

ECOS-002

Brussels, 27 March 2002

OPINION

of the Committee of the Regions

of 13 March 2002

on the

Draft Joint Report on Social Inclusion

COM(2001) 565 final

The Committee of the Regions

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission *Draft Joint Report on Social Inclusion* (COM(2001) 565 final);

HAVING REGARD TO the decision taken by the European Commission on 12 October 2001 to consult it under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

HAVING REGARD TO its Bureau decision of 12 June 2001 to instruct Commission 5 for Social Policy, Public Health, Consumer Protection, Research and Tourism to prepare the Committee's work on this subject;

HAVING REGARD TO Commission Staff Working Document *e-Inclusion - The Information Society's potential for social inclusion in Europe* (SEC(2001) 1428);

HAVING REGARD TO the Commission's Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a programme of Community action to encourage cooperation between Member States to combat social exclusion (COM (2000) 368 final);

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission *Building an Inclusive Europe* (COM(2000) 79 final);

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on the Communication from the Commission *Building an Inclusive Europe* (CdR 84/2000 fin)¹;

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 cooperation between Member States to combat social exclusion* (CdR 302/2000 fin)²;

HAVING REGARD TO the Draft Opinion (CdR 393/2001 rev. 1) adopted by Commission 5 on 19 November 2001 (rapporteur: **Baroness Hanham** (UK/EPP));

WHEREAS the Communication is addressed to the Extraordinary European Council in Laeken;

adopted unanimously the following opinion at its 43rd plenary session of 13 and 14 March 2002 (meeting of 13 March).

Views and recommendations of the Committee of the Regions

The Committee of the Regions,

1. welcomes the five-year Community action programme on social inclusion to start in 2002 and notes the open method of coordination for promoting exchange of good practice and mutual learning at Community level;
2. welcomes the Commission's draft Joint Report on Social Inclusion as the first single policy document which assesses the efforts made to tackle poverty and social exclusion across the EU and urges Member States to take seriously the observations made upon their National Action Plans (2001);
3. regrets the extremely short time period the rapporteur was given to prepare this opinion in order for it to be submitted to the Commission 5 meeting on 19 November 2001 and agreed prior to the Laeken summit in December 2001;
4. believes that it is unacceptable that 18% of the EU's population (over 60 million people) are living in poverty or are at risk of poverty;
5. agrees with the views expressed in the Report that significant improvements need to be made in the allocation of resources and the enhancement of opportunities to those who are living in poverty and/or socially excluded, to ensure they can participate in society and access their fundamental rights; but at the same time, acknowledges that all Member States will need to take into account financial constraints in designing future social inclusion strategies, particularly in light of the current global recession;
6. regrets that most National Action Plans fail to face challenges relating to particularly vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants, children, young people, old people, the unemployed and single parent families, and that the issues of equality between men and women remain largely focused on employment issues. The Committee of the Regions also emphasises the importance of involving the economic agents via tax incentives and direct support, generating new employment opportunities, vocational training and reskilling;
7. accepts that the tax and social protection systems, education, housing, health and other services should become universal enough to address the needs of those who are at risk of

poverty and social exclusion and emphasises the key role played by the local and regional spheres of government in providing and/or coordinating many of these services;

8. emphasises in particular the following roles played by local and regional government - all of which are relevant to tackling poverty and social exclusion:
 - community leaders and key players in local regeneration partnerships, bringing together the local public bodies and agencies, community and voluntary groups and the private sector to deal with health, employment, education, housing and crime,
 - those responsible for ensuring that measures aimed at combating social exclusion are implemented properly,
 - providers and enablers of services to all people in the community,
 - catalysts of economic activity and employment,
 - employers,
 - providers of local information and research;
9. welcomes the recognition that most Member States have acknowledged the need to complement national plans with integrated approaches at regional and local levels;
10. agrees that Member States should use the new social inclusion process to enhance their efforts to tackle poverty and social inclusion and stresses that the development of the second round of National Action Plans should be used by Member States as an opportunity to re-examine and develop their social inclusion policies both at a strategic level and in terms of developing new policies and initiatives;
11. agrees that it is important to identify examples of good practice, and that a thorough analysis of policies to tackle poverty and social exclusion is required for this but argues that a databank of practice should be established by the Commission in the meantime in order to share existing practice - a starting point would be the information provided in the National Action Plans (2001);
12. welcomes the eight core challenges identified by the Joint Report as emerging from the National Action Plans (2001) and stresses the importance of social protection for those who are unable to work - whilst employment is the route out of social exclusion for the majority of people, there should be adequate social protection for those who are unable to participate in the labour market and for those who move between low paid jobs and periods of unemployment;

13. agrees that better consultation with key stakeholders is required for the implementation and monitoring of the National Action Plans (2001) and argues that better consultation should be undertaken by Member States in developing the second round of National Action Plans, and that this should include consultation with local and regional government, non-governmental organisations and where appropriate with people who are socially excluded;
14. argues that it is necessary to provide time to develop the NAPs in the Member States in order to integrate the regional level in an effective way;
15. supports the concept of all levels of government (local, regional and national) proofing policies at an early stage in their development for their impact on poverty/social exclusion; and in particular commends the poverty-proofing processes being used in the UK in Northern Ireland;
16. emphasises the importance of preventative measures in the fight against poverty and social exclusion - for example, in the policy areas of health promotion, social policy, education, culture and sport;
17. accepts the importance of developing a set of commonly agreed indicators on poverty and social inclusion and the recognition that efforts are still needed to improve the development of indicators at both the EU level and the national level, and, as such, welcomes the intention to bring in other key stakeholders into the debate on indicators - this should include the Committee of the Regions at European level and regional and local government at national level;
18. urges that the commonly agreed indicators should be strictly limited in number, to ensure that they are relevant to all Member States;
19. stresses the importance of promoting collaborative work between all spheres of governance, in the context of increasing globalisation and in the interests of integrating economic, social and environmental concerns into a comprehensive sustainable development strategy. NGOs, universities, research institutes, public institutions and business should be engaged through dialogue and discussion at local, regional, national, European and global level. Local and regional authorities, as the sphere of governance closest to the ordinary citizen - and in many cases leading cross-sector partnerships - have a critical role to play in this process, including through their national and pan-European associations and the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA). Working in partnership with local partners and specialist groups, local and regional authorities help to:
 - promote job creation,
 - promote business development,
 - deliver training and support to increase employability,
 - develop an integrated approach to tackling employment and employability issues locally;
20. welcomes the recognition of the threats and challenges posed by the rapid growth of the knowledge-based society and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and stresses that local and regional authorities have a role to play both in making services accessible to all sections in the community and in taking a comprehensive view of services in their area by using ICT to interact more effectively with citizens, to improve education, skills and employment opportunities, to facilitate participation in leisure and cultural activities, to promote active citizenship, and to ensure that people are able to participate in democratic processes;

21. calls on the European Commission to incorporate the issues raised in this opinion when presenting the draft Joint Report on Social Inclusion to the Laeken summit in December 2001;
22. calls on the European Council and the European Parliament to ensure that the local and regional role is properly recognised in this important policy area.

Brussels, 13 March 2002.

The President

of the

Committee of the Regions

The Secretary-General

of the

Committee of the Regions

Albert Bore

Vincenzo Falcone

¹ OJ C 317, 6.11.2000, p. 47

² OJ C 144; 16.5.2001, p. 52

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