
Update No. 21 – November 16, 2001

Tackling Poverty and Inequality

Résumés

European Commission. 2001. Draft Joint Report on Social Inclusion.

Brussels, October 10.

http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/news/2001/oct/socincl_report_en.pdf

The Commission recently released a report analyzing governments' social inclusion policies. The report shows that the Commission, in pursuing the Lisbon summit goals, is committed to a socially cohesive Europe, both in its own right but also as a factor of economic competitiveness. The report describes the present situation and main challenges for poverty and social exclusion policies in the EU, using a common base of social indicators and documenting a wide range of action being taken by member states. It provides a launch pad for strengthening policies and programs across the EU through cooperation between member states, in particular through the exchange of best practices.

The report is based on an analysis of 'national action plans' against poverty and social exclusion drawn up by all member states for the first time this year and to be submitted every two years. The report confirms that tackling poverty and social exclusion continues to be an important challenge facing the Europe Union: 18%, or over 60 million of the EU's population, are at risk of poverty and about half of these are living in long-term poverty. Children and young people, the elderly, the unemployed and lone parent families have a particularly high risk of poverty. The relative poverty rate - those living below a threshold of 60% of median national income - varies considerably across member states, from 8% in Denmark to 23% in Portugal.

The report also identifies a series of severe risk factors that increase the danger of poverty. These include long-term unemployment; living long-term on low income; poor quality employment; poor qualifications and leaving school early; growing up in a family vulnerable to social exclusion; disability; poor health; drug abuse and alcoholism; living in an area of multiple disadvantage; homelessness and precarious housing; and immigration, ethnic background and risk of racial discrimination.

The report warns that some of the major structural changes that are taking place in society, while positive for most people, could lead to new risks of poverty and social exclusion for particularly

vulnerable groups unless appropriate policy responses are developed. These structural changes include changes in the labour market due to globalization and the very rapid growth of the knowledge-based society and information and communication technologies; demographic changes, with more people living longer and falling birth rates; a growing trend towards ethnic, cultural and religious diversity as a result of increased international migration and mobility within the Union; and changes in household structures, with growing rates of family break-up, the de-institutionalization of family life, and the changing role of men and women.

The report identifies eight core challenges that are being addressed to a greater or lesser extent by most member states. These are: (1) developing an inclusive labour market and promoting employment as a right and opportunity for all; (2) guaranteeing adequate income and resources for a decent standard of living; (3) tackling educational disadvantage; (4) preserving family solidarity and protecting the rights of children; (5) ensuring reasonable accommodation for all; (6) guaranteeing equal access to and investing in high-quality public services (health, transport, social, care, cultural, recreational and legal); (7) improving the delivery of services; and (8) regenerating areas of multiple deprivation.

Talja Blokland. 2000. "Unravelling Three of a Kind: Cohesion, Community and Solidarity." *Netherlands Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 36, No. 1: 56-70.

The attention devoted to social cohesion as a central theme in the Dutch social sciences is an example of how Dutch sociologists are influenced by and constantly influence the public debate. Although the term social cohesion has become increasingly popular, its usefulness as a conceptual tool is rarely a topic of discussion. This paper critically reviews the use of the term and investigates what is meant when either the presence or absence of social cohesion is defined as a social problem. Apparently, social cohesion sounds less normative than community. Perhaps its popularity can be explained by its neutral connotation rather than by its analytical power. There is a strong conceptual conflation between saying "cohesion" and meaning "community." A relational model of social relationships can be a more fruitful way to address community than the approaches currently predominant in the Dutch academic debate.

David Coburn. 2000. "Income Inequality, Social Cohesion and the Health Status of Populations: The Role of Neo-Liberalism." *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 51, No. 1: 135-146.

There has been a recent upsurge of interest in the relationship between income inequality and health within nations and between nations. On the latter topic, Wilkinson and others believe that in the advanced capitalist countries, higher income inequality leads to lowered social cohesion, which in turn produces poorer health status. This article argues that, despite a now voluminous literature, not enough attention has been paid to the social context of income inequality and health relationships, or to the causes of income inequality itself. It is contended that there is a particular affinity between neo-liberal (market-oriented) political doctrines, income inequality and lowered social cohesion. Neo-liberalism produces both higher income inequality and decreased social cohesion. Part of the negative effect of neo-liberalism on health status is due to

its undermining of the welfare state. The welfare state may have direct effects on health as well as being one of the underlying structural causes of social cohesion. The rise of neo-liberalism and the decline of the welfare state are themselves tied to globalization and the changing class structures of advanced capitalist societies. More attention should be paid to understanding the causes of income inequality, not just its effects, because income inequalities are neither necessary nor inevitable. Moreover, understanding the contextual causes of inequality may also influence our notion of the causal pathways involved in inequality-health status relationships (and vice versa).

What's New?

The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, in collaboration with the Policy Research Secretariat, invite you to attend the next Social Cohesion Workshop, "Social Cohesion as a Factor in Crime Prevention," which will be held on Monday, November 19, 2001 from 1:00-4:00 p.m. at the Holiday Inn Plaza Hotel "La Chaudiere," Salon A, 2 Montcalm Street, Hull, Quebec. For more information, see: http://policyresearch.gc.ca/docs/hp-ph_sc-cs_ev-ev_e.htm#crime