

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Joint Report on Social Inclusion summarising the results of the examination of the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion (2003-2005)'

(2004/C 121/08)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions entitled 'Joint report on social inclusion summarising the results of the examination of the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion (2003-2005)', COM(2003) 773 final;

Having regard to the decision of the European Commission on 12 December 2003, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to consult it on this matter;

Having regard to the decision of its president on 6 November 2003 to direct its Commission for Economic and Social Policy to draw up an opinion on the subject;

Having regard to the decision of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 October 2001 establishing a programme of Community action to encourage co-operation between Member States to combat social exclusion;

Having regard to the European Commission Staff Working Paper entitled 'E-inclusion – the potential of the information society for social inclusion in Europe' (SEC(2001) 1428);

Having regard to the European Parliament resolution on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: 'Draft joint report on social inclusion' (COM(2001) 565-C5-0109-2002/2051(COS));

Having regard to its opinion on the Communication from the Commission – Building an inclusive Europe (CdR 84/2000 fin) ⁽¹⁾;

Having regard to the Council resolution of 6 February 2003 on social inclusion through social dialogue and partnership ⁽²⁾;

Having regard to its opinion on the Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a programme of Community action to encourage co-operation between Member States to combat social exclusion (CdR 302/2000 fin) ⁽³⁾;

Having regard to its opinion on the Draft Joint Report on Social Inclusion (CdR 393/2001 fin) ⁽⁴⁾;

Having regard to its draft opinion (CdR 21/2004) adopted on 2 March 2004 by the Commission for Economic and Social Policy (rapporteur: Ms Marin-Moskovitz, Deputy Mayor of Belfort, Vice-President of the General Council of Territoire de Belfort (FR/PES));

Whereas the Communication is intended for the extraordinary European Council of 19 March 2004;

adopted the following opinion at its 54th plenary session on 21 and 22 April 2004 (meeting of 22 April).

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 317 of 6.11.2000, p. 47.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 39 of 18.2.2003, p. 1.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 144 of 16.5.2001, p. 52.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 192 of 12.8.2002, p. 5.

1. The Committee of the Regions' views

The Committee of the Regions

1.1 welcomes the Commission's draft joint report on social inclusion, which summarises the results of the review of national action plans since the launch in 2002 of the five-year Community action programme to encourage co-operation between Member States to combat social exclusion;

1.2 stresses the need for general mobilisation in order to significantly reduce the proportion of the European population at risk of poverty or extreme deprivation, which is currently estimated at 55 million individuals, i.e. 15 % of the population of Europe;

1.3 approves the consistency of the report, which takes into account enlargement, national differences and the creation of the new rationalised structure for policy coordination on social protection at Community level, as agreed by the Council in October 2003;

1.4 recalls that social exclusion is affecting more and more people, who need practical help to remain full members of society. Social inclusion must therefore become a collective priority in combating the devastating effects of precariousness and marginalisation, and must include the fight against all forms of discrimination (racism, sexism, discrimination against people with disabilities, homophobia, religious and age discrimination –highlighting the increasing difficulties a part of the European population faces in staying connected with society); however, a balanced social inclusion policy should give these people economic and financial incentives to actively participate in working life;

1.5 highlights the fact that the effects of unequal access to employment, the instability of the labour market, relocations and massive job cuts as a result of unanticipated structural changes that may be linked to the globalisation of capital and a downturn in the economic cycle, impact on individuals and societies and aggravate the process of social exclusion;

1.6 believes that the Community's social inclusion strategy must take more account of the macroeconomic context and the impact of economic, finance and fiscal policy on the functioning of society;

1.7 supports the willingness of the Commission to encourage 'the interaction with regional and local authorities' through an evaluation of national policies and of common indicators in order to take, by 2010, the measures needed to fight exclusion, as defined at the Lisbon summit in March 2000 and agreed at the Laeken Council of December 2001 (18 common indicators for measuring poverty and social exclusion);

1.8 considers it necessary to take into account the impact of the accession of ten new Member States on the Community's future social inclusion strategy, particularly because of the evaluation in 2005 of the method for coordinating the fight against poverty;

1.9 repeats its appeal to take better account of national good practice and innovative processes in terms of respecting and guaranteeing everyone's fundamental rights, which is the very basis of social inclusion and the fight against precariousness;

1.10 welcomes the six key priorities defined by the Council with regard to the 2003-2005 second generation NAPs/Incl:

- increased investment in measures to promote an active labour market and adapting to the needs of the most disadvantaged and those who have the greatest difficulties in accessing employment;
- access for all to appropriate social protection schemes;
- increasing the access of the most vulnerable and those most at risk of social exclusion to decent housing, quality health-care and lifelong learning opportunities;
- implementing a concerted effort to prevent early school leaving as a defence against systematic and terminal exclusion;
- priority eradication of child poverty;
- reducing poverty and social exclusion among immigrants and ethnic minorities;

1.11 notes that significant advances have been made that strengthen the coherence of the method of coordination (between states, local and regional authorities, and the European Union), particularly in terms of the supply of essential public services to the individual such as education, health, housing, transport, equal opportunities between men and women, access to knowledge, to leisure and culture, to justice and the protection of individual rights;

1.12 would like to see a more coherent strategy for fighting poverty being applied between Member States. Having compared the approach of the different national action plans set out in the document, it is deeply regrettable to note that the most persistent forms of poverty (unemployment, single-parent families, elderly people living alone, people with disabilities, unqualified youngsters, large families) have got worse;

1.13 highlights the importance of social protection for those who are unable to work;

1.14 believes that the developments that are taking place within the Union, particularly the rapid changes in the labour market, the development and widespread use of new information and communication technologies, and the changes linked to new demographic developments and increased migratory flows, bring about a need for vigilance so that risks can be turned into new opportunities for social inclusion;

1.15 welcomes the success of e-Inclusion and of its strong potential to become, through ICT, an effective way of making services accessible to all sections of the population and thus promoting active, participatory citizenship;

1.16 highlights the driving role played by the State at national level in the workings of tax systems, social protection, education and programmes, housing benefit and the right to housing, public health, freedom of information, and equal opportunities, in response to the universal needs of citizens. Local and regional participation is also an essential tool for ensuring the effective coordination of these services;

1.17 notes that the joint Commission and Council document does not give sufficient attention to the real budgetary efforts needed for actions promoting social exclusion;

1.18 supports the proposal to define quantifiable goals and measurable targets, following the example of the eight national plans already started by certain Member States.

2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

The Committee of the Regions

2.1 is convinced, in the light of the joint communication on social exclusion, that efforts made, whether at local, regional, national or European level, since the Lisbon summit, should be underpinned by the adoption of national plans for the ten new Member States;

2.2 notes that enough time must be allowed for the integration of the NAPs in the Member States at the national, regional and local level before there is an assessment of their effect;

2.3 recommends that the indicators used be limited in number in order to be compatible and valid in all the countries of the Union. To this end, the Committee of the Regions notes that, since the end of the first generation NAPs/Incl, and as strongly recommended in its two previous opinions on social exclusion, significant efforts have been made to identify these indicators at Community level;

2.4 reaffirms, in line with the 2003 White Paper on European Governance for employment, the importance of cooperation at all administrative levels, among all actors involved in social inclusion, whether they are institutional or part of civil society;

2.5 welcomes the acknowledgment by Member States of the need to complement their national action plans with local and regional measures, although it is important to avoid national plans becoming overloaded with measures that are purely regional and adapted to the local procedures of welfare administrations, which would tend to complicate and hinder comparison between the Member States and the use of fewer, more informative and comparable indicators;

2.6 encourages the Commission to involve local and regional authorities more systematically in the monitoring of methods to reduce social exclusion;

2.7 welcomes the prominence given by the majority of Member States to ambitious, quantified, poverty-reduction goals that are multidimensional, well-thought-out in terms of their progressive implementation, and take into account the

large disparities in levels of relative poverty, which vary enormously from one State to another;

2.8 encourages the continued integration of social inclusion criteria defined in the NAPs into the review of the Structural Funds; this will need to take into account changes in their allocation from 2006 onwards;

2.9 calls for urgent action against the most serious consequences of social exclusion and persistent poverty (such as over-indebtedness and homelessness) as defined in objective 3 Helping the most vulnerable;

2.10 supports the recommendations made by the European Commission – whilst awaiting the evaluation planned for 2005 – and calls for their uniform and balanced implementation, namely:

- continue to promote the mobilisation and participation of all the stakeholders in civil society, as well as marginalised people themselves;
- fully recognise the urgent need to reduce, as a matter of priority, discrimination against the most vulnerable (asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants, ethnic minorities);
- continue and monitor the development of the national statistical base, with the aim of effectively following the social inclusion strategies defined by the EU-SILC statistics on income and living conditions;
- promote the sharing of good practice, following the example of the Community Action Programme to combat social exclusion;
- ensure that the Community objectives for social inclusion are scrupulously included in the preparation and follow-up of the June 2004 European Council, giving particular attention to the need for coherence between these objectives, the economic policy guidelines and the European Employment Strategy launched at the European Council of Nice in December 2000;
- encourage the integration of countries joining the EU into this process by using the Joint Inclusion Memoranda (JIMs, signed jointly on 10 December 2003), which prefigure the adoption of national action plans by the ten new Member States;

2.11 calls for the necessary steps to be taken to extend the social integration processes to the new Member States;

2.12 emphasises the fact that although social inclusion is about the concept of poverty in the economic sense, it includes other forms of deprivation, such as those linked to exclusion from employment, education and training, and culture, and can be affected by discrimination based on sex, age, social class, education, language, nationality and physical and mental disability – hence the need for a holistic approach to its causes and solutions;

2.13 urges the European Commission to continue and extend its dialogue with social inclusion actors and victims of social exclusion so that all parties have an opportunity to be heard and to exercise their citizenship;

2.14 welcomes the organisation each year, as in Århus in October 2002, of a round table on poverty and exclusion to coincide with the world day on exclusion on 17 October this year. This event has been made necessary as much by enlargement, by new national practices for fighting social exclusion, and by the Nice criteria for the objectives of equality, prevention, action and mobilisation in connection with processes for inclusion and integration, as by the increase in the number of players involved in social dialogue and the partnership for jobs;

2.15 highlights the difficulty for each Member State in jointly defining criteria for social inclusion or exclusion that can at the same time be applicable, applied and exported at the local, regional, national and European level; this emphasises the ongoing need for coordinated dialogue at EU level;

2.16 recalls the role of local and regional authorities in integrating those at risk of exclusion and marginalisation into the labour market and society in general;

2.17 calls on the European Commission to include the questions raised in this opinion when presenting the joint report to the March 2004 European Summit.

Brussels, 22 April 2004.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Peter STRAUB

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the ‘Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on batteries and accumulators and spent batteries and accumulators’

(2004/C 121/09)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the ‘Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on batteries and accumulators and spent batteries and accumulators’, (COM(2003) 723 final - 2003/0282 (COD));

Having regard to the decision of the Council of 11 December 2003 to consult it on this matter under the first paragraph of Article 175 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

Having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 12 March 2002 to instruct its Commission for Sustainable Development to draw up an opinion on this subject;

Having regard to the European Commission’s staff working paper on the Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on batteries and accumulators and spent batteries and accumulators, SEC(2003)1343;

Having regard to Directive 91/157/EEC of 18 March 1991 on batteries and accumulators containing certain dangerous substances;

Having regard to Directive 2003/108/EEC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 8 December 2003 amending Directive 2002/96/EC on waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE);

Having regard to Directive 2002/95/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 January 2003 on the restriction of the use of certain hazardous substances (RoHS) in electrical and electronic equipment;

Having regard to Directive 2000/53/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 September 2000 on end-of life vehicles (ELV);

Having regard to Directive 98/34/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 June 1998 laying down a procedure for the provision of information in the field of technical standards and regulations;