

Are 'adequate and affordable' social services a priority in Europe 2020?

An assessment of the National Reform Programmes 2012

ESN Working Group on Leadership, Performance, Innovation

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The European Social Network (ESN) brings together people who design, manage and deliver social services in public authorities across Europe. We support the development of effective social policy and social care practice through the exchange of knowledge and experience.



Introduction

The annual policy cycle of the Europe 2020 Strategy begins with the 'Annual Growth Survey', in which the Commission sets out the state of play and challenges for the year ahead. The European Council (heads of state and government) then issues guidelines for Member States, who in turn present their 'National Reform Programmes' (NRPs) and 'national social reports' (NSRs) in April. The Commission analyses these documents and issues policy guidance in June.

The Annual Growth Survey 2012 made tackling the social impact of the crisis one of its five priorities and advised Member States to give priority to *"adequate and affordable social services to prevent marginalisation of vulnerable groups"*. Two years before this, László Andor, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, had told the European Social Services Conference¹: *"Social services, including all of you present at this conference as leaders and managers in local and regional government, have an important role to play in helping lift 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion."*

ESN asked its working group on service management, set up in the wake of the crisis, to assess the National Reform Programmes 2012 and asked to what extent the National Reform Programmes give priority to *"adequate and affordable social services to prevent marginalisation of vulnerable groups."* This represents an analysis of a sample of eight Member States' National Reform Programmes and also includes relevant country-specific recommendations.

European Overview

Hugh Frazer, Adjunct Professor, National University of Ireland, Maynooth

ESN invited Hugh Frazer to join this meeting and provide an early insight into the NRPs 2012. His initial impression was that the involvement of local and regional government and in particular social services had been more limited in this round of National Reform Programmes than was the case in the past under the social OMC. Overall, as was the case in 2011, the social inclusion dimension of the NRPs was quite limited and, where it was present it tended to be quite narrowly focussed on tackling unemployment and, to a lesser extent, educational disadvantage.

Two pillars of the active inclusion approach, income support and access to services, received very limited attention in the majority of NRPs. The predominant focus was on getting those closest to the labour market back to work, including the young unemployed. However, in many Member States very limited attention was given to active inclusion of those *furthest* from the labour market. He noted that a few countries (e.g. BE, FI, LU, NL, SI) seemed to have given a somewhat higher priority to the social inclusion dimension. A few others had somewhat increased their coverage of poverty and social exclusion (e.g. CY, DK, MT) compared to 2011.

¹ <https://www.esn-conference.org/barcelona/?q=presentations-barcelona>

He said that it is clear that in many countries financial consolidation and austerity measures are the dominant concern and this has relegated social inclusion policies to the periphery. As a result an ad hoc and piecemeal approach to social policy (e.g. emergency spending or savings decisions) had taken priority over systemic reform.

Belgium

Karine Lycops, Head of Social Services, OCMW-Genk, Flanders / Association of Chief Executives of the Flemish OCMWs (municipal social welfare centres)

The NRP is very theoretical and presents a challenge to local policy-makers and practitioners for putting it into action. There is a big priority for tackling child poverty but a specific budget is not mentioned. There is no mention of extreme poverty in the document; it does not address people who cannot work for reasons other than disability or ill health, but instead have complex social and family problems (mental health problems, drug & alcohol, insecure housing etc.). Rising energy prices severely affect households with a low income. The NRP is weak on measuring the long-term effects of its proposals (at a level below the macro level of the Europe 2020 indicators).

Denmark

Steinar Eggen Kristensen, Director of Social Services, Aarhus / Member of the Association of Social Directors

Denmark is one of the most equal societies and social services are highly-developed across the country. There is nothing new in the NRP: it consists of policies already announced or in the process of implementation. He saw three lines as being connected to social services: employment (labour market integration and supported jobs for people with a disability); youth education; social inclusion, but how social services are involved is unclear. One key measure has been to increase the basic benefit level. Various new social policy initiatives are yet to be defined by the new government. The association of social directors was consulted about the individual initiatives and policies, but not about the NRP as such.

Finland

Jukka Lindberg, Head of Social Services Purchasing, Hameenlinna / Chair of Association of Social Directors

There was a great deal of attention paid to industrial policy and competitiveness. The NRP describes the problems well but is short on solutions; for example, it makes a familiar call for higher productivity in the public sector, but does not offer any tools to realise this. This discussion has already been ongoing for thirty years. Finland has big public and household debts but its public services are not used to service cuts, so the need for greater efficiency is urgent.

The biggest action in the NRP is for young people who are in long-term unemployment. There is also a new proposal on services for older people, but this is a sector that already

has a good level of provision. Greater investment is really needed in early childhood education and care and excluded young people. However, long-term care for older people is politically more important. More generally in public policy, a focus on investment that brings an economic and a social return would be welcome.

In terms of the Europe 2020 targets, Finland has set its sights higher than the Council's agreed targets, but recognises that these won't be achieved. Benefits have been increased (but not enough) in line with the poverty target – such an approach is “first aid, but no cure”. Reading between the lines, the government seems to accept that 10-15% of the working age population cannot be included in the labour market.

Municipal social services have a major role in arranging and delivering services and in general, there is a lot of discussion about local government structure (size of municipalities, distribution of responsibilities between State and local level). Normally, the association of social directors comments on all social policy documents, but it was not aware of either the National Reform Programme or National Social Report before ESN raised it.

France

Marie-Paule Martin-Blachais (Director) and Flora Bolter, National Agency for Child Protection

In general, the NRP is very focused on employment and the economy; poverty & social exclusion appear quite late, suggesting a low priority. It is a report on existing policies and what has already been done; it is heavily focused on the job-seekers activation benefit (RSA). Child protection is invisible though there are some minor mentions of early childhood education and care. From the NRP, one could understand that social services' role is to help get people into work, though there is of course much more to it than that. Even so, there is more about tax/benefit measures to incentivise work than there is about help and support through services. France tends to emphasise citizens' rights strongly but is less good at making those rights known and ensuring take-up of rights and benefits. The National Agency for Child Protection was not aware of the NRP or the NSR.

Germany

Guido Kläser, Director of Social Services, Health and Housing, Erfurt

Neither the NRP nor the NSR had been mentioned at meetings of the social directors of the 16 largest German cities and the 25 medium-size cities. The NRP reports that Germany is making a big investment in the long-term unemployed and in children and young people. Some of these priorities are being implemented in Erfurt: there is a budget of €1 million in a joint project of social services and the employment agency to help the long-term unemployed back to work. The City is also introducing new universal benefits and services to families based on a central government programme and financing. There is no visible mention of older people or people with disabilities, though this may be a reporting gap rather than a policy gap. The government needs to reflect on how to meet the needs of the elderly and disabled. Overall, it was regrettable that the NRP only spanned one year at a time and was thus rather short-term in focus, despite appearing to be a highly strategic document.

Italy

Bruno Marcato, Director of Social Services Agency, City of Bolzano

Italy has produced similar strategic documents to the NRP in the past (not necessarily those within the EU process) but there has always been a large implementation gap. The NRP is a work in progress but there is little real political direction behind it and it is difficult to see what results it can produce.

A 2002 law gave municipalities responsibility for social services delivery, yet Italy still has huge regional variations: in his region of Trentino-Alto Adige, they spend €800 per inhabitant on social services, whilst in Puglia it is €200. The government is keen to decrease regional differences, which will mean reducing services in some areas and increasing them in others. The government will have to overcome major opposition from interest groups, change the structure of institutions and build stronger alliances with people and communities to help improve social security for all Italians.

As far as the NRP's social policy priorities are concerned, these are family, work, the simplification of administration and tackling corruption. The spending priority is for older people (who use up to 80% of social spending through pensions, health and long-term care). However, municipalities lack money for family policies, especially early childhood education and care. It seems doubtful that the Europe 2020 targets will be met. Bruno Marcato was not aware of the NRP before the meeting.

Romania

Monica Ghitiu, Head of Child Protection, City of Cluj

There is a big focus on legislative changes, e.g. the law on social assistance but there has not been much follow-up through subsidiary legislation or methodological guidance. It is weak (as is much legislation) on clear guidance on implementation for municipalities. A lot of attention paid to community-based social services for children and families; there had been special measures for deinstitutionalisation until 2007 ahead of EU membership.

The NRP cites various EU-funded projects but these are not necessarily representative of the whole country or municipalities' efforts outside of EU funding. There are big gaps in rural areas and very low capacity to implement legislation in smaller municipalities. There is nothing on the situation of older people living in poverty or long-term care. The National Roma Strategy had sought to place greater responsibilities on municipalities, but with only a derisory national budget attached, accompanied by an invitation to apply for EU funding.

United Kingdom

John Powell, Director of Social Services, London Borough of Redbridge / Member of Association of Directors of Adult Social Services

The content of the NRP is familiar but not the NRP as a document in its own right. Neither his association (ADASS) nor the association of directors of children's services (ADCS) were consulted. Because of various ongoing policy debates in the UK, it would have been good to understand more of the government's intentions on welfare and social care reform and funding, but there was a disappointing lack of depth. There was only one reference to 'adult social care' throughout the NRP. There is some attention paid to family carers, but the logic (possibly economically flawed given costs of care) seems to be to get them into work. Overall, the government is still "ducking the issue of long-term care funding", not only in this document but in general.

There is a particular government initiative on 'troubled families', for which Redbridge has received money for twenty families; however the funding tends to be tied to particular central government priorities that do not necessarily reflect local needs. The scale of the housing problem and its costs are not adequately addressed: Redbridge has 2000 people living in temporary accommodation, but there are another 10 000 on the waiting list. Thanks to 'austerity', the need to 'show you're doing something now' through small one-off projects in some cases overrides the long-term systemic reforms.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This assessment of eight countries' National Reform Programmes in 2012 shows that 'adequate and affordable social services' were not a priority despite the importance attached to the issue in the AGS 2012. There are a number of lessons to learn from this assessment as we move into the European Semester 2013.

Consultation and Awareness

Analysis: Members of ESN's working group on *leadership, performance and innovation* had been unaware of the NRPs as such, but were familiar with individual initiatives mentioned.

How to improve: Governments should be sure to involve specialists such as associations of social directors besides generic local government networks. They would provide valuable professional and strategic input on social, health, employment and education policy, notably in relation to the target on poverty & social exclusion and to Guideline 10. Even if the NRPs (and NSRs) are unlikely to produce new policy initiatives, greater stakeholder involvement could at least close various reporting gaps.

Priorities and policy gaps

Analysis: The NRPs tended to focus on economy and employment in the main, turning only to social issues later in the document (albeit in line with the order of Europe 2020 Guidelines and targets), and then having a narrow focus on labour market activation and education; there was little reference to older people in poverty or with care needs, those with a disability or a mental health problem (whether in poverty or not).

How to improve: The NRPs need to at least recognise the wider group of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion and in need of long-term care and support, even if few policy details are given, in light of the limited space – these could then be elaborated in the National Social Reports. People at the margins of society and perhaps invisible to EU statistics (those in residential care) should be made visible given the EU's commitment to 'inclusive growth'. The importance of adopting a broader 'active inclusion' approach which not only looks at active labour market measures but also looks at adequate income support and access to quality services (including social services) should be stressed. However, active inclusion in the labour market cannot be the only approach for the most vulnerable people, who need help first and foremost to achieve independence and a decent quality of life.

Relevance to social services

Analysis: Social services are mentioned only by implication but not by name in relation to youth unemployment and education, and they are seldom referred to in relation to poverty & social exclusion – despite their responsibility for basic welfare benefits, emergency social aid and social work. This is particularly disappointing in light of the call in the Annual Growth Survey 2012 to give priority to “adequate and affordable social services”.

How to improve: In line with the first recommendation to make sure those at the margins of society are visible, there is a concurrent need to recognise those essential social services (and indeed wider public services and policy efforts) that aim to offer them care and support, to help them overcome or manage challenging life circumstances, and ultimately achieve independence and wellbeing – or in other words, social inclusion.

Impact of the crisis

Analysis: In many NRPs limited attention seems to have been given to the impact of the crisis and financial consolidation packages on the most vulnerable groups in society. The key role played by social services in supporting these groups and helping them find routes out of poverty/exclusion is insufficiently acknowledged and is being put at risk due to the dual impact of cutbacks in resources and increased demands on services.

How to improve: Monitoring of the crisis by the European Commission and Member States should give particular attention to the impact on the most vulnerable groups and, given their key role in protecting those most at risk, every effort should be made to protect social services from the effects of financial consolidation. Short-term cuts and a failure to maintain investment in social services will have long term and expensive consequences for society. At the same time, it should be recognised that social services (and welfare and health systems more broadly) need to improve their knowledge of what works and measure their economic and social impact.

Protecting children

Analysis: Coverage of children and the services that support them in the NRPs is extremely limited, despite the knowledge that children are at a greater risk of poverty/exclusion than the general population and that poverty/exclusion tend to be passed down from one generation to the next. There is a failure to sufficiently recognise that investment in early

childhood services is a cost-effective and necessary intervention with long term benefits for the children and the society and thus for achieving Europe 2020's overall goals.

How to improve: Encourage Member States to give more attention to protecting and investing in social services for children in their NRPs 2013. In this regard, the forthcoming Commission Recommendation on child poverty and well-being should emphasise the importance of social inclusion and well-being of children in the Europe 2020 process. It should also draw attention to the key role played by specialist social work, family support and child protection services.

Social investment in the Annual Growth Survey 2013

The Annual Growth Survey 2013 should strengthen the call to Member States to give attention to the role of social services in protecting the most vulnerable. This time, however, this should be broader than active inclusion in the labour market; instead, it could state:

“The Commission considers that Member States should:

- Invest in quality and sustainable social services that help both those citizens worst affected by the crisis and those who were already facing severe social exclusion, to address any underlying issues such as a disability or poor mental health as well as immediate material needs.
- Promote social innovation in order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of social protection systems, giving vulnerable citizens the best chance of achieving social inclusion and wellbeing.”

This might appear under a priority heading of ‘sustainable social investment’. This proposal is in line with the Commission’s concern to promote social investment and social innovation but would also remind policy-makers of the need to address underlying factors in social exclusion besides providing emergency social aid and income support.

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