

On 16 March the Social Platform held an ad hoc meeting to discuss the draft report produced by Steinruck MEP of the Employment Committee, on the draft regulation for EUPSCI. The results of the discussions in this meeting have been sent to the Platform's steering group which will meet on March 29th, and will propose an official platform response to the draft report.

The proposed EUPSCI is part of the European Commission's proposals for the 2014-2020 EU budget - known as the multi annual financial framework, MAFF. It brings together two pre-existing programmes - "Progress" and EURES, and adds a new third strand, the micro finance initiative to support entrepreneurship. Progress is the largest component in terms of monetary investment, and is used to provide stable financing to civil society initiatives, while EURES is the EU's attempt to promote workers mobility across international borders within the EU. The entire proposed budget for the EUPSCI is just under 1bn € over 7 years.

This ad hoc meeting was attended by several organisations including CECODHAS (social housing) FEANTSA (homelessness) EAPN (anti-poverty network) MHE (mental health) as well as CEDAG. The first reactions of the organisations present to the draft report were generally positive, with some caveats. On the whole, the Brussels based NGO community has felt some relief from the Commission's MAFF proposals, since it was feared that they would be a lot worse, in terms of the commitments to promote solidarity and fight poverty and exclusion. Regarding this draft report, there was a feeling of relief that economic criteria are not described as being predominant over social ones - a rare occurrence in current EU social policy.

The main area of concern with regard to this report was the feeling that it places perhaps too great an emphasis on employment - indeed Ms Steinruck proposes introducing the word 'employment' in the programmes name. This was generally thought to be a threat, since many organisations currently working with 'Progress' have a significantly wider scope than employment.

Regarding the microfinance strand of the EUPSCI, participants wished to call for social enterprises to have direct access to EU funding through calls for proposal. There is a concern that in its current proposed form the microfinance initiative would only be accessible through intermediary bodies (banks...). The ad hoc meeting advocated a grant-based approach, which has not been taken up by the rapporteur.

On the subject of innovation and experimentation there was some divergence of opinion, but it was generally agreed that the EU funding should support innovation, including projects of all sizes, and that an innovative proposal should be able to get support before it is supported by evidence. Innovative projects should be able to show a tangible social benefit.

On the other hand, experimental approaches should be evidence-based and money should be made available to scale up successful models which are developed under the EUPSCI budget. It was felt that this scaling up should be done with money which come from elsewhere in the European Social Fund budget, rather than cutting into the budget assigned to the EUPSCI itself.

There was also a positive feeling that the report is discussing social policy experimentation in a way which does not assume or define public authorities as leading the process.

There followed a detailed discussion of various ammendments proposed in the report. In particular there was concern ofer the idea of lowering the percentage of the fund which would be assigned to 'progress' while raising the overall budget. It was also felt that the EURES axis did not need to recieve such a large percentage, and that items such as 'training for eures staff' received too large an amount with respect to the priority they ought to be assigned.

On the whole, it was felt that a theme running through the EUPSCI and the draft report was visible which belittled the contribution and the role that CSOs played. The draft report is open to comments until mid April.