

# NI Anti-Poverty Network



## THE NATIONAL ACTION PLANS ON SOCIAL INCLUSION (NAPsincl) The politics and policy of combating poverty in Europe

### WHAT ARE THE NATIONAL ACTION PLANS ON SOCIAL INCLUSION (NAPsincl)?

The NAPsincl are reports prepared by all European Union (EU) governments every two years. The first one was completed in 2000. They describe anti-poverty policy according to objectives jointly agreed by all 15 EU governments. There is a peer review process in which governments share their best practice and an overall report written by the European Commission, which assesses the NAPsincl according to the agreed objectives.

### WHY SHOULD GRASS-ROOTS GROUPS HAVE AN INTEREST IN THE NAPsincl?

For three reasons.

**1 Firstly, because the fourth Objective of the Napsincl obliges governments to 'mobilise all bodies',**

This gives a legal 'hook' for grassroots groups and voluntary organisations to get into dialogue with their governments on anti-poverty policy and make our views better known. In the last few years, the UK government has developed a lot more consultation on specific issues in the UK, but it is not obliged to do so and it does not really consult with the anti-poverty people and organisations as a sector. This is where the NAPsincl is an advance, if we are able to use it.

In the UK, the Social Policy Task Force of voluntary organisations and networks has been slowly developing dialogue with officials in the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) for over a year. The DWP are the UK government department that has overall responsibility for preparation of the UK NAPsincl. We have recently got agreement for a working group convened by the DWP which has the job of developing a way of involving people experiencing poverty in drawing up the next Napsincl, due in 2003. The working group has equal representation of people with experience of poverty and voluntary organisation workers. We hope the model that the group develops will undergo further development for future NAPsincl.

**2 Secondly, because what happens at European level has more and more influence on our lives.**

'Europe' is still being built and we should build a Europe for all. More and more big decisions are taken jointly at European level, but the European 'economic' dimensions is much stronger than the European 'social' dimension. National governments guard national independence on social security, social assistance, health and pensions. So what then? Why don't we just talk to our own government?

Because things are changing – more social decisions are being taken jointly. And – in the absence of a strong social dimension, the rules of the economic dimension are spreading into the social dimension. For example, the rules for European Monetary Union (ending up with the euro) control how much national governments are able to tax and spend. The rules for competition and trade policy have an impact on privatisation of public services. So the economic dimension is more and more determining what kind of welfare state we are able to have and what kind we can afford. This is not because 'Brussels' is running things – its because our heads of government are making decisions about our lives at one remove – in the European Council. There is a 'democratic deficit' in Europe.

Europe is unique in the world not only because it has established a union of independent states. For all their particular shortcomings, the welfare states are the jewel in its crown. Citizens have agreed to be taxed and to share their good fortune with those in need, not as a 'safety net' for the worst off only but as a means of protection and integration for everyone. 'Cohesion' was an early goal too of the European Community, but today its twin- 'competition' is a much more powerful objective. Increasing global competition and the entry of ten new and poor countries from central and eastern Europe into the European Union from 2004 are big challenges that lie ahead. The 'European Social Model' is on the line. We need to put pressure on governments at national and at European level and to do this we need to link the two levels to promote our approach to welfare and social protection. Participation in the NAPsincl is one way of linking the national and European levels.

### **3 Thirdly, because there is a window now for some policy change in the process of making decisions**

The weak legal framework in the social field meant there were no new legal developments throughout most of the 1990s. The Open Method of Co-ordination (the 'NAPs' process) – which is a 'softer' process than hard law, was developed for the employment field in 1997 and for social inclusion in 2000. The European Social Platform of Non Governmental Organisations lobbied hard for an inclusion NAP as a means of supporting the development of a better legal framework. This Platform includes European level anti-poverty networks and organisations, and organisations concerned with issues of women's rights, rights, the rights of people with a disability and the situation of homeless people. Amongst the most active lobbyists were the European Anti-Poverty Network and ATD Fourth World, both organisations involved in the Social Policy Task Force in the UK. These organisations are committed to ensuring the direct voice in decision-making, of people experiencing poverty.

We already have big social non-governmental organisations that lobby 'vertically' up to their national governments on specific issues. But the NAPsincl are examples of what's often called 'multi-level governance'. This links together the European, national and sub-national levels in decision making. What's important in our strategy is that we make horizontal links across the community and social NGO sectors at national and European level and get a strong sectoral influence in this multi-level governance process.

We face some tough barriers to promoting the kind of anti-poverty framework we would like – and not just at European level. These include:- threats to the values underpinning welfare states; lack of interest from the trades unions in defending and

supporting broader social welfare standards and at best a lack of interest from wider public opinion, both in combating poverty and in Europe as a union; all of these need to be addressed.

But, we have got an opportunity. In the last few years, officials and political levels in the European Commission have recognised a role for the voluntary sector in promoting economic and social cohesion, starting with the implementation of the Structural Funds for regional development, employment and training and developing on from there. The fourth objective of the NAPsincl –mobilising all bodies –agreed by Member State governments in Lisbon in 2000, enshrines that recognition for combating social exclusion. The leader of the European Parliament has also said that the 'not for profit sector' is crucial to effective anti-poverty policy.

The European Commission has recognised also the impact of the democratic deficit in alienating people from building the European idea. Since the year 2000 they have prepared a paper for public discussion on 'governance' in the European Union and how to improve it and prepared another paper on the role of 'civil society' (i.e. the public, organised into groups and associations.. The 'social partners' (trades unions and employers) have a legally recognised role in European policy. It is on the agenda that the voluntary and not for profit sector could also have partner status, but only if we work at it. Given the threats in the social field, we need to get on and do it. This is another good reason for us putting effort into getting some life into the NAPsincl process – and not letting governments slide away from their commitment to the fourth Objective. Another opportunity arises from the Convention on the Future of Europe, which will complete its work in 2003 and which may develop the basis for a 'constitution' for the enlarged European Union. The European Platform of Social NGOs is involved in the Convention's work and is pushing for a strong place for civil society, legal status for the Charter of Fundamental Rights and greater recognition for the social dimension of Europe.

Greater openness to ideas about participation are at least partly due to pressures from voluntary organisations. **Amongst social NGOs, especially those concerned with anti-poverty work, there is a growing wave of support for participatory democracy – for people having a voice as well as a vote.** Representative democracy alone is like supermarket politics – you go in and just choose from the 24 brands of washing powder which one you want – but it's all soap and it all comes from 2 big companies and they don't do much for poorer consumers. But a *voice* gets you a say in shaping what gets put on the shelves. This is why we want greater participation in decision-making at all levels - to include people in and to make better policies to combat poverty.

# What do the European anti-poverty networks and organisations think about the NAPsincl so far?

## 1 Government commitment to the NAPsincl

- Good that they have signed up to it
- Is there a hidden agenda of NAPsincl?
- Low publicity and awareness about the NAPsincl process.

## 2 Consultation and participation

- Lack of sufficient *consultation* on the development of the initiative.
- Short *timescale* and lack of participation in the preparation of the first NAPsincl.
- Lack of *mechanisms for participation* especially for the least advantaged.
- Lack of *resources* to support on-going participation.

## 2 Policies

- *Too much emphasis on welfare to work and employability*, relative to rights.
- Not enough focus on: fundamental rights, access to public and private goods and services, inequality and links to the Budgets and the economy.

Policy to combat poverty and social exclusion should be based on 5 principles

1. Human dignity
2. Non discrimination
3. Social justice
4. Universal and structural social policy
5. Universal social rights

## 3 What are the NGO priorities?

- Long-term approach of universal structural social policy.
- Sufficient secure resources to support participation by vulnerable groups and networks.
- Need for on-going, resourced and open advisory forum in each country.

## Points to watch from some countries with experience of a NAPS-style process

Ireland - experience of Irish NAPS over last three years.

- Low targets and lack of tangible impact on poverty and exclusion.
- Limited emphasis on rights.
- Lack of transparency and accountability.
- Lack of learning from other countries.

- Lack of appropriate data, poor targeting of resources, limited procedures for identifying added value of NAPS.
- Importance of wide consultation and inclusion of objectives in government workplans and budgets.

Netherlands - 5 years experience of NAPS and annual 'social conference'

- Risk of voluntary work as substitute for social inclusion
- No emphasis on combating poverty.