



CAN ACTIVATION SCHEMES WORK FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION?

EAPN CRITERIA FOR 'GOOD' ACTIVATION

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It is timely to open a debate on activation

The development of 'activation policies' is a general trend. Activation of social spending, after having been applied to unemployment replacement income, is applied now more generally to social benefits including minimum income.

While repeating that employment is a way towards social inclusion, EAPN has already expressed its concerns regarding the way activation is sometimes implemented; which can lead to the reverse effect of increased levels of poverty and social exclusion. This is particularly the case when a neo-liberal work-focus political approach is concretely translated.

In its Communication on the Social Agenda in February 2005 the Commission have announced a 'Community initiative on minimum income schemes and the integration of people excluded from the labour market'. EAPN, as well as other stakeholders, have welcome this announcement and we still await with high expectations the views of the Commission and the opportunity to engage in a dialogue on this particular matter. Such a discussion will have to address the way minimum income schemes are currently being developed with the aim to foster the integration of people excluded from the labour market through activation policies.

As a first contribution is this discussion, EAPN want to present its own definition, based on the expertise of its members, some of them being actively involved in the implementation of social inclusion policies as well as employment policies, of what is 'good' activation, i.e. capable of delivering alleviation of poverty and social exclusion.

The aim of activation should be social inclusion and professional mobility by empowering the claimants

It is important to distinguish between activation and workfare. Both terms are used within the concept of active labour market/social policy and sometimes indiscriminately. However, workfare is a term of Anglo-Saxon origin while Scandinavian/Western European countries more commonly use the notion of activation or insertion.

The basic meaning of workfare is working in return for benefits. The meaning of activation is broader and involves a wider range of options for the benefit claimants: training, education, subsidised employment, work placement, group activities, language-learning skills etc.

The term activation can be divided into two extremes on a continuum: Labour market oriented activation and social activation.

The aim of workfare is to reduce dependency and to reduce the costs of unemployment benefit schemes. The strategy is reforms of social protection schemes by tightening the conditions of access to benefits. The personal responsibility is emphasised (help yourself).

The aim of activation is social inclusion and professional mobility by empowering the claimants to improve their competencies and skills, physical and mental health, to establish social contacts, improve feeling of participation and citizenship etc. (help to self-help). Additional service to further social inclusion is emphasised, not obligations. Activation is an investment in human, social, psychological and cultural resources. The aim of activation is labour market integration but also social integration in a wider sense. The strategy is broad, taking the multi-complexity of problems into consideration and offering tailored intervention for individual needs and expectations.

As such (social) activation can include excluded groups with the most serious problems, who are furthest away from the job market, including alcoholics and drug addicts, people with health or psychological problems, single mothers with little support, immigrants with poor language skills etc.

Criteria for 'good activation'

Good activation means:

- Improving personal, social and vocational skills and competencies and enabling to further social integration
- Individualised and flexible offers taking the whole person into consideration and acknowledging diversity of age, experience etc.
- Relevance of the offer for the individual person's needs, wishes and priorities
- Aiming to overcome or compensate for the excluding forces in society
- Wide range networking with relevant actors at local level, such as actors on the labour market, health care services, social services, housing sector, communities etc.
- Respecting the individual's identity and self-respect
- Achieving quality compared to ambitious social standards
- Raising status
- Building on reciprocity between the individual and the (municipal) agency
- That the planning, the design and the implementation of activation is carried out in co-operation and interaction between the claimant and the (municipal) agency
- Involving the resources and strengths of the claimants
- Using adequate social income, including minimum income, as a positive tool likely to guarantee the security needed for activation. Benefits should be used also as a positive incentive to face the extra costs and risk when resuming a job after unemployment.

'Good activation' is the ambitious but only relevant approach

Such activation, likely to be a tool rather than a threat for social inclusion, is in terms of social spending more an activation of public budgets than an activation of individual benefits. It implies the development of opportunities on the labour market including through social economy.

Such activation should be reflected on at the broader level of the design of social protection system and labour markets, and not only on the micro level of individual behaviour.

We hope that such an ambitious approach of activation, only capable of contributions to the Lisbon objective of 'having a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion' will be supported by decision makers at the EU, national and local level.