INFORMATION NOTE

The European Union's Strategy of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion

1.   Background

1.1   The Subcommittee to Study the Subject of Combating Poverty (Subcommittee), at its meeting on 19 May 2005, requested the Research and Library Services Division to provide additional information on the strategy of combating poverty and social exclusion adopted in the European Union (EU).   In particular, the Subcommittee was interested in obtaining details of the biennial *National Action Plans (NAPs) on Social Inclusion* published by the EU member states[1].

2.   Definitions of poverty, social exclusion and social inclusion

2.1   The EU defines the terms of "poverty", "social exclusion" and "social inclusion" as below[2]:

Poverty

2.2   People are said to be living in poverty if their income and resources are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living considered acceptable in the society in which they live.   They may experience multiple disadvantages through unemployment, low income, poor housing, inadequate health care and barriers to lifelong learning, culture, sport and recreation.   Further, they are often excluded and marginalized from participating in economic, social and cultural activities that are the norm for other people, and their access to fundamental rights may be restricted.

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[1]   The EU currently has 25 member states.
[2]   See European Council (2004).

Social exclusion

2.3   Social exclusion is a process whereby certain individuals are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from participating fully by virtue of their poverty, or lack of basic competencies and lifelong learning opportunities, or as a result of discrimination.   Social exclusion distances these individuals from job, income and education opportunities as well as social and community networks and activities.   As a result, these individuals have little access to power and decision-making bodies, and thus often feel powerless to take control over the decisions that affect their day-to-day lives.

Social inclusion

2.4   Social inclusion is a process ensuring that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in the economic, social and cultural life and to enjoy the standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live.   It also ensures that they have greater participation in decision-making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights.

3.   The European Union's strategy of combating poverty and social exclusion

3.1   Under Articles 136 and 137 of the Amsterdam Treaty (Treaty), the European Council (EC)[3] has an active role in supporting and complementing the activities of the member states in combating poverty and social exclusion.[4]   In March 2000, the EC further agreed on the need to take steps to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty by 2010.   According to the EC, building a more inclusive EU is considered as an essential element in achieving the EU's ten-year strategic goals of sustained economic growth, more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.

3.2   The EC also requires the member states to co-ordinate their policies for combating poverty and social exclusion.   The policies adopted by individual member states should comprise the following five main elements:

        (a)   agreeing common objectives in the fight against poverty and social
               exclusion;

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[3]   The EC, consisting of representatives of the EU's member state governments, is the main
       decision-making body in the EU.
[4]   Articles 136 and 137 of the Treaty provide that the objectives of the social policy in the EU are the
       promotion of employment, improved living and working conditions, proper social protection,
       dialogue between management and labour, the development of human resources with a view to
       lasting high employment and combating social exclusion.   To achieve these objectives, the EC
       will support and complement the relevant activities of the member states.

(b)   establishing common indicators in the field of poverty and social exclusion as a means of comparing best practice and monitoring progress;

(c)   translating the EU's objectives into national or regional policies through the preparation of the biennial *NAPs on Social Inclusion*;

(d)   publishing the *Joint Report on Social Inclusion* which analyses the *NAPs on Social Inclusion* submitted by the member states; and

(e)   establishing a Community Action Programme (CAP) to promote policy co-operation and transnational exchange of learning and good practice.

<u>Common objectives in the fight against poverty and social exclusion</u>

3.3   The EC has set out the following five objectives in the fight against poverty and social exclusion:

(a)   facilitating participation in employment;

(b)   facilitating access to resources, rights, and goods and services for all people;

(c)   preventing the risks of social exclusion;

(d)   helping the most vulnerable; and

(e)   mobilizing all relevant bodies.

Facilitating participation in employment

3.4   The aims are to:

(a)   promote access to stable and quality employment for all people who are capable of working; and

(b)   prevent the exclusion of people from work by improving employability, through human resource management, organization of work and life-long learning.

Facilitating access to resources, rights, and goods and services for all people

3.5   The aims are to:

(a)   establish social protection systems with a view to ensuring that people have the resources necessary to live in accordance with human dignity and overcoming obstacles to employment; and

(b)   implement policies which provide access for all people to decent and sanitary housing, healthcare appropriate to their situation, and public and private services, such as education, justice, culture and leisure.

Preventing the risks of social exclusion

3.6   The aims are to:

(a)   exploit fully the potential of the knowledge-based society and of new information and communication technologies, and ensure that nobody is excluded; and

(b)   put in place policies which seek to prevent life crises which may lead to situations of social exclusion, such as indebtedness, exclusion from school and homelessness.

Helping the most vulnerable

3.7   The aims are to:

(a)   promote the social integration of people at risk of facing persistent poverty; and

(b)   develop comprehensive actions in the areas of social exclusion.

Mobilizing all relevant bodies

3.8   The aims are to:

(a)   encourage the participation and self-expression of people suffering from social exclusion; and

(b)   promote dialogue and partnership between all relevant public and private bodies.

Common indicators in the field of poverty and social exclusion

3.9   In March 2001, the EC decided to determine a set of common indicators on poverty and social exclusion to allow the EC as well as individual member states to monitor progress towards the goals of making a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty by 2010, to improve the understanding of poverty and social exclusion in the European context, and to identify and exchange good practice[5].

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[5]   The discussion on good practice is available in paragraphs 3.21 and 3.22 below.

3.10   The EC agrees on the following methodological principles when determining the set of indicators:

(a)   an indicator should capture the essence of the problem and have a clear and accepted normative interpretation;

(b)   an indicator should be robust and statistically validated;

(c)   an indicator should be responsive to policy interventions but not subject to manipulation;

(d)   an indicator should be measurable in a sufficiently comparable way across the member states, and comparable as far as practicable with the standards applied internationally;

(e)   an indicator should be timely and susceptible to revision;

(f)   the measurement of an indicator should not impose too large a burden on the member states, on enterprises, nor on the EU's citizens;

(g)   indicators should be balanced across various dimensions;

(h)   indicators should be mutually consistent and the weight of each indicator should be proportionate; and

(i)   indicators should be as transparent and accessible as possible to the citizens of the EU.

3.11   According to the EC, a large number of indicators are needed to properly assess the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion.   In December 2001, the EC set out 10 primary and eight secondary commonly agreed indicators. Primary indicators are lead indicators which cover the most important elements in leading to social exclusion.   Secondary indicators support these lead indicators and describe other dimensions of the social exclusion problem.   The two levels of common indicators are presented in both the *NAPs on Social Inclusion* and the *Joint Report on Social Inclusion,* published by the member states and the EC respectively.

3.12   There is a third level of indicators that the member states may include in their *NAPs on Social Inclusion* to highlight specificities in particular areas and help interpret the primary and secondary indicators.   These indicators have not been harmonized at the EU level.

3.13   The primary and secondary indicators common to all member states, and examples of tertiary indicators adopted by the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1 — Primary and secondary indicators common to all member states, and examples of tertiary indicators adopted by the United Kingdom and Ireland

Primary indicators	- low income rate after transfers with the low-income threshold set at 60% of median income - distribution of income[1] - persistence of low income[2] - relative median low income gap[3] - regional cohesion[4] - long-term unemployment[5] rate - people living in jobless households - early school leavers not in education or training - life expectancy at birth - self-perceived health status
Secondary indicators	- dispersion around the 60% median low-income threshold[6] - relative low income rate[7] - low income rate before transfers - distribution of income (Gini coefficient) - persistence of low income (based on 50% of median income) - long term unemployment share[8] - very long term unemployment[9] rate - persons with low educational attainment

Notes:
(1) This is the ratio between the national income of the top 20% of the income distribution to the bottom 20%.
(2) This refers to the number of households where the total household income was below 60% median national income in the last two years.
(3) This is the difference between the median income of persons below the low-income threshold and the low-income threshold.
(4) This refers to the dispersion of regional employment rates.
(5) This refers to the period of unemployment lasting for 12 months or longer.
(6) This refers to the distribution of households where the total household income was below 40%, 50% and 70% median income.
(7) This is equal to the current low income rate divided by the low income rate in the 1995 base year.
(8) This refers to the total long-term unemployed population as a proportion of the total unemployed population.
(9) This refers to the period of unemployment lasting for 24 months or longer.

Table 1 — Primary and secondary indicators common to all member states, and examples of tertiary indicators adopted by the United Kingdom and Ireland (Cont'd)

Tertiary indicators	- employment rates of disadvantaged groups – people with disabilities, lone parents and ethnic minorities - difference between employment rates in the most deprived local authority districts and the overall employment rate - percentage of people in non-decent housing - proportion of people who do not have access to the Internet - educational qualifications of persons aged below 16 - number of people sleeping rough - infant mortality rates by social groups - proportion of people whose lives are greatly affected by fear of crime

National Action Plans on Social Inclusion

3.14   The member states are required to publish their *NAPs on Social Inclusion* every two years[6] in response to the agreed common objectives.   In effect, the EC requires the member states to draw up their plans according to the common outline presented below, to ensure consistency in presentation across the member states and enhance the mutual understanding of the strategic approach of social inclusion.

Chapter 1 – Major trends and challenges

3.15   An *NAP on Social Inclusion* should start by giving an overview of the economic and social context and changes that need to be taken into account.   It then identifies the major trends, the key immediate and long-term risk factors and the main groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion.   This section should be supported by the three levels of indicators covering all aspects of poverty and social exclusion.

Chapter 2 – Review of the implementation of social inclusion policies

3.16   This section should assess the extent to which the overall targets and objectives set in the previous *NAPs on Social Inclusion* have been achieved and describe what progress has been made in implementing the policies.

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6   Fifteen member states published their first *NAPs on Social Inclusion* in 2001 and the second in 2003.   Ten new member states from the Eastern Europe published their first *NAPs on Social Inclusion* in 2004.

Chapter 3 – Strategic approach, main objectives and key targets

3.17   This section should give an overall coherent strategy and long-term objectives for tackling and preventing poverty and social exclusion. Quantified targets should also be set for reducing the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Chapter 4 – Policy measures

3.18   This section should set out in detail the policy measures which the member states intend to implement over the two-year period.   In particular, the member states should:

> (a)   summarize the priorities they have set in relation to the common objectives;
>
> (b)   recapitulate the existing policy instruments and measures that will continue to contribute to the achievement of the objectives;
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> (c)   indicate any modifications they propose to make to existing policy instruments and measures so as to enhance their impact and effectiveness in relation to the priorities established;
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> (d)   detail any new and additional policies or programmes that they envisage introducing to achieve their objectives; and
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> (e)   outline as appropriate the policy indicators and other monitoring mechanisms being used for measuring progress in implementing each measure.

Chapter 5 – Institutional arrangements

3.19   This section should set out the institutional arrangements involved when implementing the measures over the two-year period. Further, in order to raise greater awareness of the national plan and the social inclusion process amongst policy makers and the general public, the member states should:

> (a)   identify what institutional arrangements are already in place; and
>
> (b)   specify what new or additional institutional arrangements will be put in place during the period of the plan.

3.20   A section should also be included to indicate how the particular responsibilities and competencies of local and regional authorities are taken into account in the preparation, implementation and monitoring of the NAPs.

Chapter 6 – Good practice

3.21   This section should contain a detailed presentation of a few (not more than four) examples of good practice drawn from policy measures or institutional arrangements implemented as part of the previous *NAPs on Social Inclusion*.   The member states should select the examples with proven results which are more readily acceptable to other member states.

3.22   Examples of good practice cited by the member states in the *NAPs on Social Inclusion 2003* are provided in Table 2 below for easy reference.

Table 2 — Examples of good practice cited by the member states in the *National Action Plans on Social Inclusion 2003*

Member state	Title of the programme	Summary
Employment		
Ireland	Preventative strategy for unemployment	The preventative strategy aimed to reduce unemployment and prevent the drift into long-term unemployment by actively engaging unemployed people and assisting them to return to employment. Participants were interviewed to assess their current skills with a view to providing them with an individual plan which might lead directly to employment, retraining or education.
Sweden	Stockholm Matching	The purpose of the project was to help the unemployed who depended on social assistance find jobs. The social services and business sectors jointly offered professional training programmes covering interview techniques and labour market information for job seekers.
Health care		
Belgium	Maximum health cost bill	The bill reformed the healthcare system to ensure that low-income households would not pay more than an annual health cost ceiling on healthcare expenses.

Table 2 — Examples of good practice cited by the member states in the *National Action Plans on Social Inclusion 2003* (Cont'd)

Member state	Title of the programme	Summary
Housing		
France	The Social Watch Programme	This programme aimed to inform, guide and offer housing to all persons experiencing difficulties, including single mothers and young people estranged from their families. The government set up a toll-free telephone line and an outreach team to help those in need.
Homelessness		
Austria	Measures against homelessness	Financial assistance, and day centre and public housing services were offered to the homeless people in Vienna. The government targeted on solving the homeless problem by 2006.
Family solidarity and children		
Ireland	Teen Parent Support Initiative	The following services were provided to teen parents: (a) support with parenting; (b) provision of information on a range of issues including income support, health services, education and training; and (c) access to group support and one-to-one support.
United Kingdom	Lone Parent Childcare Grant (Scotland)	This package assisted lone parents into further and higher education through supporting additional childcare costs and childcare supply. An information leaflet for lone parents was published providing all the relevant information.
Promoting dialogue and partnership		
Denmark	Social services programme	A "one-stop shop" programme was developed to improve the quality and delivery of social services.
Ireland	Local Government Anti-Poverty Learning Network	The services provided by the network included: (a) access to commissioned research on poverty and social exclusion; (b) regular newsletters for local authority staff and members highlighting good practice and new initiatives; (c) regular quarterly meetings for exchanging information and enhancing skills; (d) training on how to tackle poverty effectively; and (e) evaluation of the new services.

Appendix – Setting targets

3.23   The member states should set a number of targets for monitoring the progress of eradicating poverty by 2010.   The targets may be:

>   (a)   a significant political statement of purpose and ambition in terms of eradicating poverty and social exclusion which can lead to increased policy effort;
>
>   (b)   a goal against which to measure progress and thus a means of creating a dynamic process characterized by openness and accountability;
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>   (c)   a tool for promoting awareness of the process and thus for encouraging and mobilizing all relevant bodies in support of it; and
>
>   (d)   a focal point around which to concentrate the efforts of policy makers and practitioners.

Joint Report on Social Inclusion

3.24   The EC conducts joint analysis and assessment of the *NAPs on Social Inclusion* submitted by the member states.   The findings are presented in the *Joint Report on Social Inclusion,* which assesses progress made in the implementation of social inclusion policies, and identifies good practice and innovative approaches of common interest to the member states.   Two *Joint Reports on Social Inclusion* were published in 2002 and 2004 respectively, drawing upon information from the corresponding *NAPs on Social Inclusion* of 2001 and 2003.

Community Action Programme

3.25   CAP aims at supporting co-operation among the member states by:

>   (a)   improving the understanding of poverty and social exclusion among the member states in the context of the NAPs; and
>
>   (b)   developing innovative approaches to combat social exclusion effectively.

3.26   The EC is responsible for the direct implementation of the measures covered by CAP.   To achieve this end, it is assisted by a programme committee made up of government representatives from the EU member states.   The role of the committee is to provide political guidance to the EC on the implementation of CAP, and to act as a partner to the EC in matters of policy against social exclusion.

3.27   In practice, CAP is divided into three strands:

(a)   Strand 1: Supporting research and analysis

— Implementation of measures under this strand focuses on enhancing the quality of data and analysis in order to improve the understanding and monitoring of poverty and social exclusion phenomena.   One major effort is to assist the member states to develop statistics on income and living conditions. This strand can also finance research in areas requiring in-depth analysis.

(b)   Strand 2: Promoting policy co-operation and mutual learning

— Special attention has been devoted to developing the transnational exchange of information and best practice. Another important measure is the implementation of a peer review programme[7] with an aim of evaluating the effectiveness of certain policies and programmes.   A network of independent national experts is also set up to keep the EC and the member states informed of the main developments concerning the policies covered by the *NAPs on Social Inclusion.*

(c)   Strand 3: Supporting the participation of the various bodies and networking at the European level

— One component of this strand is the provision of funding to the European networks which are active in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.   This strand also funds a number of events such as the annual European Round Table Conference on Poverty and Social Exclusion[8].

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17 June 2005
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[7]   The peer review programme encourages the dissemination of good practice among the member states by assessing the effectiveness of key policies or institutions, serves as a tool to the member states to help them in the design and implementation of more effective policies and contributes to the dialogue with stakeholders such as social services bodies and NGOs, and where appropriate, people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.
[8]   The annual European Round Table Conference on Poverty and Social Exclusion is a key European awareness raising event, with a view to promoting dialogue among all stakeholders for combating poverty and social exclusion.

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