Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on how can social experimentation be used in Europe to develop public active inclusion policies

(2009/C 100/13)

In a letter dated 5 March 2008, in the context of the forthcoming presidency of the European Union, the French Minister for Foreign and European Affairs asked the European Economic and Social Committee to draft an exploratory opinion on the following subject:

How can social experimentation be used in Europe to develop public active inclusion policies.

The initial framework for this task was set out by the High Commissioner for Active Solidarity against Poverty, who initiated the request.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 11 September. The rapporteur was Mr BLOCH-LAINÉ and the co-rapporteur was Mr EHNMARK.

At its 448th plenary session, held on 22 and 23 October 2008 (meeting of 23 October 2008), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 66 votes to none, with 1 abstention.

1. Introduction

1.1. This referral is linked to a decision by the French government to host a conference on social experimentation in Europe, in November, in Grenoble. The aim is to promote the shared benefits and use of experimentation as a public policy tool at Community level and among the Member States, in the social field and, in this instance, in the area inter alia of 'active inclusion' as a means of combating poverty. The conference is to be used as an opportunity to help develop a culture of experimentation and to prepare, if and when appropriate, new programmes that could be supported by the Commission. The Czech and Swedish presidencies could, if they see fit, take up the baton afterwards.

1.2. For the French presidency this means, first, gaining a better knowledge of and better publicising the current practices of the 27 Member States in the field concerned and, second, gauging their relevance, methods of improvement and the possibilities for joint development, a higher profile and dissemination. No limits have been set as to the scale of experiments planned, begun or completed. The idea is to highlight the variety of players, cooperation methods, legal frameworks and practical measures. The final objective is to lay the foundations for a European network of excellence which is both demanding and realistic, as quickly as possible, keeping up-to-date information on tried and tested experimental innovations.

1.3. This opinion aims to compile comments and observations and then state convictions and make recommendations.

2. Comments and observations

2.1. This referral has not sprung randomly or unexpectedly from nowhere. Social experimentation is developing apace in Europe (and also in the United States and Canada).

2.1.1. Over the last decade, some excellent studies, surveys and research projects have been conducted on the subject in a number of EU countries. Many useful meetings, workshops, seminars and international conferences have been held, are being held or are planned.

2.1.2. Nevertheless, 'social experimentation' remains in many respects a vast and vague concept. It is not easy to define its immense and rich scope. Its content is infinitely diverse and constantly changing. Its terminology is sometimes rather esoteric. Evaluations of its results are often overly vague (if not non-existent) or controversial as they are ambiguous and debatable.

2.1.3. It is certainly the case that catalogues, reports, case studies and notes can be found on the subject, which are often highly interesting. However, to the best of the Committee's knowledge, there are currently no ministries, local or regional authorities, national economic and social councils, Community consultative bodies, social partner umbrella organisations (1), etc., which keep properly indexed files under this heading.

(1) Central, federal, confederal or other.
2.1.4. In the time available, it would clearly be impossible to attempt a broad survey of experiments that could be used straight off as templates for public policy development. Common sense points to a short opinion of a literally exploratory nature (preparatory and preliminary), in order to pick out reliable and informative European sources, some institutional, others held by NGOs.

2.2. The notion of social experimentation has not always been written into the principles guiding EU policy. Some experimentation, in the form of mini-projects, was certainly present in the first anti-poverty programme (1975-1980). The second and the third programmes (1985-1989 and 1989-1994) were underpinned by a desire to take stock of experience gathered, although the term 'experimentation' was not stressed as such. Lastly, whereas essential new elements in the Treaty of Amsterdam and considerable advances made by the Lisbon Council share a common willingness to examine examples of good practice jointly, national programmes, action plans and joint reports on social protection have given little attention to experimentation. The open method of coordination meanwhile hardly grants it any space at all.

2.2.1. Nevertheless, there have been major advances in this area of EU social policy in recent years, and the European Commission deserves most of the credit. The EESC was grateful for two working meetings with the DG for employment, social affairs and equal opportunities, which highlighted the impressive results of the EQUAL programme, the PROGRESS programme and the peer review system. There is not enough room in this opinion to give a detailed description of this system; equally, its nature does not allow for this either.

2.2.2. A file will be drawn up in good time for use at the above-mentioned meeting in Grenoble in November. It will include information on examples of successful innovative experiments, and will include the addresses of potentially useful sites.

2.2.3. To provide but a few details: the EQUAL programme, which ran for six years (2002-2008), invested EUR 3 billion from the European Social Fund in social innovations relating to the labour market and active social inclusion in a number of Member States. It set up 3 480 partnerships with over 2 000 players. It involved over 200 000 underprivileged people. It is probably the best thought-out and largest social innovation programme to be completed in Europe.

2.2.4. Going beyond pure numbers, it is worth noting that EQUAL and the peer review system have, on behalf of the EU, established the first body of methodological knowledge of its kind. This is possibly the most important aspect in terms of the future. A number of the lessons learned are clearly set out in guides. The EESC therefore believes that it is important to continue assessing the results of these programmes and their contribution in terms of social inclusion.

2.2.5 It should also be noted, with regard to the measures surveyed at this exploratory stage, that the EESC has given particular attention to the field of innovative experiments designed to promote inclusion through economic activity using a holistic approach. To this end, it organised a hearing (1) of NGO networks and bodies (2) able to provide well analysed and evaluated case-studies of successful measures carried out by European social enterprises in the area of integration through work. The Committee is fully aware that the scope of 'active inclusion' extends far beyond this sector alone. However, this sector brings together key stakeholders operating within well-organised networks; it was thus important to meet with them at the beginning and without delay.

2.2.6. The information gathered at the time of the above hearing (16 June 2008) and the minutes thereof will also be included in a file which will be made available within the above-mentioned deadlines. The present opinion will draw attention to the following points:

2.2.6.1. Numerous experiments have produced very positive results based on highly innovative and diverse ideas, and a variety of often very different legal systems.

2.2.6.2. All the cases mentioned involved effective cooperation between a highly diverse and actively involved group of stakeholders.

2.2.6.3. In many countries, laws have recognised and given a framework to the actions carried out. However, this often occurred late in the day.

(1) A hearing was held on 16 June 2008 following a preparatory meeting on 22 April 2008.

(2) CNIAE, the [French] National Council for Integration through Economic Activity, EAPN, European Anti Poverty Network; ENSIE, European Network for Social Integration Enterprises, FEANTSA, European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless.
2.2.6.4. The ‘time factor’ is key in this respect. In many areas, significant concerns exist concerning the long-term nature of the experimentation (the end of the EQUAL programme in particular gives much cause for concern). The issue of how to get stakeholders — particularly local authorities — more involved is also important.

2.2.6.5. With regard to assessment, all the parties involved stress the need for overall measures and evaluations regarding the benefits and costs of experiments.

2.2.6.6. All parties agree that EU action is essential both for the transfer of know-how and for ensuring the lasting nature of all projects begun.

3. **Convictions**

3.1. The Committee is convinced of the potentially fundamental usefulness of innovative experimentation as a national and transnational policy-making tool in the EU. The reasons for this can be summed up as follows:

3.1.1. No one would disagree that contemporary forms of poverty and exclusion are so complex that they have long defied analysis and predictions. Diagnoses, particularly those carried out by means of European Union funded studies, have slowly come a long way in recent years. However, there are still many unknown factors and uncertainties when it comes to the solutions, to say the least. In many countries, the blanket policies implemented have not achieved their objectives. General measures stemming from predefined theories have rapidly shown themselves to be ill-suited, inefficient or even outdated or counter-productive, owing to practical ignorance of the primary causes, specific details and links between the problems being addressed, or to a failure to foresee or detect negative effects in good time. Experimentation by its very nature should, by means of close observation, facilitate fine-tuning and corrections and help to avoid the widespread implementation of ill-advised good ideas.

3.1.2. Use of the method which philosophers call the ‘inductive’ method (‘reality is based on that which I observe’) is fundamental for scientists. Its opposite, the ‘deductive’ method (reality can only be in accordance with what I think) has, in the past, led to miscalculations and errors (1) in the field of social policy. Let us be clear: the idea here is not to promote the abandonment of general policies and simply replace them with case-by-case experiments. That would be absurd. The objective is to recommend — where possible — more use of innovative experiments to highlight and support the formulation of general public policies. It is a question of developing and optimising a mechanism which can play the role of innovative experimentation with regard to state government and EU institutions.

3.1.3. Experimentation is often better than immediate general adoption for working out how to win the support and enthusiasm of the various local players involved, as close as possible to people’s real needs.

3.1.4. It offers the right to make a mistake without causing damage, and without generating systematic scepticism.

3.1.5. ‘Social experimentation’ must be firmly rooted in existing systems of social solidarity and be supported by well-developed concepts and by the responsibility of the stakeholders involved. Equally, the use of experimentation should help to extend the scope of the open method of coordination.

3.2. While most would agree with these arguments, it should be borne in mind that there are also those with doubts and objections that must be taken into account and discussed in order to ensure that useful measures are not discredited or hindered.

3.2.1. The most commonly expressed objections are the following:

3.2.1.1. The term experimentation is in itself shocking, as humans are not guinea pigs: it would be better to refer to trials or even better, simply to innovation.

3.2.1.2. Trials in the social field are often no more than laboratory tests — how can this be avoided? How can one distinguish phenomena such as mockery, imitation, misrepresentation, window-dressing, distortion, or ghettos?

(1) Let us remember that, much more dramatically and on another scale completely, ideologies and dogmas of all kinds have been and remain capable of generating severe catastrophes.
3.2.1.3. The fact that they are specific to limited areas on a limited scale means that in general they are impossible to replicate.

3.2.1.4. Experiments can be used as an excuse for decision-makers reluctant to carry through general reforms. They can lead to a reduction in or even the abolition of existing social protection measures.

3.2.1.5. Experiments can generate unfair advantages for a few, or, when experiments are abandoned, leave people bitterly disappointed having enjoyed amenities for just a brief period.

3.2.1.6. Are the evaluation protocols reliable?

3.3. In order to defuse this opposition, the EESC believes it is essential to provide a strict definition of experiments that could be set up with the support and under the responsibility of public authorities of any kind.

3.3.1. Point 2.1.2 above states that social experimentation remains a ‘vast and vague concept’. This is no flippant remark on the part of the Committee. If it were, it would certainly not be amusing, useful or dignified; clearly, this is not the case. On the contrary, the Committee is driven by the will to contribute to a wider debate aimed at removing this sense of vagueness.

3.3.2. The first step that needs to be taken is to agree on a definition. This task is somewhat complicated by the existence of deep-rooted ambiguities which surface again and again. The key is to identify whether the sole purpose of social experimentation is to validate existing methods or whether its objective should rather be to foster the development of genuine innovations.

3.3.3. The Committee wanted to avoid being burdened with examining a doctrinal and semantic list of definitions. Instead, it focused its attention on two definitions:

3.3.3.1. The first comes from a key American institute in the field (1). It comprises four stages:

- random assignment,
- policy intervention,
- follow-up data collection,
- evaluation.

3.3.3.2. The second definition was drawn up by the French body behind the original request for this opinion, which covers the following:

- social policy innovation, initially launched on a small scale due to uncertainties regarding its effectiveness,
- implementation under that make evaluation possible,
- the prospect of their subsequent widespread adoption.

It is this second definition which has the clear and unconditional support and backing of the European Economic and Social Committee.

3.3.4. Let us not forget, once again, that innovative experimental ideas abound. There is no lack of vague good intentions; the road to hell is paved with them. The worst that could be done for the concept of social experimentation and its future would be to open the floodgates to a stream of public initiatives that were doomed from the start to fail or never to be replicated.

3.3.5. The EQUAL programme in particular served to draw up rules and methods making it possible to test factors for success or failure. The Committee would highlight this useful work, which was carried out principally for European Social Fund managers but which could be useful to any local or national decision-makers wishing to launch innovative experimental projects.

3.3.6. Attention should only really be given to experiments that include:

3.3.6.1. clear details of figures and dates;

(1) URBAN Institute.
3.3.6.2. precise programming of the means implemented;

3.3.6.3. a definite and real commitment and on-going cooperation from various players: public authorities, researchers, social partners, and other civil society players (foundations, cooperatives, mutual and other associations, etc.);

3.3.6.4. arrangements ensuring the active and genuine participation of the experiment's 'target group' from the project design stage to implementation and evaluation, thus securing a joint experimentation and policy-making process. In European culture, human beings are not 'recipients,' 'users,' 'subjects,' 'constituents,' 'customers,' 'voters' etc. They are people;

3.3.6.5. a monitoring and, above all, evaluation system defined in a truly methodological way and announced clearly before the launch of the project; including proper impact studies, involving reliable experts and designed to allow for a proper assessment of the results' durability;

3.3.6.6. an appropriate assessment of the possibility of replicating the experiments (in the knowledge that a non-transferable project might nevertheless include elements and components that are instructive in themselves).

3.3.7. This already lengthy list of conditions will not guarantee the success of an experiment in all cases; but the risk of failure must be accepted in advance, or else experimentation must be precluded by virtue of its very nature.

4. Recommendations

4.1. General guidelines

4.1.1. Experimentation and innovation are still not really part of European social strategy or, therefore, the open method of coordination. However, a certain amount of common ground has emerged in recent years regarding the approach that needs to be taken: the importance of ideas for the modernisation of social policy; the role of assessment as a key for good governance; mutual learning and the transfer of good practices. On 2 July 2008, the Commission adopted the renewed Social Agenda, which contains an important communication on strengthening the open method of social coordination. The text emphasises that PROGRESS will support 'social experimentation.' The objective is to persevere and progress down this path; it is important to ensure that the principles governing the EQUAL programme are effectively taken into account in the future management and operation of the European Social Fund. In addition to the action already taken, there is no reason why we should not conceive of or recommend the inclusion of the European Social Fund or Structural Funds within the framework of the programmes for innovation and active inclusion.

4.1.2. The EESC recommends that consideration be given to an approach or concept that is more integrated into the various and numerous European programmes so as to promote more innovative social experimentation in the field of cohesion and social inclusion. The programmes being targeted here include the Seventh Research and Development Programme, certain regional development programmes (Jeremie, Jaspers, Microloans); certain rural development programmes (such as the 'Leader') programme and, where possible, sustainable development programmes.

4.2. While the social experimentation projects to combat exclusion are primarily the preserve of local and national players, the EU institutions and, in particular, the European Commission can step up their action and exert a crucial leverage effect. The time is ripe for such measures.

4.3. To this end, it is essential to promote a better understanding of the reality of the situation in the EU's 27 Member States. This is, moreover, one of the major concerns and motivations behind the present opinion which, given its limited timeframe and scope, should only be seen as an initial step preparing the ground for subsequent developments, something which is the sincerest wish of the Committee.

4.3.1. The Committee does not recommend the creation of yet another observatory based on the traditional institutional model. It considers that such a complex and costly solution would be counter-productive. It does, however, strongly recommend creating a structure in the form of an observant
European network, whose aim will be to develop and share knowledge about the existence, nature, content, arrangements, lessons learned, and results of the experiments conducted in the EU’s Member States. This structure should bring together a diverse range of stakeholders: research organisations, joint project partners (political, economic and social partners...). It is important for the EU to be the driving force behind the implementation, coordination and sustained development of such a network. This role should be placed under the auspices of the Commission. If so invited, the EESC would be more than happy to participate in this project, given its role as a ‘bridge’ to ‘organised civil society’, within the limits of its capabilities.

4.3.2. The Committee recommends that effective use be made of already existing sources: the EQUAL report, peer review, tried and tested NGO methods (1).

4.3.3. The Committee suggests that active measures be taken to ensure that plans for national programmes and joint reports include information on developments in innovative social experimentation projects.

4.3.4. The European Parliament and the Council could together set up regular meetings on social experimentation, to be held at least once a year, focusing on a different area of interest each time. The programme of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion could also include a number of events for working together on these issues.

4.3.5. It would be advisable to increase the number of local European meetings such as ‘peer review meetings’.

4.3.6. The aim of these recommendations is to help gradually establish a map of local active inclusion projects which could be eligible for EU support and help pave the way for transnational social experiments. Regularly taking stock of success stories and good practice could contribute to the valuable process of sharing and passing on experience at EU level.

(1) The liaison group between NGOs and the EESC could help contribute to this process.

4.4. The Committee firmly hopes that, in the future, funding will be available at a level similar to that allocated to the EQUAL programme.

4.5. It is worth noting — and to their credit — that those responsible for and most familiar with the EQUAL instrument themselves emphasise the work and planning which still needs to be done regarding social experimentation and the best way for the European Union to step up action and build on its knowledge, particularly in the areas of feasibility, replication and codes of ethics. The Committee proposes that, in order to help move this dossier forward, the Commission suggest to the Council that a report be drafted to fully investigate the added value which it is hoped that social experimentation will bring in Europe by highlighting, in particular, responses to questions such as the ones outlined below:

4.5.1. We are far from having a clear picture about the gap that so often exists between social experimentation and the extent to which it is recognised or promoted. This barrier has not appeared as a result of chance, accident or insignificant events. It represents a real divide. This issue must be given much consideration.

4.5.2. Is it necessary to establish precise size thresholds or criteria in order to identify which cases of social experimentation and innovation are worthy of being taken into consideration.

4.5.3. Should one specify the conceptual limits separating that which merits the name of innovation from that which does not? If so, then how?

4.5.4. Inclusion-related experimentation essentially focuses on remedying ills that have already arisen; in other words, it concentrates on cures. How, whilst continuing to progress down this path, can we increase the role of prevention by trying to anticipate more effectively future challenges (demographic, economic, social issues) which have yet to become significant?
4.5.5. How can we broaden the partnerships between stakeholders affected by active inclusion? How can we develop synergies between associations, start-up firms and common-law firms in order to develop and perfect veritable inclusion strategies? How can we strengthen and increase the number of pathways between exclusion and inclusion through the development of corporate social responsibility? Should we promote ideas such as, for example, cooperation with works councils? Or instead encourage approaches such as asking companies employing more than a certain number of workers to publish an annual report on such issues?

5. Conclusion

5.1. Social experimentation is one of the principal challenges currently facing public governance within local and regional authorities, at centralised, decentralised or Member State level, as well as at EU level. It is a complex, demanding and perfectible methodology which could prove useful over the long-term.

5.1.1. The EESC stresses that individual experiments cannot be a substitute for general public policies. The EESC believes that the greater use of innovative experimentation can help clarify and strengthen the formulation of such policies.

5.2. The European Union has the authority to define a framework for national and local policies; indeed, this is one of its key tasks. In this particular case — the fight against poverty and the drive for social inclusion — it has already launched and completed a bold, groundbreaking and well thought-out measure. But it could go a lot further, in the interest of serving the public, for the future of Europe and in view of the importance that the public attaches to this issue.

5.3. The EESC recommends that the Union make a firm commitment to promote and support innovative social experimentation more actively in numerous, subtle and essential areas of inclusion policy and that it take the necessary time and resources to do this so as not to raise any false hopes.


The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Mario SEPI