

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

Austrian platform for monitoring the implementation of the Europe 2020 headline target for combating poverty and social exclusion¹

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1. Involvement of stakeholders - An Austrian tradition of governance

In Austria there exists, due to social partnership, a long history of engaging stakeholders in the framework of legislation and administration. In addition, delegates of the federal states are represented in various national bodies, which is especially important in the area of "social affairs" because, according to the Austrian Federal Constitution, the implementation of laws in this area is essentially the responsibility of the federal states; inter alia, in social assistance.

In recent decades, existing participatory processes were supplemented with the increased participation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as involved individuals. Although measures against poverty in Austria are to be regarded as a horizontal issue, the Ministry inter alia set up institutionalised interagency practices of cooperation with NGOs regarding poverty.

From National Action Plans to the establishment of the National Poverty Platform

Since 2001, the National Action Plans for social inclusion in the framework of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) for social protection and social inclusion were drawn up from the beginning with a broad participation from all stakeholders. As part of the participation process, sub-projects have been initiated, such as in particular the project that started in 2007, "Becoming visible", which put into practice the demand for inclusion and better visibility of people experiencing poverty. The project is carried out by the Austrian Anti-Poverty Network and is funded by the BMASK. Another project was the development of national poverty indicators with the broad involvement of all stakeholders.

To prepare and implement the European Year 2010 for combating poverty, a National Steering Committee was set up in 2009, to which all relevant stakeholders were invited. That steering committee then was transformed into the national poverty platform, in the framework of the Europe 2020 strategy and its core target for poverty reduction (ÖPAP).

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The ÖPAP in the context of the EU 2020 strategy

For the Ministry, the involvement of civil society in the formulation and implementation of poverty reduction and integration measures is a key element, which is why an information and consultation mechanism has been established in this area, which strives to provide a high degree of participation.

Social partners, regional and local actors as well as actors of civil society are important stakeholders in the fight against poverty. To monitor implementation of the Europe 2020 core objective of poverty and social exclusion (to reduce up to 2020 the number of people at risk of poverty by 20 million) and on the specifics of the respective flagship initiative, a permanent dialogue with all relevant actors in Austria was established.² This discussion process for the in-depth underpinning of the Europe 2020 strategy is designed in the form of regular platform meetings, which generally take place twice a year and are supplemented by additional meetings on specific topics. These platform meetings are financed and organised by the BMASK.

Participating institutions / organisations

In the Austrian platform for monitoring the implementation of the Europe 2020 objective of combating poverty and social exclusion, the following organisations are represented:

- Ministries, Provinces, Municipalities, Cities and Towns;
- Statistics Austria, and selected representatives from the scientific community (reference topics);
- social partners;
- Senior Citizens' Association, Senior Citizens, National Youth Council;
- NGOs and representatives of civil society (poverty conference, BAWO, Caritas, ÖAR, Roma organisations, etc.);
- people experiencing poverty.

Invitations for the meetings are sent to about 130 persons and organisations. On average, between 40-60 participants attended the platform meetings.

Main topics

As part of the platform meetings, information on the EU 2020 strategy is being provided, with a thematic focus on poverty and interactive contributions, in which great emphasis is placed on interaction in the form of discussion. After each meeting, the contributions and a protocol of the platform are sent out to the participants.

The participants are informed on developments concerning the European Semester, on of the National Reform Programmes (NRP), the EU perspective on governance of the poverty target, the programming of European funds (ESF and strategies of social inclusion and combating poverty in Austria), and on the Annual Growth Report of the European Commission.

Another focus is the discussion of relevant issues, such as the development of national indicators to measure poverty, the Austrian implementation of the EU 2020 target at the interface between poverty reduction and the employment objective (with reference to the working poor), and energy poverty. The annual priorities of the platform are discussed together with the representatives in the platform.

² European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion: A European framework for social and territorial cohesion, COM(2010) 758.



The participants were given the opportunity to provide inputs on the content of the meetings of the Austrian platform for the monitoring of the national target regarding relative poverty in 2013. In addition, opportunities were given for the interaction of people having experienced poverty with representatives of civil society (project "be visible" 2013: training and education to strengthen self-organisation and participation of people experiencing poverty).

2. Evaluation of civil society involvement in the EU-2020 strategy in Austria

In 2012, SORA published on behalf of the Federal Chancellery a study *"The involvement of civil society in the reform programme Europe 2020 in Austria"*. The main results were:

- For the BMASK, the involvement of NGOs in the examination procedure for the adoption of laws is standard practice, as well as the inclusion of stakeholders, both in the development of strategies in the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) for Social Protection and Social Inclusion (National Action Plans, reports ...) and in the framework of the European focus years.
- A special feature which was consistently rated positively by the respondents in this study was the *"Austrian platform for monitoring the implementation of the objective of combating poverty and social exclusion"*. The platform, thus, fulfils the function of networking and exchange of information.
- In particular, the involvement of the Ministry is positively emphasised by most interviewed NGO representatives. *"I think that one can say that the processes coordinated by the Ministry are running pretty well. [...] both regarding the European years as well as the NAPs or the Social Platform. This is transparent [...] There is a broad involvement, now also with the participation of people experiencing poverty."*
- Very impressive for the NGO representatives was that the Ministry also invited people experiencing poverty to the meetings: *"[...] because I thought to myself, here happened [...] something really new"*.

In summary, it is noted in the study that the participation of civil society in the implementation of the Europe 2020-strategy is permanently institutionalised and established in Austria.

3. Issues for the discussion

The Belgian Platform - A Best Practice Model for Austria ?

The Belgian General Report on Poverty (1994) started a process, which culminated in the drafting of a National Action Plan for Social Inclusion. In Austria, it is planned to develop a national poverty strategy in dialogue with all relevant stakeholders. In this regard, an exchange of information with regard to the Belgian experience in the development, implementation and integration of the Belgian Anti-Poverty Networks could provide important inputs.

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

Regarding civil society, Austria does not invite individual organisations or persons, but instead turns to the umbrella organisations that cover with their member organisations all relevant areas. Thus, the information flow is permanently ensured. Depending on the issue, an extension of the invitation list is always possible (like for the issue of energy poverty).



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

The Austrian Anti-Poverty Network receives a core funding, which also serves to promote the involvement of all stakeholders in the consultation processes.

The participation of people experiencing poverty is particularly supported by a project of the Austrian Anti-Poverty Network financed by the Ministry. The issue has already been dealt with in the poverty platform. It turns out again and again that the question of the involvement of people experiencing poverty is important, but also challenging.

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

The roles must be clearly defined and unrealistic expectations among the actors should be avoided. We understand the platform as a means of information exchange and not as a tool for the design and implementation of programmes. The implementation of the Europe-2020 strategy is about measures by public authorities which also bear the responsibility. Nevertheless, the exchange of information in the platform can be very important and may contribute to mutual learning.

Bibliography

SORA (Institute for Social Research and Consulting) (2012): Die Einbindung der Zivilgesellschaft in das Reformprogramm Europa 2020 in Österreich; Study on behalf of the Austrian Federal Chancellery.

