

Common position

**5 recommendations
for an effective
Open Method of
Coordination on
social protection and
social inclusion**

Social Platform is the largest civil society alliance fighting for social justice and participatory democracy in Europe. Consisting of 42 pan-European networks of NGOs, Social Platform campaigns to ensure that EU policies are developed in partnership with the people they affect, respecting fundamental rights, promoting solidarity and improving lives.

Contact:

T: +32 2 511 3714 • E: platform@socialplatform.org
A: Square de Meeûs 18, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium
W: www.socialplatform.org

Social Platform strongly affirms the need for a reinforced and dynamic Social OMC as part of the post-2010 EU strategy and fully supports the recommendations made by the European Commission in its Communication "A renewed commitment to social Europe: Reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion."

However, the Commission does not go far enough. With many of its members deeply involved in the Social OMC process, Social Platform calls on the European Commission to build an active stakeholder dialogue with Social civil society organisations at national and EU level and to adopt the following recommendations:

1. Increase visibility and political commitment to the Social OMC, and improve its coherence with the wider post-2010 strategy
2. Increase ownership of the Social OMC and the delivery of better policy making through participation of national parliaments, regional actors, civil society organisations and people in poverty
3. Set quantified targets to reduce all forms of poverty and social exclusion across the lifespan and to improve pension adequacy and quality of health and long-term care at EU and national level
4. Strengthen mutual learning, link it to policy impact and open it to more actors, especially local and national actors
5. Couple the Social OMC with EU financial instruments – most notably the structural funds

Introduction

More can and should be done to address social challenges and adapt to new social realities in Europe.

This is the assessment of the European Commission, which proposed in July 2008 ways to reinforce the Open Method of Coordination in the field of social protection and social inclusion (i.e. the Social OMC) - one of the most important instruments to support social development in the EU and in Member States.

Established in 2000, Member States have used the Social OMC to coordinate their efforts and “....address old and new social challenges and to adapt their social protection systems to the new social realities...”¹ .

This process has achieved important results in methodological terms, setting measurable indicators and guidelines, alerting some countries to the issue and promoting a debate based on facts and figures.

A serious gap exists, however, between the objectives and the actual implementation of policies. Despite its aim, the process has not mobilised yet a wide range of actors and has not raised widespread political interest. It has often remained elitist and its important methodological advances are not fully exploited.

More efforts are also required to link the social inclusion strand with the other strands of the Social OMC, namely pensions and health and long term care, which have a direct impact on women and gender equality.

How can we make the social OMC more effective in delivering results for people?

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¹ Communication from the Commission - A renewed commitment to social Europe: Reinforcing the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion - COM/2008/0418 final

recommendations made by the European Commission. However, the Commission does not go far enough. With many of its members deeply involved in the Social OMC process, Social Platform calls on the European Commission to build an active stakeholder dialogue with Social civil society organisations at national and EU level and to adopt the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Increase visibility and political commitment to the Social OMC, and improve its coherence with the wider post-2010 strategy

To make a meaningful impact on social objectives of the EU, the Social OMC must be given the same weight as the Growth and Jobs agenda, through commitment to quantified targets and mechanisms of accountability.

Why?

- On one hand, despite the European Council's commitment in 2000 "to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty", poverty has not been reduced and the Social OMC has been progressively sidelined, with no political leadership to back it up and ensure progress.
- On the other hand, the Lisbon Strategy, though similarly limited by subsidiarity considerations, has been driven by a common policy agenda, agreed upon at the highest level, accompanied by quantified targets to which Member States are held accountable.

How?

1. In the architecture of the post-Lisbon strategy, ensure a central role for a reinforced Social OMC, encompassing the three strands of the OMC
2. Guarantee that all EU policies and in particular in employment and economic policies contribute to social inclusion, the eradication of poverty and the improvement in social protection mechanisms
3. Set up an inter-service working group on poverty and social exclusion, adequacy of pensions and quality of health and long-term

care responsible for reviewing coordination and impact of EU policies on the social OMC objectives

4. Establish written 'agreements' between the EU and each Member State which will include: country specific recommendations and points to watch; regular scoreboard to measure progress; and reports every three years
5. At national level, ensure that Social OMC processes are better articulated with national policy and programming cycle
6. Set up new coordination mechanisms to ensure the effective mainstreaming of the social OMC priorities into the National Reform Programmes
7. At national level, support the development of local and regional social inclusion action plans that would feed into and support the implementation of the National Action Plans on social inclusion and National Strategic Reports.

Recommendation 2: Increase ownership of the Social OMC and the delivery of better policy making through participation of national parliaments, regional actors, civil society organisations and people living in poverty

Why?

- There are clear weaknesses in the governance of the OMC which need to be addressed, such as the restricted number of stakeholders involved and the limitations of having only social affairs ministers politically responsible for delivering on social objectives.
- Participation of civil society actors is key not only to ensure ownership and promote civil dialogue and participative democracy, but as an essential tool to develop and deliver more effective policy solutions.
- A real political commitment from many EU Member States to the process is still missing, with no real involvement or even awareness of high-level national politicians on the social OMC process: There are few debates in national parliaments on decisions and commitments taken by their governments through the social OMC while they impact on policies and decisions taken at national level.
- One of the key objectives of the social OMC is to promote the direct participation of people in poverty in the process: both in shaping and delivering the National Action Plans and National Strategic Reports. This includes the civil society organisations that support/empower and provide services for them.
- Although several high-level Presidency and Commission events are held as part of the Social OMC, the outcomes are not sufficiently

promoted in a systematic fashion at EU and national levels or mainstreamed into other policy areas.

- And yet, the social OMC is mainly perceived as a bureaucratic reporting machine for EU experts and insiders. Many Social civil society organisations working at grassroots level often report difficulties in getting involved in this European-wide process, at national or EU level.

How?

Increasing public accountability at European, national and regional level

1. Establish a regular European Parliament report and national parliament debates/reports on the Social OMC and encourage cooperation between European and national parliaments
2. Bring different stakeholders together – grass root civil society organisations, social service providers, researchers, local authorities, people experiencing poverty, civil society organisations and social economy organizations, national/regional authorities, statistics offices - around different issues or priorities, e.g. child poverty, homelessness, feminisation of poverty, social inclusion of migrants, active inclusion, gender inequalities in pension provisions, health and long-term inequalities
3. Make available in written format minutes/reports and conclusions of high level OMC meetings immediately after the meetings and widely distribute them

Increasing civil society participation

1. At EU level, establish a structured and regular dialogue between the Social Protection Committee and European Social civil society

organisations on the progress made through the Social OMC

2. Together with civil society, develop and disseminate guidelines and benchmarks for Member States on how to strengthen the governance of the Social OMC at national level. These guidelines could be based on existing best practices, peer reviews and on the 2009 European Commission's study on governance and participation.
3. Implement the Recommendations of the Commission for promoting better participation of civil society organisations and people experiencing poverty in the development of the National Action Plans and Strategic Reports e.g. by organising yearly dialogue with social civil society organisations at national and regional level
4. Develop qualitative and quantitative indicators on how civil society organisations are involved in the Social OMC and do this together with civil society organisations
5. Admit and take into consideration divergent positions voiced by civil society representatives during national and EU consultations

Recommendation 3: Set quantified targets to reduce all forms of poverty and social exclusion across the lifespan and to improve pension adequacy and quality of health and long-term care at EU and national level

Why?

- On one hand, the EU's commitment to make a decisive impact on poverty and social exclusion by 2010 has not been realized, despite 10 years of the Social OMC.
- On the other hand, the Lisbon Strategy, though similarly limited by subsidiarity considerations, has made effective use of EU targets to concentrate and coordinate efforts of Member States on key priorities.

How?

1. Agree on EU targets as called for by the European Parliament in its report on active inclusion (May 2009) such as reducing child poverty by 50 % by 2012 and ending street homelessness of children, youth and adults alike by 2015. These and other specific targets should be seen as part of a broader effort to eradicate poverty. Furthermore, indicators in respect of Women and poverty were proposed by the Council under the Portuguese Presidency.²
2. Move beyond GDP as reference indicator and develop more specific social indicators e.g. related to poverty and inequality rates, access to financial services, energy, health, education, transport housing, quality employment and child well being.

² Council of the European Union, Review of the implementation by the Member States and the EU institutions of the Beijing Platform for Action – Indicators in respect of Women and Poverty, draft Council Conclusions, Brussels, 31 October 2007, 1394/07 ADD1 SOC 377

3. Support Member States to establish targets and actions plans to achieve them, in partnership with national civil society organisations. This should be done in the context of a structured dialogue established through the National Action Plan process and for instance by organising seminars on how to set targets with examples from countries where this already works.

4. On specific priority issues where policy progress at EU level has proved difficult because of divergent understandings amongst relevant stakeholders, consider organizing European consensus conferences. Such conferences, based on an established methodology, facilitate the development of a common understanding which can provide the basis for effective EU intervention

Recommendation 4: Strengthen mutual learning, link it to policy impact and open it to more actors, especially local and national actors

Why?

- The Commission's communication refers to the need to strengthen the social OMC with "better ownership through peer reviews, mutual learning and involvement of all relevant actors." It is a key element of the social OMC in promoting meaningful exchange and learning on the common objectives and priorities.
- However, too often it remains a closed debate between a handful of experts, whose expertise does not always cover the priority issues of the OMC, and doesn't adequately engage national, local as well as EU experts and other stakeholders in the learning experience.
- In addition, they are usually not linked effectively to the National Actions Plans and National Strategic Reports.

How?

Together with national and European actors:

1. Establish a clear strategy to ensure that mutual learning leads to policy impact and are implemented through a participatory approach. The strengths of the peer review process for actors from the ground should be better exploited, in particular the component focusing on the transferability of concepts, policies or modes of governance.

2. Facilitate mutual learning across the three OMC strands i.e. on social inclusion, pensions, health and long-term care
3. Organise multi-stakeholder forum to disseminates findings of peer review exchange and promote debates linked to policy impacts (see for instance the thematic review model used for the European Employment Strategy)
4. Establish taskforces on specific objectives, involving representatives of Member States and stakeholders at national level. These taskforces should be linked to the structured dialogue established at national level through the National Action Plans

On Thematic years

1. Ensure continuity on thematic years with an explicit roadmap: when results of a thematic year and recommendations are finalised, progress against these should be monitored systematically through for instance SPC working groups
2. Balance mutual learning on thematic fields with exchange on the development of integrated, multidimensional strategies to reduce poverty and social exclusion
3. Ensure that each thematic year has a clear governance and participation strategy setting out how stakeholders at European and particularly at national level will be engaged

Recommendation 5: Couple the Social OMC with EU financial instruments – most notably the structural funds

Why?

- The Communication on reinforcing the Social OMC refers to the role of EU financial instruments in delivering the objectives of the Social OMC, but so far there is little evidence of a systematic approach
- The ending of EQUAL has meant difficulties to capitalise on innovative social inclusion projects which promoted multiple stakeholder approaches
- And yet, making a decisive impact on poverty reduction implies targeting EU funds, in particular the ESF, towards achieving this objective. In order to increase coherence, the Structural Funds priorities should correspond to the objectives and targets set up in the three strands of the social OMC

How?

1. At national level, ensure that the Structural Funds priorities correspond to the objectives and targets set up in the Social OMC and contribute to delivery of policies and programmes to reduce social exclusion and poverty and address pensions and health and long term care
2. Develop guidance for Member States on how structural funds can deliver on social inclusion
3. Make the Structural Funds regulation more flexible so the funds can meet specific needs i.e. country-specific challenges identified in national reports
4. Use indicators on social inclusion from the Social OMC in delivering and using Structural Funds - including those allowing for policy monitoring on extreme form of poverty, as cross-cutting tools in the Structural Funds monitoring and evaluation process
5. Devote an equivalent level of earmarking for the objectives of the Social OMC as for the Lisbon Strategy
6. Give guidance to Member States on the value-added of supporting small, civil society organisations projects, encouraging the use of block grant and technical assistance.