

For many months, two connected debates – and two acronyms – have been bringing uncertainty to social NGOs in the wake of the EU 2020 strategy. It concerns how NGOs will be able to engage with the European institutions and influence the development and implementation of policies in the future.

On the one hand is the social OMC, the ‘open method of coordination’ which over the last 10 years has become a prominent way for national and European public authorities to engage with each other and, to some extent, with interested non-governmental actors like civil society, businesses and trade unions. On the other hand, is the European Platform Against Poverty which people refer to as EPAP which is a new initiative created to respond to the EU target of reducing the number of people in poverty by 20%.

Since the idea of creating an anti poverty platform was established, there has been much speculation and debate about what shape it should take and what it should do. Within the EU institutions, there seemed to be support for making the platform a catch-all centre for dealing with all issues relating social Europe. In late 2010, many were saying that it was a done-deal, that the social OMC and all the work that had been accomplished with stakeholders developing a common language for dialogue together would be abandoned or at least subsumed into the EPAP. This caused a lot of worry to social NGOs, especially as the poverty platform was – and remains – amorphous and vague.

Now it seems clear that both will continue in parallel. This is good news, because while the

social OMC has many shortcomings – not least the low levels of visibility and stakeholder involvement at national level – it has at least allowed the development of a common language and the potential to work strategically together across EU borders.

But if the EPAP and the social OMC will coexist on the EU landscape as entry points for debate with policy makers, it has still to be decided what shape they will finally take.

For the anti-poverty platform in particular, if the Commission has clear plans for what it will do, how it will do it and who will be involved, it is keeping them to itself for now, while it consults widely and intensively for ideas. CEDAG and other NGO networks are making a large number of recommendations to try to make these tools useful, efficient and relevant to the needs of our societies.

A key danger to avoid is the EU tendency to oversimplify the issues, and lump complex or unrelated phenomena together. In the interest of handling such a vast range of complicated

policy fields applicable to 27 member states – and in the context of reducing budgets – there is pressure towards reductionism just to keep things manageable. A case in point is the Commission's move to address the social economy under the umbrella of the fight against poverty.

CEDAG is a founding member of Social Economy Europe, an advocacy network made up of the four 'families' of the social economy – associations, mutualities, foundations and cooperatives. As values-based organisations, members of Social Economy Europe certainly stand firmly in support of poverty reduction policies. But with 10% of the EU's GDP and a vast spectrum of activities going from services to the productive economy and beyond, it is simplistic to characterise the social economy simply as a tool to fight poverty.

The underlying ideological question in the current debates on EPAP and OMC, is whether the EU should continue to focus almost entirely on economic governance, trusting market principles to resolve social problems, or whether it should invest energy and resources in social governance. The four families of the social economy should play a part in designing this counterbalance because they are organised around a management model based on democracy, equitable distribution of profits and reinvestment in the interests of the community.

The most striking difference from the private market logic that dominates in the EU is that social economy actors' first aim is not maximizing profits to pay the most cash to share owners. It is this human-centred approach, putting people and planet before profits, which should be brought into the centre of EU governance.

This is why CEDAG, which represents a major voice in the associative world, is calling for better information about how initiatives like EPAP and social OMC will interrelate

to push social policy priorities closer to the heart of EU decision making. In particular we are calling for clear plans to build local and national stakeholders' participation into the mechanisms. EU processes have a poor record for opening the discussions to those who are affected, and 'top down' governance dominated by national governments and the EU is really no governance at all.

We are urging that in future the Social OMC should become a far more agile and interactive process so that it can adapt to fit better into the natural cycles of national politics, which are different in every country. To increase participation and interest, the EU and member states need to increase the visibility of the process, which means also showing where and how it has an impact.

This is perhaps the fundamental area to improve – the social OMC needs to become a tool which can influence policy in the direction of a commonly defined strategy, so that it will have a tangible effect on peoples' lives. It should establish itself as a permanent fixture in the arsenal of participation tools, which is flexible enough to grow and adapt to social priorities as they develop over the years. We believe that it should not be specifically attached to the EU 2020 process, which is once again too simplistic and too rigid in the way it deals with social concerns.

The anti poverty platform, on the other hand, is central to EU 2020: when its final form is decided, it will be responsible for supporting and promoting the actions to achieve the target of reducing EU poverty by 20%. CEDAG calls for the platform to be a truly forward looking governance tool, and not one simply based on reporting of the status quo. It is vital that we have an effective and well functioning platform, which includes all relevant actors, has a visible impact in improving lives and helps to develop activities at all levels which target investment well, and make a sustainable reduction to EU social inequalities.

CEDAG and its partners in the social economy continue to make these points in the ongoing debates, but more than this we urge the decision makers at national and EU level to move from talking to action.