

One of five headline targets in the Europe 2020 strategy for “smart”, sustainable, and inclusive growth is for the 27 EU member states together to lift 20 million people out of poverty. The “European Platform Against Poverty” (EPAP) is a key plank in the EU’s struggle to achieve this target, although it remains a vaguely defined initiative. A first annual convention of the EPAP was held in Krakow in October last year.

But many participants in stakeholders in the meeting were disappointed by the way it was organised and the quality of the discussion that was possible. Given that this is a major high profile event which is time consuming and expensive to organise, many stakeholders are demanding more from the commission in future years.

On 6 February a stakeholder meeting was held in Brussels to allow interested organisations to discuss with the officials in the Commission who are responsible for organising this weeks event, led by Anne DeGrand. She said that following the extensive debriefing of the first convention in Krakow the Commission had taken on board the following main points:

- there had been a lack of feeling of shared ownership - the Commission had found it difficult to make all stakeholders feel included and they intended to remedy this from now on.
- there had not been enough time for discussion, and too many set speeches
- the whole affair had been prepared in too much of a rush, and this year will be prepared well in advance.

She presented a provisional plan for the 2012 event: it is proposed to hold a two day conference over three days on the 5-7 December, in Brussels. This is because the EPSCO council falls on the second day and it will allow a stronger ministerial presence. It is proposed to invite around 600 persons, of whom 300 would have travel and accommodation paid. An idea which the Commission already had in 2011 is to have a ‘solidarity village’ where there would be stands to allow participants to present projects and initiatives.

Feantsa Director Freek Spinnewijn said that the Convention seemed to be struggling to find its feet, and that he thought that it should be used to launch and give dynamism to the ideas which are annexed to the EPAP. He said that there are other departments of the Commission which have a lot to contribute and have not been successfully brought in yet. He proposed inviting some academics to present the current state of the research in the area and particularly to flag

up the gaps, which would give DG Research a ready-made research agenda to pursue. Anne DeGrand however said that 20 academics had been present at the 2011 convention. She agreed that they should be present but did not think it necessary that they should be invited to speak.

It was proposed that the convention should not only be about practice and projects, that indeed there should be some opportunity to discuss the political stance behind the practices presented.

Herlinde Vanhoiendonck of the Social Platform called for there to be an explanatory document on what has taken place under the flagship 'Platform against poverty' to be distributed before each convention, reporting on the year past. The Convention should not be another fragment in an unconnected array of meetings about poverty. We are looking for some leadership from the Commission, and a report like this would give some visibility to an initiative which remains poorly defined by the commission. We regularly hear that the EPAP is regularly happening and ongoing, so let us see that. Anne DeGrand said that this information was contained in the speeches of last year's convention.

The EPAP should be central to the Europe 2020 process; it is one of the 5 targets adopted by the Council and the Parliament. It should be discussed in the NRP, and it is such a shame that the Convention being held in Brussels is going to remove any member state feeling from it - it will just be another conference organised by the European Commission with a heavy stamp of the bureaucracy on it.

Eurocities suggested looking at integrated approaches, not just isolated projects and free-standing best practices. The commission should be warned against hoping that easy answers to poverty can be 'cherry picked' from the grassroots context in which they have been developed and transplanted 'wholesale' across a variety of European cities.

A far more sensible approach would be to understand the complex web of policies which work together to give the impetus and ongoing support to a successful practice. This also links back to the suggestion of Feantsa to involve the impressive budget of the Research DG

which is currently untapped for poverty and social inclusion questions. Why is the EU not putting its money where its mouth is and why are the social targets not being mainstreamed. If we are

supposed to commit 3% of our budgets to R& D why is there not a large research budget assigned to every strand of the Europe 2020 strategy?

ATD Quart Monde referred to the often-expressed frustration with last year's event, to see all those ministers up on the podium releasing their set speeches through their mouths. The speaker said that what needs to be heard is the impact on poverty and exclusion levels of current political and economic to restore the economy. We do need a public forum to look at the effect of the policies which have been put in place by coalition and minority governments since the crisis began to make itself felt. It has had catastrophic results on poverty levels in each one of the 27 member states. If the EPAP convention is not able to address this, then it is a failure and a shame.

A speaker representing the European Anti Poverty Platform returned to the question of ownership, which indeed had been named but not at all addressed by the European Commission. Tying the event to Brussels just to get an increased ministerial participation might not get an increased audience from the national press. If the event slips out of the hands of member state governments, and there is nothing in the domestic discussion which links to the discussion the commission is trying to have, then you won't get far.

Members of the European social NGO networks are talking about an increasing loss of trust with public authorities, there is a decreasing belief that the initiatives that they are taking are there to protect the public good. In the format that the Commission seems to be proposing, there is a risk that the public relations opportunity of appearing in touch and listening to the reality that a huge number of citizens are facing will be lost. In the perspective of the upcoming European parliament elections this could be foolish, given that the parliament has shown itself to be quite aggressive in vetting the national government proposals for the college of commissioners. We feel that there is space needed for discussion of the fundamental politics which is feeding the practices put in place.

Anne DeGrand said that she had listened to the views expressed and that the next step will be a large stakeholders meeting in May (tentative date 6th) and another in September, with other smaller meetings in between to prepare these.

If you would like to read a more detailed report of this meeting please contact CEDAG secretariat.