



european social network
réseau social européen
europäisches soziales netzwerk

Perspectives from practice

Review of the *National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2008-10*

20 January 2009

European Social Network

Social Services in Europe

ESN is the independent network for social services in Europe. Our mission is to help change the lives of the most vulnerable in our societies through the delivery of quality social services. With Members in local public social services across Europe, we bring together the people who are key to the design and delivery of vital care and support services to learn from each other and contribute their experience and expertise to building effective social policy at European and national level.



The European Social Network
is supported by the
European Commission

www.esn-eu.org

Preface: scope of the review

The National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2008-10 were published in October 2008.¹

ESN established working groups on three contemporary priorities for local public social services and European social policy at the start of 2008. These were: **long-term care for older people; active inclusion; children & families**. With each working group, ESN reviewed the parts of the National Report most relevant to it covering the countries represented in that group.²

This review therefore covers **a necessarily limited selection of countries and themes**. It does not purport to offer a complete review of the National Reports neither in terms of country nor thematic coverage. We hope however that it will add a different angle to the European Commission's and other Networks' reviews of the National Reports, one which is based on the experience and expertise of directors of local public social services.

This review is concerned mainly with two aspects: the extent to which the **role of local public social services** was recognised and the extent to which present **challenges for local social work and care** were visible. However we begin with a commentary on the nature and scope of the National Reports in general and then move onto governance aspects, particularly relating to the participation of local public social services in the preparation of the Reports. It concludes with some suggestions to improve the visibility and ownership of the Reports in order to enhance opportunities for mutual learning.

1. Nature and scope of the National Reports

The National Reports sit in an uncomfortable space between the reality of a reporting exercise and the ambition of pursuing shared European social policy objectives³. They have **great potential for mutual learning**: they could become key reference documents for anyone interested in social policy in other European countries. There is, through the OMC as a whole, "a considerable body of very useful learning about how best to tackle and prevent poverty and social exclusion."⁴

Whilst "finding solutions to [contemporary social problems] is in the first place the responsibility of national authorities,"⁵ the OMC provides a unique opportunity to review national priorities and policy direction with a wider European framework. This can inform policy-making, though as the Commission recognises, it can be difficult for the OMC to "produce large-scale results in a limited period of time"⁶ given that the National Reports timetable may not always match the political calendar.

The Commission's Guidance Note states that, for the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion: "the focus should be on developing policies or programmes which aim to reinforce impact rather than on just providing a report on existing actions." What often happens in the National Reports, however, is that existing policies are presented anew using 'European' shared language and respecting the required format.

¹ National Reports are available at: ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/strategy_reports_en.htm

² For membership of the three working groups, please see: www.esn-eu.org/policy-and-practice-overview/

³ EU Common Objectives are available at: ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/common_objectives_en.htm

⁴ Frazer and Marlier (2008): Building a stronger EU Social Inclusion Process: Analysis and recommendations of the EU Network of independent national experts on social inclusion http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/expert_reports_en.htm#2008_1 p4

⁵ Frazer and Marlier (2008), op.cit., p5

⁶ Com (2008) 418/4: A renewed commitment to social Europe: reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion", p3. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52008DC0418:EN:NOT>

Overall a small number of countries may have used the opportunity of the NAPs/Inclusion part of the Reports to (re)assess national social inclusion policy. However, ESN working group members, in those countries covered by the groups, felt that this was indeed to a great extent a reporting exercise – and, understandably, coloured by governments’ concern to present their country in a positive light. One ESN member reacted by saying that there were “no surprises”. This is a reflection of ESN’s findings on the NAPs/Inclusion 2006-08, though coming from a different perspective: “national civil servants freely admit that [the NAPs] are by and large a collection of policies already announced or in existence”⁷.

This is the natural product of the in-built tension between the reality of national ownership of social policy and the pursuit of common objectives. The present review recognises that this has value in itself and reflects on how better to **exploit the potential for mutual learning** on this basis as a means to improve policies for social protection and social inclusion in Europe.

2. Governance and Participation

The Commission’s guidance note on consultation stated that “essential actors include local and regional authorities”. The degree of participation in the National Reports process, especially in the NAP/Inclusion, varies from one country to the other. The European Commission has recognised that regional and local authorities’ involvement “remains limited in most Member States” over the history of the OMC.

ESN had contributed to **informing Members** in writing about the preparation of the Reports and provided contact details for the members of the Social Protection Committee (SPC) in each country. ESN had also **written to the members of the SPC** to promote local public social services’ participation and provided contact details of ESN members.

An online survey attracted responses from 20 ESN Members in 12 countries. It showed that **ESN Members are active national policy stakeholders**: almost half of respondents were “regularly involved” in national policy-making, another quarter are “occasionally involved” and 15% “quite involved”. In turn, when it came to looking at the National Reports, a strong majority were aware of the National Reports (half through information from the ESN secretariat, half through direct contact with government). However, this did not translate into strong engagement with the preparation process – barely 50% of respondents were involved.

One example of **good governance was in Denmark** where there was extensive consultation with numerous stakeholders including the Association of Social Directors (FSD), an ESN Member. Consultation was carried out in the framework of a national conference whose aim was to consult local and regional authorities, social partners, social research centers and NGOs. The first draft of the Report followed the conference and was sent for comment to all who had taken part.

The survey responses do not allow any clear conclusions to be drawn as to the reasons for this. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that **participation in the National Reports is not a priority** because they tend not to be a source of new policy, but “mainly an administrative reporting exercise”⁸. As our survey confirmed, ESN Members

⁷ Social Services and Social Inclusion, A report by the European Social Network 2006: www.esn-eu.org/publications-and-statements/

⁸ Frazer and Marlier (2008), op. cit., p4

are involved in national policy-making; they would typically have strong input into policies impacting on social services directly. These would (though not reliably or consistently) be presented in the National Reports.

A *secondary factor* may be that **ownership of the National Reports** is perceived as lying with national government alone. This is particularly complicated politically in countries where social protection and inclusion policy lies with sub-state government.

In Italy, for example, a “unified conference”, bringing together the Italian State and the regions was in charge of drafting the report. It ensures that policies are drafted in agreement with regions which have responsibility for health and social services. The United Kingdom’s National Report exemplifies the **challenge of producing a report in a state with devolved administrations**: it outlines separate policies for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Even within the Nordic countries it can be difficult to produce a single national report due to the high level of local autonomy.

A *third factor* relates to the value national government attaches to the Report:

“In most Member States it would appear that the process has a very low political priority and status.”⁹

If a national government does not adequately resource or support the drafting of the NAP, which may well be the case, then the Report may have a number of reporting gaps arising from insufficient resources for consultation across departments and different levels of government.

3. Reviewing policy content¹⁰

This section looks at the policy content of the National Reports for the themes and countries represented in the ESN working groups 2008.

(A) Active Inclusion¹¹

The NAP/Inclusion part of the National Report is guided by three common objectives, one of which directly invokes active inclusion, namely objective (e): “the active social inclusion of all, both by promoting participation in the labour market and by fighting poverty and exclusion”. **Member States have widely recognized active inclusion** as an important objective for national policy and given it a high profile in their reports. This will certainly have followed from the European Commission’s active inclusion initiative, which has created momentum around the issue.

However, the majority of Member States have **framed active inclusion in terms of the Lisbon Strategy** rather than the Commission’s policy concept. Active inclusion appeared under headings like “increasing labour market participation” (United Kingdom), “increasing employment level” (Romania), “more efficient participation in the labour market” (Latvia). Taken from a different perspective, the second pillar of the Commission’s active inclusion policy concept¹² (“link to the labour market”) was given the most attention, which in turn meant that the role of social services, included in the Commission’s third pillar of its three-pronged approach, tended to be underplayed. Member States reported on active labour market policies, usually through a mix of fiscal incentives for employers and benefits conditionality for the unemployed.

⁹ Frazer and Marlier (2008), op. cit., p4

¹⁰ The working groups on Active Inclusion and Children & Families reviewed policy content from the *NAP/Inclusion* while the Long-term Care group looked at the part of the *long-term care strategies* relevant to older people.

¹¹ For the members of this working group please see: www.esn-eu.org/active-inclusion

¹² Recommendation of 3 October 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market (2008/867/EC): <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:307:0011:0014:EN:PDF>

Within active inclusion, **the visibility of the local level varied**. In the case of Germany, there was inadequate recognition of local authorities' role in delivering the Hartz-IV reforms. By contrast, throughout the Finnish report, local authorities were fully recognised as the foundation of the Finnish welfare system and their autonomy underlined. Hungary was in a particular situation because of the large number (over 3000) of small municipalities: this may have been a contributing factor in local government's low visibility in this country's Report. A rationalisation of local government structure has been discussed many times but is politically difficult to bring about.

The group felt that in practice active inclusion programmes are about two groups of people: those who can be supported to move towards a 'regular' job and **those who realistically will not be able to work**. However, with the exception of Finland's, the Reports did not contain policy proposals for the second group; this may be a reporting gap rather than a policy gap. This is **a worrying omission which needs to be addressed in future policy-making and policy-reporting** as in social work practice. Subsidised community work is highlighted as a pathway to work in Hungary, but for small municipalities of which there are many, it proves in practice to be more expensive and difficult to organise such schemes than simply to pay out benefits – this has proven a real disincentive for local authorities.

ESN's working group on active inclusion remarked that local partnerships (with business, local-regional-central level, faith-based services, specialist NGOs working for integration, ethnic minority representative groups) should have been given more emphasis. The **local implementation, an important source of experience and mutual learning**, was not visible and there was no sense of reviewing the effectiveness of the policies in light of local practice.¹³ This was seen as the biggest gap, for example, in the UK plan.

Members of the group remarked that the **policies and budgets outlined in the Reports could be affected by the ongoing financial crisis**. Objectives and targets based on the previous year's figures could be obsolete in the current climate. The question is how the Member States will review their policies and whether the support for those furthest from the labour market will be compromised or not. The Commission should consider requesting that Member States address the impact of the financial crisis on active inclusion and other policies in the expected updates in 2009.¹⁴

(B) Children & Families¹⁵

The NAP/Inclusion part of the National Reports had **a strong on focus on child poverty**, similarly under different policy headlines. This may have been in part driven by the focus on this issue during the so-called 'light year' of the OMC. One of the common objectives refers to "preventing and addressing exclusion"; tackling child poverty and working with families is key to a preventive approach.

The working group found that the main policies to be implemented in the next two years on children & families were accurately reflected in the NAP. There was however **some concern about the way these policies are presented**. In Denmark, for example, some minor projects are described extensively, hence appearing more important than they are in the political agenda. There was also a danger for some that obstacles and challenges to policy implementation had not been adequately thought through.

¹³ ESN published the brochure "*Realising Potential: Active Inclusion and Social Services*" in October 2008 to share the learning and exchange from the working group: <http://www.esn-eu.org/Home/>

¹⁴ ESN wrote to national governments in December 2008 to promote the participation of social services in policy development on active inclusion and also highlighted the potential impact of the financial crisis: <http://www.esn-eu.org/ai-letter-to-ministers/>

¹⁵ For the members of this working group please see: www.esn-eu.org/children-and-families

Although child poverty tends to be measured in terms of income poverty, it is dealt with **as a multidimensional problem in the NAPs**. In the Irish NAP it is mainstreamed across a number of headings. The NAPs also make reference to the complex causes behind child poverty and to specific practice cases. Given the complexity and interlinking causes of child poverty, it is necessary to **highlight the need for effective partnerships and inter-agency cooperation** to improve services for children. The Irish NAP emphasises inter-agency working and constitutes a good reflection of the current situation and future developments.

The Czech plan mentions targets to increase the numbers of young people in foster care and there is also a big emphasis on prevention. Overall, the group underlined that it would be positive nonetheless to **focus more on the protection of the most vulnerable children**, whose parents may, for example, have a drug or alcohol abuse problem. The Danish NAP conference had highlighted the need for consistency of support for parents and children. **Deinstitutionalization is one of the principal challenges** for countries such as the Czech Republic with large-scale institutions. Social services also have a crucial role in looking after children in public care; this is not a well-reported issue across the board.

Although the Commission's Guidance Note requests targets and budget details for each policy measure mentioned, this information does not always appear. It was felt that the **inclusion of existing targets, indicators and funding information** (e.g. on deinstitutionalisation) would enable the NAPs to show how specific policy measures had made an impact, so providing an evidence base for mutual learning in this area. Member States' commitment to better measuring the multidimensional nature of child poverty and wellbeing, along the lines of a recent report¹⁶ is a positive step.

(C) Long-term Care and Inclusion for Older People¹⁷

The long-term care strategies are divided into three main sections on access, quality and sustainability, reflecting the EU common objectives in this area. Given the remit of the ESN working group, its review looked only at long-term care for older people.

In the reports, **access is too often reported in financial terms only**, for two potential reasons. First, there is the wording of the common objectives which stress "poverty and financial dependency". Second there is the fact that national governments may be reporting according to national level competences, which in many countries concern basic financing and benefits levels. The reports tend to describe the set of benefits and services available to a person and on what grounds. Local public social services have a role here in guaranteeing access to services for people on low incomes (e.g. Belgium, Germany).

In the UK, access to services starts with a needs assessment by a local authority social worker. In Germany by contrast, where services are linked to the care insurance, there was little recognition of the role of municipalities in financially supporting people without insurance or in providing additional services such as information centres and social clubs in partnership with NGOs. Sweden's report gives **strong recognition to local autonomy in organising and delivering care services**.

In practice however, access goes beyond the financial dimension: it is also about being able to reach the right service at the right time and helping people to understand what

¹⁶ *Child Poverty and Wellbeing in the EU: Current Status and Way Forward* (2008):

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/docs/social_inclusion/2008/child_poverty_en.pdf

¹⁷ For the members of this working group please see www.esn-eu.org/long-term-care-for-older-people

care is available. In England, it was noted that most local authorities only respond to people assessed as having 'critical' and 'severe' needs. Further, there is understandably a prioritising of care which gives rise to **waiting lists and different sets of services (and charges) for people in different towns**. This issue is not brought out in the report.

Several issues crossing over all three headings were highlighted as absent by different members of the working group. The Polish report omits to tackle the **problem of an unregulated part of the care sector** in Poland, in which many small operators run guesthouse-type accommodation for older people, who are then vulnerable to financial abuse and neglect. Several examples (Romania, Sweden) were given of challenges related to cooperation between health and social services. In Romania, 30-40% of hospital beds are occupied by older people with basic social care needs because of inadequate capacity in community care. Several members of the group (Sweden, UK) felt that **the rural and remote dimension was missing** from the report: good developments in terms of tele-health and tele-care could have been reported.

The sustainability part of the report is overall too much focused on financial aspects. It provides **information on resources but does not really reflect on whether this is sustainable**. In Romania, funding tends to be for short-term projects. Local authorities are required to raise funds locally though policies are defined nationally. The Reports do not generally cover the question of 'promoting a rational use of resources' (common objective I) adequately – though this could have been a good opportunity for mutual learning, for example, in managing local care markets and monitoring the effectiveness of interventions. Crucially, information on healthy ageing, carer support and volunteering should have been included here, another missed opportunity to share some good policies.

Social inclusion is also a key issue within long-term care, but, at least within the long-term care strategies, there is little recognition of this need. An ESN Member's survey of older people's needs showed that isolation was a significant problem. The UK report had a welcome focus on home-care but did not recognise the **risk of increased isolation at home**, e.g. for an older person who has lost their life partner and who only see care workers who call in. There was also no mention of specialised care for older people from ethnic minorities.

4. Concluding Remarks...

This review began by considering the nature and scope of the National Reports, their governance mechanisms and the participation of local public social services. From this starting point, the review presented perspectives from the ESN working groups on (a) active inclusion, (b) children & families and (c) long-term care for older people.

The Reports were **in general a good summary of national policy**, there were also some gaps in reporting and in policy development. Stronger involvement of local public social services in the drafting of the Reports could have avoided some of the gaps and enriched the Reports with local practice experience and social work expertise, particularly in the following areas:

- Social inclusion measures for those realistically unable to work
- Care and protection of the most vulnerable children
- Access and sustainability in broader terms than only financial

However, this would have depended not only on national government creating multi-level ownership of the National Reports but also on the active and willing participation of local government stakeholders.

This review started with the recognition that the National Reports occupy an uncomfortable space between the reality of a reporting exercise and the ambition of achieving shared European social policy objectives. Viewed within the context of the open method of coordination, the National Reports have **great potential to enhance mutual learning** as a means to combat social exclusion and poverty in Europe.

5. ... and some suggestions to improve mutual learning

Based on the above conclusions of this review, necessarily covering a limited selection of countries and themes, we would like to propose some actions to reform the process and presentation of the National Reports, in order that they can contribute to realising their potential to contribute to mutual learning in the OMC.

To improve communication and dissemination, each country could set up a website in its national language plus English/French which could bring together all the strands of the (renewed) Lisbon Strategy. These could be platforms for exchange and learning with references to existing key pieces of national and regional legislation across all priorities and links to examples of local good practice and local and regional social inclusion strategies. They would also link to the Commission webpages and to counterpart websites of other countries.¹⁸

Consultation needs to take place across central government and, crucially, with local and regional authorities, including social services, in order to **widen ownership and ensure full reporting**. Each government could consult with local and regional authorities to discuss ways to improve their participation in their own National Report and inform them better about the learning opportunities of other countries' Reports. Local and regional authorities could also be supportive in reporting on implementation of key initiatives contained in the Reports. The Commission could help here by documenting examples of where local and regional authorities are involved and use these to encourage other Member States to do likewise.

There is **a long way to go to realise the potential of this process** and ESN will continue to reflect on ways forward. The renewal of the OMC must focus on realising the potential for mutual learning beyond 2010 as part of a renewed commitment to a social Europe.¹⁹

Contact: stephen.barnett@esn-eu.org / 00 44 1273 739 039

¹⁸ Ireland's www.socialinclusion.ie and Lithuania's www.socialmap.lt, though quite different, could be starting points for the development of these websites.

¹⁹ ESN will promote the present report among its Members and will invite Members to benefit from the wealth of information of the National Reports in each area.