusion?

This is a very important question for Bulgaria where a relatively high percentage of children and youth live in poverty. Thus, the sectors of education, child services, health care, and economy are all affected by this issue.

There are various approaches for increasing the participation of these sectors in the fight against poverty. One direction is to develop integrated approaches such as combined social, health, education and employment services for those in need. At NCSII, there already is a notion that such innovative services with proven effectiveness can be supported.

Another approach could be to include high level policy makers such as National Assembly commissions by involving them in the legislative support for the implementation of innovative integrated services. These measures will quickly show results in the effectiveness of these services and will thus increase the importance and impact of the stakeholder consultations on all policy areas.

