



Programme “Society and Future”

EUROPEAN TOOLS FOR SOCIAL POLICY IN BELGIUM (ETOS.BE)

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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ETOS.be - Key policy recommendations

Throughout the research project the ETOS.be team benefited from the support of an active Steering Committee which included (European or Belgian) high-level civil servants and representatives of social partners and the Belgian Permanent representation to the EU. Committee members provided us with regular feedback (both formal and informal) enabling us to focus our research activities on what these policymakers considered most relevant. Thus, the specific choice of OMC's to be studied, the detailed development of the Belgian-EU interface (various channels for up-and downloading for each of the policy instruments), the concrete elaboration of our "multi-tool methodology" (see above) etc. have been discussed with policymakers.

One particularly important request from the Committee was that the research team would formulate recommendations from a "realist" perspective, i.e. that we would start from the current political and institutional situation and propose ways forward which (according to our best judgement) would be *politically and practically achievable* (be it sometimes with considerable effort) and not *out of the blue*. With these framing conditions in mind, this paper summarises the most important general (applying to the different policy strands) as well as specific (pertaining only to one of the policy instruments) policy recommendations. Other recommendations can be found in the specific chapters of the final report.

1. Uploading Belgian interests to the EU arena: awareness raising

As far as the uploading dimension is concerned, some of our findings (see section 4 of the "Description of the Research Project") have been framed to *raise awareness* among decision makers about (*inter alia*):

- ❖ The instrumentalisation of social policies (i.e. social policies being pursued not « per se » but subordinated to other, usually economic, objectives). If this would be considered as problematic, increased uploading efforts are needed to:
 - Safeguard the possibility to continue the funding of "social inclusion" projects through ESF spending (the general 'Structural funds' and ESF Regulation should be amended in this perspective).
 - Increase actors' vigilance and political monitoring to avoid that gender gaps (increased dualisation in some fields) appear or increase, without the possibility to rely on a strict fundamental rights reasoning so as to reduce them.
- ❖ The (almost complete) lack of (sub-)national Parliamentary involvement in EU processes, which led us to recommend that the federal and sub-national Parliaments welcome the Lisbon Treaty to step up efforts to engage in the scrutiny of the different EU policymaking processes. Political parties need to consider the multiple constraints that impact on legislatures and review the incentives they give to individual MPs to become involved in European affairs

2. Enhancing uploading capacity

With a view to enhancing the future impact of Belgian positions at EU level, two operational policy recommendations were formulated:

- ❖ In an EU of 27 (and soon more) Member States, policymakers should go beyond their current state of 'uploading heroism' and ensure (formal and informal) timely alliances with a wide variety of Member States, including the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) which are far too often left out of the picture.
- ❖ To improve timely coordination between federal and sub-national levels of government, for example within the context of the Ministry for foreign affairs (DGE), with a view to preparing Council Working Groups. These coordination meetings should also start to include relevant stakeholders, i.e. those who will in principle be involved in the downloading stage (e.g. transposition).

3. Downloading EU social policies: awareness raising

Also with regard to the downloading dimension, a number of recommendations aim at raising political and administrative awareness concerning:

- ❖ The need to start incorporating the reality of hybridisation of EU policy instruments in the day-to-day follow up of European dossiers, and to avoid the current 'balkanisation' of expertise: by working - at political and administrative level - across disciplines (e.g. hard and soft law) or between functioning units (e.g. ESF and OMC). Furthermore, policymakers at the different levels of government should beef up efforts to monitor the impact of policies they implement as a result of EU policies (legislation, OMC, ESF).
- ❖ At a very general level, we raised the question to policymakers whether the ESF still is relevant for a wealthy EU Member State such as Belgium. This discussion is nourished by the growing disparities between EU Member States since the expansion of the Union in 2004 and our finding that the ESF had important effects during the 1980s and 1990s of last century, but that its value added seems to have drastically declined.

4. Enhancing the efficiency of downloading

4.1 EU Law

- ❖ Belgian authorities should, when they act in a case that is brought before the European Court of justice, recall that some of the core objectives of the European Union are being made explicit in soft law mechanisms and should therefore also figure amongst the teleological criteria of interpretation to be used by the Court. This should entail a closer cooperation between social ministries and the legal service of the foreign affairs administration and no longer considering the European adjudication process as a mere technical matter.
- ❖ The incoming Belgian Presidency of the European Union in 2010 should explore the possibility – which has been overlooked so far - of introducing legally binding procedural requirements into soft law, such as rights to transparency and participation in the Open Method of Coordination.

4.2 Open method of coordination

Finally, some directly applicable recommendations were formulated to increase the efficiency of the Social Inclusion OMC and the EES. These include the following:

- ❖ The relationship between the EU Social Inclusion strategy and pre-existing national processes should be clarified and simplified. The fact that the NAP/Inclusion continues to co-exist with biannual reports on poverty in Belgium is confusing for many actors and diminishes the political appeal of both processes.
- ❖ Sub-national and federal authorities should decide on effective political strategies to pursue the 'nationally agreed' targets of which the implementation depends on sub-national levels of government. It should be specified what happens if a sub-national authority does not meet the targets. The federal and regional levels of government should also increase efforts to inform local levels of government about the value added of using OMC tools (indicators, target setting at the local level etc.).

4.3 The European Social Fund

- ❖ In view of the increasing market logic and the structural financing of already planned policies with ESF-resources, we recommended that ESF funding should be reoriented towards policy experimentation and innovation.
- ❖ The requirements of partnership and of *de facto* (and not merely *de jure*) gender equality should be strengthened at all levels, since we found that they constitute important (yet diminishing) value-added of the operation of the ESF.