

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

### Strengthening the stakeholder involvement<sup>1</sup>

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### Handling of EU affairs in Finland

Responsibility for the preparation and monitoring of affairs relating to the European Union and the determination of Finland's positions rests with competent ministries. A coordination system has been established to ensure a coordinated position on issues under consideration in the EU at each stage of preparation. The coordination system involves competent ministries, the Cabinet Committee on European Union Affairs, the Committee for EU Affairs and its EU sub-committees.

The Cabinet Committee on European Union Affairs - chaired by the Prime Minister - meets once a week to discuss important EU affairs. The Cabinet Committee agrees on Finland's priorities in all formal and informal Council meetings. The Committee for EU Affairs serves as an advisory and mediatory body in the coordination. This Committee discusses broad issues involving several ministries and also those issues that have not been resolved in the sub-committees. (Each ministry, the Prime Minister's Office, the Office of the President of the Republic, the Office of the Chancellor of Justice, the Bank of Finland and the Provincial Government of Åland are represented).

The Committee for EU Affairs has appointed 37 **sector-specific preparative sub-committees**. These sub-committees constitute the foundation for the preparation of EU affairs at the civil servant level. The chair and the secretary of each EU sub-committee usually represents the competent ministry. The sub-committees can assemble in a restricted or extended composition. The restricted composition includes civil servants from the competent ministry and representatives of other ministries and central agencies. An extended composition comprises representatives from various interest groups and other concerned parties, too. Sub-committees meet as necessary.

In the Government Report on EU Policy 2013 it was stated that to attain the established objectives, Finland's existing system of coordinating EU issues must be strengthened, it should focus on early preparation and it should not be by-passed in any key EU policy issue. While cooperation between ministries at the early stages of preparations has recently been emphasised in coordination, this must not lead to a situation in which the sub-committees are by-passed. The procedures of the preparatory sub-committees must be developed and meetings held more regularly in all sectors. Those participating in the formulation of positions must see to it that the proposals are supported by the ministry's political leadership. In the preparation of EU affairs, various shareholder groups and the civil society at large

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared for the Peer Review in Social Protection and Social Inclusion programme coordinated by ÖSB Consulting, the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and Applica, and funded by the European Commission.

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should be consulted more frequently in the individual stages of preparation, also by the sub-committees. This will provide extensive information on the practical implications of the various legislative proposals and other projects for citizens, companies and other actors.

### **The organisation of stakeholder involvement in Finland more generally**

Finland is the promised land of Civil Society Organisations and a land where the administration openness is an underlying value. This attitude is reflected in the structure of Finnish administration, in the strong self-government of municipalities where decision-making power is brought close to citizens. Broad-based policy preparation has a long tradition in Finland. The country's policies have been developed through close collaboration between central and local government, the labour market organisations and NGOs. Social welfare and health care organisations are a major player as far as civil participation and influence and the production of services and support are concerned. Grants from the Slot Machine Association, which was originally founded by NGOs, form an important component in the financing of organisations. NGO's most important role is to offer people a means of influence, they are also an important source of expert knowledge in society.

However, decreasing voting percentages and criticism directed at the politicians and political parties has been seen even as the crises of democracy. These concerns led to discussions, which emphasised the increasing need to strengthen the role of civil society in Finland. Following these discussions different projects and development initiatives were launched around the Finnish administration towards the end of the 1990s. The aims of these projects were mainly to increase the role of civil society in defining social matters and e.g. public services.

The ministries have gone through their current procedures of dialoguing with citizens and citizen organisations. Based on this assessment the ministries considered where they have succeeded in their current practices and what could still be improved. Meanwhile a discussion forum [www.otakantaa.fi](http://www.otakantaa.fi) (=Share Your Views with Us) was built by the Ministry of Finance for all the ministries to use for consultation of individual citizens and there was also preparatory work going on in the different ministries on how to make use of ICT in listening to citizens' views. The horizontal Civil Participation Programme (2003–2007) gave the participation issue a higher status and contributed to the cooperation mechanisms between the ministries. The Government has pointed out that each ministry should have a Civil Society strategy and most of the ministries have all their on-going projects in the Internet in the government project register (HARE) and on their ministry's web pages.

### **...and concerning the EU poverty processes**

Before the NAPincl the governments of Finland (and more broadly the Council of the State) did not have specific policies against poverty and social exclusion. In fact, it was only the programme of the government for the years 1999-2003 when the concept social exclusion was mentioned in such an official document. The NAPincls were produced only after the major external input from the European Union. The idea of an action plan did not fit without institutional and mental adjustment into the Finnish system of social protection. This adjustment took some time....but it was taken seriously.

All relevant organisations and ministries were actively involved in drafting the first NAPincls. Organisations included all major employers' and employees' confederations and the association of Finnish local and regional authorities, major



research institutions, Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland; Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters (as the representative of EAPN-Fin and Finnish Federation for Social Welfare and Health. Ministries involved include the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Environment. A broad-based working group was also set up to monitor and assess the implementation of the first National Plan of Action to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion (and to prepare a proposal for a new one). The Working Group convened fifteen times. In addition, it arranged two hearings: one for third sector organisations and the other for local authorities. Also an event to start the drafting of the new national plan of action was arranged, with invited representatives of the local government and NGOs.

For the purpose of evaluation, written expert statements on the Plan were requested from a total of 50 experts in a variety of sectors. The emergence of various networks and the strengthening of existing networks were seen as an immediate effect. With the first NAPs, cooperation and coordination between the sectors of the administration increased both nationally and regionally. In the second round the definition of national policy objectives succeeded better than in the first round, since the preparation of the National Action Plan coincided with the preparation of the new Government programme. In particular NGOs felt that the NAPs provided them a new channel of influencing the national decision-making. The labour market organisations did not fully agree on the view that the co-operation has influenced the content of the pursued policy more than before.

Nowadays the National Social Reports are compiled at the Ministry of Social Affairs mainly by civil servants. The reports are discussed in relevant EU sub-committees and a consultation process is arranged. The general interest towards these reports is modest. In the preparation of the National Social Report the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health organised a hearing event on 20 March 2012 for the stakeholders to discuss the content of the NSR. Participants represented various governmental organs (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry of Finance, Prime Minister's Office), representatives of municipalities, the Finnish Centre for Pensions, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Finnish Pension Alliance, non-governmental organisations (the Finnish Society for Social and Health, mental health association Helmi ry, the Finnish Heart Association, the Finnish Diabetes Association, single-parents' association), the Central Association of Finnish Pensioners, and labour market organisations (the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions, the Confederation of Finnish Industries, the Finnish Medical Association). No direct involvement of the people facing and experiencing poverty.

### **Important issues that are being raised and debated in Finland**

Income differences have increased in Finland despite the social income transfers policy pursued. Inequity in terms of health is also a growing problem. A concern has been raised for whether universal thinking is still observed in social policy consistently in all sectors, or if the trend is increased means-testing in determining who shall obtain services and benefits. The adequacy of the present level of primary social security benefits in view of elimination of the poverty problem has also been taken up in the discussions. There are problems in co-ordination of the benefit schemes. The increasingly complex policy challenges threaten the sustainability of the Nordic model, including the ageing of the population, shifts in the global economic environment and, more recently, the impact of the global economic crisis. It is clear that the government needs to better communicate the choices required of the society as a whole.



## Comments to the Belgian approach

The examples given in the discussion and host country papers on the Belgian approach are interesting and encouraging. Citizens seem to be seen as partners. One can easily accept the view that there is a need for broad stakeholder involvement so that as many people as possible can feel that they “own” the policies influencing and affecting their lives.

The Belgian model seems to have clear and established structures; regular and continuous dialogue, meetings four times a year. As an ongoing process it has better opportunities to be recognised as a significant contributor to the national policy making. The Open Platform Day makes sure that the process has been evaluated “while in action”. The Belgian model seems to be working rather well for ensuring that people experiencing poverty feel listened to and heard. However there is a risk that the expectations will not be managed.

## Recommendations in the discussion paper:

As mentioned in the discussion paper, stakeholder participation is a learning process that needs to be built up over time. The prerequisites for an effective stakeholder involvement listed in the discussion paper are long-term resourcing, supporting and encouraging participation, regular discussion and feedback about its effectiveness and how it can be improved. Fostering an open and understanding culture amongst the policy makers is needed for ensuring that the work and input of the stakeholder groups is taken seriously. All actors would benefit from shared training about the process.

The outcomes must be made visible for avoiding disillusionment and un-realistic expectations of the stakeholders. If there are no visible results or impact, the groups involved need to be explained why not. Reports of the stakeholder meetings would facilitate the follow up of the process by participants. In the discussion paper the political support was mentioned as a key factor for relevant stakeholder action. Giving the processes a recognised status would ensure that the consultation has an impact on the national policy making and the outcomes are taken into account when making policy decisions. It is important that draft versions of the NRPs and NSRs are circulated in good time to the stakeholder groups.

Important and obvious benefits and gains of the Belgian Platform:

- greater visibility of social inclusion issues;
- increased exchange of information;
- enhanced dialogue between different stakeholder groups;
- greater participation of people experiencing poverty.

## The current situation in Finland...more generally

### User or client involvement/participation in service design and evaluation

Especially at the local level there are several promising examples to be found in developing the user/stakeholder involvement. The use of **experts of experience** has increased in the service design of the social- and health services. Many municipalities have also established **client panels** in order to strengthen the relationship between the professional knowledge and the experience of the people using services, facing poverty etc.



### **Citizen involvement/participation in policy design and evaluation**

On the municipal level there are many structures to enhance the user involvement in the municipal policy making and developing. The municipal council has to make sure, that the citizens and the service users have the opportunities to participate and influence on the policy making and actions taken. There are for example councils for senior citizens (mandatory 1.1.2014) and communal disability councils that are advisory co-operating bodies of people with disabilities, their interest groups and organisations and the representatives of the communal administration. In some Finnish municipalities there are also child- or family councils, on the same grounds as councils on disability.

In the discussion paper the Danish Council for Socially Marginalised People was mentioned. We would certainly need something like that in Finland, too. If people feel that they have been treated improperly in social and health care services or if they need advice about their rights, they can turn to the Social Ombudsman who annually reports to the communal policy makers.

At the national level there are also good traditional structures involving stakeholders in vulnerable positions. The National Council on Disability VANE is a co-operative organ for authorities, disability organisations and organisations for relatives of disabled people. It closely follows the decision-making in the society, gives statements and promotes the real implementation of human rights of disabled people. The Council is working in close connection with the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Another important structure is the National Advisory Board on Romani Affairs which supports the work of the Regional advisory Boards on Romani Affairs.

### **Sketching the future - Making more use of the above mentioned and other existing structures in strengthening the citizens participation**

There are several networks, NGO-based, closely linked with policymakers and these links could be better used also in building up a system for direct citizen participation in the process of national action plan preparation and national reporting. For example in the Finnish Parliament there is a "poverty working group" that has regularly organised seminars linked to topics and debates about acute social policy initiatives. This group works closely together for example with EAPN Finland and a stakeholder group "Who listens to the poor?" In the future, this Parliamentary group could be used as an inviting body for wider citizen hearings. Stakeholders could easily be found from the existing councils mentioned earlier and experts by experience groups and client panels established in the municipalities.

- More research data and analyses are needed on the main risk groups for social exclusion: the analysis of the complex mechanisms causing social exclusion, addressing them and monitoring the situation.
- The objectives should be concretised: attaining them demands long-term efforts (it may take years just to carry out the change in procedures and working practices of the authorities).
- The responsibilities and commitments of the various actors should be clearly outlined.
- Concrete cross-sectoral co-operation practices in issues related to poverty and social exclusion should be developed further; the achievement of long-term impact requires continuous action and participation.
- The measures in separate action plans can do little to affect the general structures and factors contributing to social exclusion (risk of frustration).



- The measures do not easily reach those who most desperately need help and attention.
- Best practices are often very much linked to the administration system, culture and situation concerned.

### **Transferability issues**

The difference of social policy structures is a clear obstacle to peer learning. The open method of co-ordination has not necessarily offered much that is new from the perspective of Finnish policy. European co-operation has not been able to address the actual major problems at the system level. The emphasis on programme- and project-orientation in the comparison of best practices has been criticised. A strategic total analysis of the system is lacking in both the national plans and the summarising reports. The structural review and analysis of the links between the national social policy and economic, employment and internal market developments should be improved. For instance the EU's competition policy also has a great impact on the job opportunities of disadvantaged people in branches of low productivity. The biased building of a Europe of markets hampers NGO activities and increases the risk of social exclusion, which is seriously in contradiction with the objective of eliminating poverty and social exclusion.

