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promote and support open method of coordination for strengthening social inclusion and social protection

The final OPEN Newsletter - no. 4 January 2011

This newsletter is for people who have been involved in the OPEN Project activities and are passionate about the social agenda and for those organisations that work everyday to support those facing social exclusion.

More information can be found on www.the-open-project.eu

OPEN Final Conference

During the OPEN Project Final Conference held in Ancona on January 26th 2011 Project partners



presented the main result of the OPEN Project: the Guidelines for the Open Method of Coordination.

Mr Paolo Mannucci, Head of Social Policy Unit for Italy's Marche Region described the activities carried out by the partners during the two year project, including seminars for citizens and social providers, meeting with journalists and policy-makers, and the networking of experience across the partner countries to foster dialogue between all the stakeholders to more effectively tackle social exclusion.

Mrs Mary Dunleavy of West Midland Regional Development Centre and Mr Lakhvir Sahota of Play England, NCB – UK, Mr Winfried Lütke-meier of Saxony State Ministry of Social Affairs – Germany, Pilar

Machin of the Aragonese Institute of Social Services – Spain, highlighted the importance of including the social dimension in the context of the global economic situation, as well as the need for common indicators to assess progress and the need to share best practice. The debate involved Mrs Cristina Berliri of Italian Ministry of Employment and Social Policy and Mr Filippo Strati of the EU Network of independent experts on Social Inclusion. The event ended with an intercultural theatrical performance by young people titled "In Ancona...fragments of diversity" by Ponte tra Culture Soc. Coop.

GUIDELINES for the Open Method of Coordination



The reality of the conditions that citizens live their lives in are varied. Among the many perspectives that policy makers can take in considering social problems, it is important that they remember to look out for those in poverty; to give special thought for those who can't make ends meet from month to month, for those with disabilities, those who can't find a decent job, for those who experience the pain of family break down - those who experience disadvantage are best placed to understand what would do most good for their community. Engaging in dialogue and strengthening the flow of information and sharing good practice means taking a proactive approach to listening and through this the problems acquire a real human face and we can start to find ways to solve and manage the serious problems that people face.



This perspective is valid in different ways for all social actors, because only in this way can we test the realism of planning for a more inclusive society within Europe.

In these times of financial, economic and social challenges, it's now more necessary than ever that each one of the actors concerned – and this includes the media – take their share of responsibility in

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supporting social cohesion: everyone must make sure we protect the most vulnerable amongst us.

It is our hope that all of the actors affected by the recommendations will accept their share of responsibility to progress down the path that has been cleared for them.

Guidelines for the enhancement of the Open Method of Coordination as key driver of Social Inclusion and Protection Policy

Abstract Recommendation speech by Volker Köhn - Saxon State Ministry of Social Affairs (Germany)

The focus of the OPEN project is to put the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) as key driver of social inclusion and protection policy. In more than 20 thematic seminars we had the chance to discuss social policies in our four regions, European social policies and the Open Method of Coordination.

In the end, it was a very interesting exercise to have such an in-depth exchange of views on the OMC. It turned out that the experiences in our four regions are very similar. Furthermore, we all feel that there is room for improvement. After analysing use of OMC in our regions and national states, it was not very difficult to draw conclusions and make proposals which seem to be feasible and beneficial.

After dealing with the OMC, we will have a closer look at social communication.

1. Introduction

However, let us start with the OMC.

First of all, it has to be stressed that the OMC is a necessary and useful tool in the field of European social issues. It is obvious that we cannot enjoy in Europe the freedom of services, the single market and travelling without border controls and using a single currency without having a common understanding of social issues.

On the other hand, social inclusion mainly happens in daily life. That means it happens mainly in families, in the neighbourhood, at school, at work and on TV. Most of these fields are, of course, not appropriate

issues for European legislation. Therefore, a different kind of coordination for social policy is needed.

The OMC provides a set of useful tools that facilitates policy making. Let me explain this.

There is a widespread and strong interest in learning best practice. Every policy maker and every social service provider is permanently looking to improve their work. It is worth highlighting that, like the OMC, companies focus on the latest trend, the newest technologies and what their competitors are doing – and they are constantly trying to emulate best practice.

With regard to the results of the 'PISA study' by the OECD, international benchmarking is also recognised as a very important tool to adjust policies.

Additionally, the repercussions of the economic and financial situation have an impact on the provision of social services. It might be expected that there will be a long-term trend of increasing demand for health and



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social services. Public finances are already under severe strain, just at the time when the demographic transition towards an ageing and declining population is starting to be felt.

Policy makers must achieve the greatest possible impact with less money. Many policy makers try to bring about the necessary changes, but the efforts are often stifled by superficial hostility and misunderstanding by opposition leaders and vested interests. Voters are often uninformed about future challenges and the underlying sources of past prosperity.

With a view to addressing all the challenges, social policies must be more transparent, understandable and coherent, and public money must be targeted more wisely. Everybody should agree with this statement, at least in principle.

The idea is that policy should not be based on hear-say or doctrines, but rather rest on solid evidence, for which measurement of performance and comparison with others are essential. Setting targets and measuring achievement are also parts of the OMC.

Therefore, the OMC has great potential to assist greater convergence towards social policies in the EU and to help Member States to progressively develop their own policies in the social field. In this regard, the OMC is an appropriate tool to complete or reinforce Community action, especially when there is little scope for legislative solutions.

Unfortunately, the OPEN project revealed that the OMC is not being used effectively.

2. Analysis

A recent Eurobarometer survey showed that three out of four Europeans say that Europe has a role to play in reducing poverty. Even though the EU is fully committed to it, the perception at national, regional and local level is quite different.

There is a significant lack of knowledge in terms of European social policies, common objectives and achievements, in particular at the regional and local level. Indeed, there is a wide-spread ignorance and uncertainty about European social issues which needs to be stated. The OMC's objectives and procedures are



little known. As far as the OMC is known, the benefits of this method are to some extent contested.

The OMC mainly follows a top-down approach. The regional and especially local level is only marginally involved in elaborating the EU objectives and their corresponding indicators. It can't really be said that the common objectives are considered as being owned by these levels.

Moreover, the national strategies require reporting duties that consume a lot of staff time. Indeed, the role of the regional and local level in the OMC is mainly limited to contributing to the National Strategy Reports. This bureaucracy is – without doubt – not popular. The experts are burdened additional tasks. The contributions mainly cover political measures and legislation which are already in force.

It is likely that at least some policy makers feel uncomfortable being supervised by peers or even by the European Commission. Due to understandable

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reasons, no policy maker and no authority is keen to report to a higher level that there may be severe difficulties. In the European context, there are sometimes also fears that the European institutions interfere unduly in their affairs and want to have more information to prepare new legislation with more management and more paper work.

Fighting poverty is not only an issue for governments; it is one for the civil society too. Only the combined commitment of all social policies will bring people together to fight poverty and social exclusion, in particular; the service providers, the grassroots organisations and policy makers. So, what are the direct benefits of the OMC for them?

Often reports are just put on the website of the European Commission. With regard to the extent of the reports, it is impossible for policy makers or service providers even to read them. Evaluations are largely missing, in particular the thematic recommendations and conclusions. For example there is no point in evaluating all the national reports (or peer reviews either) and drawing out the lessons from good experiences. This kind of outcome is not and cannot be used at the regional and local level.

One of the most important issues in the OMC is the exchange of experience. Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to get an overview of the results. This is also our own experience in the OPEN project while preparing the thematic seminars.

Exchange of information often takes place at European and governmental level with little information from the conferences and meetings. There are exceptions, but as a rule sharing information is rather poor. The conference websites mainly consist of PowerPoint presentations without any background information. Often these conferences are explicitly restricted to governmental level. If there is further information, the documents are often only written in English. It is not possible to read these papers and make sensible conclusions that help our daily work.

Projects in EU programmes are largely unknown. The Commission websites do not provide sufficient information. In particular, there is no overview of the projects in the PROGRESS programme. Transparency

and dissemination of useful projects, reports and other information is needed.

3. Room for improvement

Drawing on experiences stemming from the thematic seminars there is a need for restructuring the OMC to become a tool that is appreciated and accepted by policy makers as their own policy instrument. This requires, among other things, the participation by policy makers at regional and local levels in the elaboration of common European goals beyond being simply consulted.

Participation is a key feature of the process. The OMC must tap the benefits of local knowledge and local experimentation better. Accordingly, participation should not be limited to those who operate in EU-level committees, but it should be extended to local-level actors.

To be clear, the different emphasis on local or EU-level



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actors reflects a bottom-up or top-down learning.

By learning from local knowledge and by generating trans-national diffusion, policy-makers can improve at their own paces. Learning in the context of the OMC is a political exercise. Policy makers may be open to reasoned argument, but not to the point of overcoming the basic fact that they are engaged with politically-sensitive policies.

It is necessary that the OMC leads outcomes and results that are useful for the member states, especially for the regional and local level. The OMC must be more outcome-oriented in its support and assistance for stakeholders.

This means that the OMC should, for example, be used for producing helpful manuals, recommendations, guidelines, strategies and development plans by and for regional and local policy makers and stakeholders on a voluntary basis (bottom-up approach). A good example for a beneficial description of social policy and best practice is the 'Handbook on Integration for policy makers and practitioners'. The main advantage of this handbook is that the relevant policy approaches, experiences, projects and studies have already been evaluated, structured and put in a form which can be learned from. It is much better to have options than develop new provisions and frameworks to be implemented every year.

To enhance the acceptance of these papers, they must be translated into all languages of the member states. It is unacceptable to present to policy makers and service providers papers and other tools which are designed to support them and ease their daily work in a foreign language. Many helpful and conducive initiatives went up in smoke because policy makers and practitioners are not able to read and understand them. Additionally, the sometimes artificial European language should be completely avoided. Messages must be easy to understand and free of rhetoric.

The exchange of experience on a transnational level is somewhat un-structured; an additional a problem is that we do not know all the completed or on-going activities. The participation of representatives from national governments at the conferences is not really helpful for regional and local stakeholders.

An alternative could be to structure the exchange of experience in a way that assures the involvement of the regional and local level. This could, among other things, be secured in the framework of the Committee of Regions.



The Committee of Regions could for example organise annual conferences on social issues with the main focus on the exchange of experience and accordingly prepare material for stakeholders, such as background notes, results from workshops, collections of best practice and recommendations.

Additionally, the Committee of Regions could elaborate the different tools above mentioned, such as handbooks, guidelines and so on. Without any difficulty, a lot of issues could easily be identified. It is likely that the OMC would, in this case, be more appreciated as a platform for regions and municipalities. Therefore, the Committee of Regions should be recast from just being a counselling body to a platform for regional and local policy makers for exchanging experience and best practice to provide the best possible benefit for regional and local policy makers and grassroots organisations and producing beneficial outcome for their everyday work.

Arguably, the most effective reforms are those at the policy level. The room for improvement here is impressive. There is much to learn from intelligent benchmarking. Methodologies and suggestions for learning from positive and negative lessons are available, but somewhat neglected. The suggestion is to seek a balance between benchmarking and context-sensitive lesson-drawing.

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For experts it might be of interest to have a closer look at the other EU projects in the social field. The European Commission should be more transparent and provide access to the results of projects on the internet, especially in the PROGRESS programme. In general, the relevant website of the European Commission could be enhanced. There is sometimes no further information available on some policy fields, even not a link to other papers.

The visibility of the OMC in the media is rather low. There is a danger that without an attentive public the method could be captured by technocrats and vested interests. Information available in the field of social policies should be spread and evaluated systematically, in particular the EU PROGRESS programme. The message to be disseminated should be that there is really good experience with this kind of tool throughout in Europe.

Last, but not least, the role of the European Commission should be re-considered as regards the relation to regional and local policy makers in the OMC. The impression must be avoided that the European Commission just supervises the progress in social issues.

Policy makers encounter many different challenges which reflect a far more complex, dynamic and diverse situation than the European institutions can imagine. Financial and economic challenges, empty cash boxes, demographic change, lack of prospects and deserted rural areas are some of the big challenges that policy makers face every day. It is not really encouraging for them to be blamed again for not achieving the political objectives.

I am looking forward to a lively discussion with the European Commission.

4. The Social Communication

Now let us have a deeper look at social communication.

The OPEN project was explicitly designed to take advantage of the Social Communication tool in order to reach and involve the OPEN target groups such as civil society, NGOs, organisations, public and private stakeholders, politicians and policy makers, journalists and the media.

Social communication is a tool for improving communications between grassroots organisations and strategic policy makers, ensuring voices are heard and information is accessible, and therefore the tool for ensuring a bottom-up approach as one of the requirements of the OMC.

One of the most important paradoxes for reporting in Europe is clearly the low level of attention given to “so-called” social issues. This is paradoxical because the seriousness, the size, the “newsworthiness” and even the standing of these issues appear inversely proportional to the quality and to the space dedicated to them in the mass media.

In order to address phenomena that are problems for different segments of society and trends that could become a problem, actions are often carried out spontaneously and freely by civil society groups organised specifically to tackle the social difficulties and promote well-being.

This reality, the richness of stories and news is not or only partly represented in the media; or represented so badly that sometimes silence is preferable.

What are the reasons for this? The OPEN team has identified several points.

1. Sad news:

Social news is often surrounded by negativity and sadness. It mainly deals with people who are not in the best of circumstances. Happy endings are rare. Even then the stories are often not communicated when journalists believe that good news is not good for publishing.

2. Difficult news:

The second of the structural causes is that social issues are “difficult” and combined with difficult solutions. They are complex because they almost always have different and overlapping origins and a difficult context. There are no easy solutions beyond platitudes, such as: let us throw them out or let us put them in jail.

3. An unhealthy link with politics:

Sometimes politics establishes the agenda for journalism. That is a problem that concerns, in

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particular, some countries. One of the reasons is that some mass media is controlled by policy makers. Additionally, some journalists think: “what comes from the political places is important”, and so “good for news”.

4. The news spot light:

Another handicap of social issues in the information society is that news is often reduced to being a “crime” or an “emergency”. News becomes the pretext to work on some issues more deeply. In some cases this is positive, when it can produce in the media a high profile and continuous focus on serious problems. But, in most cases, the emphasis given by a single report produces the effect of suddenly overexposing a social problem.

Closely related to this is the treatment of social stories as “emergencies”. The repeated emphasis in the news always has consequences for the growth of social alarm about a phenomenon, especially when the “alarm” is stated in a headline. The sensation in the reader is that we are going from one emergency to another.

5. Competence and discontinuity:

If a non-expert journalist attends an event (a congress, a press conference, etc.), unless they have read previous articles, they may not grasp what is really “new” in the flood of information. The loss of adequate contextual references, superficial background knowledge and, it can be added, the shortage of reliable materials – with the previously mentioned “emergency” approach – are the causes of the discontinuity in the narration that of the broader context of social problems and the sense of their evolution. Consequently, the stereotypes go on.

6. The “social” source:

The overwhelming majority of public and private social operators are unable to act as prompt, reliable and documented sources of information. That is a serious gap, because it deprives the journalists – at least those willing to use it – of the opportunity of using different versions and data which are essential to a more complete picture from which to perform their work.

An Information Alliance

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So what are the consequences?

The above mentioned analysis discusses the inconsistencies of the mass media system, but it also contains one of the principle and possible remedies. To obtain a better representation of social topics avoiding “stereotypes” and stigmatisation as well as encouraging intolerance and fear, an “alliance” between the media and appropriate sources of social information becomes more and more urgent.



There are a lot of potential partners, such as organisations, public officials, trainers, teachers and even policy makers at the local level. They have data and experience and know the faces of social discomfort directly.

Principles and actions to consolidate this alliance could be:

1. Mutual recognition of roles:

It is important that journalists and social operators recognise each other’s role and function, without any “invasion of field”. Journalists often refuse to accept non conventional sources apart from the ones offering official news about social topics (police, judges, lawyers, academics, etc.). On the other hand, social operators should accept that the communicator must follow constraints; in techniques, deadlines and their specific language that cannot be ignored by reporters.

2. Periodic comparison:

Those who work in the different areas of social policy and journalists who are involved in those topics in their territories should organise some time to meet. This can be done with the objective of understanding each other, acquiring confidence and enriching skills.



Finally, it should aim to prevent the inadequate treatment of sensitive social cases when they become public. Preferably prominent mediators would help to pay particular media attention to poverty and social exclusion.

3. Self-training:

It is essential for social operators to attain appropriate knowledge and skills on communication. It is not a question of becoming media experts, but to train and improve understanding of the essential elements of the media.

4. Management of the 'stories':

One of the obstacles of social, public and private operators is the protection of privacy, and, in general, of the identity of people that, under their care, are temporarily in a difficult situation or experiencing serious disadvantage. It is necessary to find forms of communication that protect them, but that at the same time give journalists as many aspects as possible of the story. One of the principles to be followed is to create a good relationship between social operator and journalist.

5. Systematisation of knowledge:

The social operators are depositories of a huge volume of knowledge, experience and data. The problem is that this often remains un-tapped or only reported into inaccessible bureaucratic reports or, finally, only into specialized magazines. The aim in these cases is to provide the operators' data and knowledge in form adequate for journalists' needs.

Upcoming Events on Social Agenda

16/03/2011 - 18/03/2011

What Future for Cohesion Policy?

The Fifth Cohesion Report's broad orientations on the future architecture of cohesion policy will be discussed at a conference in Slovenia on 16-18 March 2011.



News on Social Agenda

27/01/2011

Buying social

A guide on taking account of social considerations in public procurement.



27/01/2011

The Measurement of Extreme Poverty in the EU

One of the objectives of the Strategy Europe 2020 is to reduce by 20 million the number of poor people in the European Union within the next decade.



24/01/2011

Public sector restructuring initiatives on the rise

While the EU technically emerged from the recession 18 months ago, growth continues to be sluggish, hesitant and unequally spread, the latest edition of Eurofound's European Restructuring Monitor quarterly shows.



21/01/2011

Monthly Labour Market Monitor January 2011

According to the latest Monthly Labour Market Monitor released by the European Commission, the labour market in the EU has stabilised, with signs of recovery in some Member States, but conditions are generally set to remain weak and uneven for some time, with potentially persistent unemployment in others.



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