

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Education for inclusion: a tool for fighting poverty and social exclusion’ (exploratory opinion)

(2011/C 18/04)

Rapporteur: **Ms SÁNCHEZ MIGUEL**

In a letter dated 23 July 2009, Mr Diego López Garrido, Spanish State Secretary for the European Union at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, asked the European Economic and Social Committee, in the name of the future Spanish Presidency, in accordance with Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Union, to draw up an exploratory opinion on:

Education for inclusion: a tool for fighting poverty and social exclusion.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 23 March 2010.

At its 462nd Plenary session, held on 28 and 29 April 2010 (meeting of 28 April), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 103 votes in favour, 13 votes against and 10 abstentions

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The EESC welcomes the decision to devote 2010 to redoubling efforts to eradicate exclusion and poverty and highlights the importance of using education and training as effective tools for achieving these goals. Education is recognised as an important instrument for including those living in poverty in society.

1.2 The fact that one of the priorities of the ‘EU Strategy for 2020’ is strengthening education as a means for combating inequalities and poverty and that the trio of EU rotating presidencies, Spain, Belgium and Hungary, have set ‘Education for all’ as one of their objectives makes it possible to put forward a series of measures aimed at making education and training effective tools for combating poverty and social exclusion.

1.3 Education has been recognised as a basic human right since the EU was founded and huge positive efforts have been undertaken to make this right a public good available to all. The EESC has made its contribution in this area with a large number of opinions, all of which recognise that the central goal of education is to train individuals to be free, critical, independent and capable of contributing to developing the society in which they live, with a high level of skills to address the new challenges, particularly in the world of work, but also aware that they share values and a culture and that the world they live in must be preserved for future generations.

1.4 On the basis of the concept of education for inclusion, the EESC recommends that the EU and the Member States undertake to revise education policies, their content, approaches and structures and the allocation of resources, but also that a revision and/or up-dating of policies relating to employment, quality public services, attention to specific groups (children, people with special needs, migrants, etc.) be carried out, and that the gender perspective is included in all these policies.

Inclusive education can take place in a number of settings, formal and non-formal, within families, in the community, so that burden does not fall exclusively on schools. Far from being a marginal question or one focused solely on the poor, it should be open to all social groups that need it. The reasons to choose inclusive education are:

- educational, because it requires a quality education system accessible to all from early infancy
- social, because education must help change mentalities, helping to build societies that are free of exclusion, prejudice and discrimination, and
- economic, because it helps to increase competitiveness in the face of new economic challenges and new labour market demands.

1.5 Within the EU, discussions on the recognition of outcomes of non-formal education, which takes place outside traditional educational settings, complements formal education by providing people with practical competences, ‘soft’ skills and attitudes and encourages active citizenship, have been ongoing for many years. Although these discussions have not yet culminated in consensual agreements at EU level, non-formal education is gradually being recognised as being of help in accessing the labour market. The EESC considers it useful for the EU to look at this aspect in the light of education for inclusion and consequently recommends:

- collecting information on the existing institutional and technical provisions and proposing the establishment of indicators for measuring the potential benefits of recognising non-formal education and gathering evidence as to who might benefit from it.

- reviewing the models for recognising the outcomes of non-formal education to identify the most egalitarian, effective and beneficial, particularly for the socially excluded, and ensuring the quality of the education provided.
- encouraging the exchange of successful experiences between the Member States.
- engaging social partners, concerned civil society organisations as well as representatives of both formal and non formal education institutions in this process.

1.6 The EESC has pointed out in previous opinions that quality public education for all is a tool that promotes equality and social inclusion. In this respect, it is essential that all those excluded have access to high-quality education that is for the most part public⁽¹⁾, which gives them access to the labour market and to decent, well-paid work.

1.7 Finally, the EESC recommends that, without losing sight of coherence with the political priorities already defined, the actions to take forward should serve as a driving force for more daring and ambitious commitments in this area, taking in the widest possible range of institutions and social players.

1.8 The conference being held by the EESC from 20 to 22 May 2010 in Florence on Education to fight social exclusion is a good example of this vision. It will be based on a cross-cutting approach and will bring together a large number of relevant actors.

2. Introduction

2.1 The right to education as basic human right has been recognised and is written into all the instruments that the European Union has set up since its creation. Europe has made huge and positive efforts to make this right a public good accessible to all⁽²⁾. Nevertheless, there are still tiers of the population that are still excluded from its benefits, which aggravates conditions of poverty that have still not been eradicated. The Member States, the Commission and the European Parliament have proposed and approved substantial measures aimed at combating poverty, using public, quality education for all as an instrument for inclusion. Similarly, the EU has decided that 2010 will be the European Year for Combating Poverty⁽³⁾.

⁽¹⁾ See UNESCO guidelines on inclusion policies in education, Paris 2009.

⁽²⁾ European Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000). Reference should also be made to the ratification by the countries of Europe of all the International Treaties related to human rights, in particular, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights (1966).

⁽³⁾ OJ C 224, 30.8.2008, p. 106.

2.2 Social inclusion and fighting poverty also form part of the European Union's objectives for growth and employment. Coordinating national policies on social protection and inclusion is being carried out through a process of exchange and learning known as the 'open method of coordination' (OMC) which is being applied in areas within the remit of the Member States for the purpose of achieving convergence between the national policies to attain some common objectives. The OMC helps to coordinate social policies, particularly in the context of the renewed Lisbon Strategy.

2.3 Furthermore, education and training are key factors for improving economic development and social cohesion in our societies. The failure to achieve the objectives of reducing levels of poverty and the consequences, in terms of exclusion, of the current economic crisis together with the growth of unemployment make it all the more important to seek the means for making it possible to push ahead towards the objective of active inclusion.

2.4 The first of the EU's priorities for the 2020 Strategy⁽⁴⁾ is 'Creating value by basing growth on knowledge'. It is thus recognised that knowledge is the motor of lasting growth and that education, research, innovation and creativity make a difference. The conclusions of the Labour Summit held in Prague in May 2009 follow the same line. In this respect and in the light of the current economic crisis that has had a major impact on workers and companies, especially SMEs, and considering that unemployment has reached historic levels of close to 20,2 % with substantial differences between the EU countries, it is necessary to step up measures, most particularly as regards education policy, that help to create employment and, at the same time, reinforce equality between all Europeans.

2.5 Public education, which is one of the main instruments that fosters equality, is currently addressing numerous and new challenges in an increasingly globalised, but also more unequal, divided and asymmetric world. Educational and social integration for all learners is a priority for public authorities and for international or regional organisations. Education for inclusion is an approach geared to meeting the learning needs of all children, young people and adults, and particularly those from sectors most affected by discrimination, marginalisation, poverty or social exclusion.

2.6 Education and training can be effective instruments for combating poverty and social exclusion. Young people with fewer opportunities in society face specific difficulties associated with the fact that they come from educationally, socio-economically or geographically disadvantaged backgrounds, or because they are living with a disability.

⁽⁴⁾ COM(2009) 647 final 24.11.2009. Commission Working Document – Consultation on the future 'EU 2020' Strategy.

2.7 According to the UNESCO guidelines for inclusive education, this is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through an increasing participation in learning, cultures and community values and reducing social exclusion and poverty. Education for inclusion calls for changes in content, approaches, structures and educational strategies, the consequent changes in teacher training programmes, the allocation of greater resources with a vision that covers all learners and with the conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate everyone. Inclusive education is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of the learning needs of social groups and can be dispensed through formal and non-formal educational settings.

2.8 Rather than being a marginal issue on how some learners can be integrated into mainstream education, or focusing exclusively on the poorest, inclusive education is an approach that requires transforming education systems and other learning environments in order to respond to the diversity of learners and becoming a powerful tool for combating poverty. It must enable both teachers and learners to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and a chance of enrichment within the learning environment, rather than a problem.

2.9 The onset of mass unemployment created unprecedented situations of poverty. The current global economic crisis⁽⁵⁾ is merely a painful confirmation of this situation. Nowadays, poverty does not only mean that there is insufficient income, it can take the form of limited or non-existent access to health care or education, a dangerous environment, the persistence of discrimination and prejudices and social exclusion. A job in itself (if it is not a good job) does not guard effectively against poverty. And extreme poverty is more widespread amongst women than men. The risk of extreme poverty is considerably higher for women in 17 of the Member States of the European Union. Single-parent families where the head of household is a woman run a much greater risk of falling into poverty. In a world where 60 % of the population lives on just 6 % of global earnings, where 50 % live on only 2 dollars a day and more than 1 billion people earn less than 1 dollar a day, Europe cannot turn itself into a fortress, ignoring the context in which it lives.

2.10 The growing problems of urban poverty, people moving from the countryside to industrial areas and mass migration are a challenge, for the region's social policies. According to EUROSTAT figures for 2009, 16 % of Europe's population is living below the poverty line, one out of ten Europeans is living in a household where no member of the family is working. Children in a number of Member States are more exposed to poverty than the rest of the population and it

is calculated that 19 % (that means 19 million children) are under threat. It is imperative to help break the cycle that condemns so many to poverty by creating a safe and stable learning environment that is able to guarantee that all learners can fully exercise their basic rights, develop their skills and have every chance of success in the future.

3. General comments

3.1 Combating poverty forms a key part of the inclusion and employment policies of the EU and of the Member States. Formerly deemed a part of welfare policy, combating poverty has now evolved into combating exclusion. It is no longer merely a question of protecting society from the dreaded consequences of poverty, but of guaranteeing the human rights of those individuals affected by poverty. When they decided in 2007 to make 2010 the year of 'Combating poverty and social exclusion', the European Parliament and Council stated that some 78 million people were currently living under the threat of poverty in the EU and that this figure continued to climb. Measures involving the EU and its Member States were called for since this state of affairs conflicted with the European Union's common values.

3.2 Furthermore, in 2000, the Member States of the UN adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) which aimed particularly to cut extreme poverty by half. These eight goals are supposed to be reached by 2015. However, it is recognised that, in the current economic climate, it will be very difficult to ensure that all of the goals will be attained within the timeframe. The EU decided to dedicate 2010 to combating poverty and social exclusion specifically to step up its efforts for achieving these goals.

3.3 The EESC has repeatedly maintained a harmonised position to the effect that the knowledge society is one of the essential instruments for achieving the full integration of all citizens, rather than merely an elite, and especially as one of the means for attaining the objectives set out at the Lisbon Summit.

3.4 The EESC has recently expressed the belief⁽⁶⁾ that those with a lower level of education run the greatest risk of exclusion. The right to education must give them options for improving their quality of life and for accessing the labour market. Similarly, it should be remembered that economic, social and technological changes call for adjustments in educational content, particularly if education is supposed to meet the needs of the labour market. In this respect, the EESC suggests a change in both school and university curricula so that they can be complemented by vocational training programmes that would facilitate entry into the labour market⁽⁷⁾ for those who might leave early. This would be a way of preventing and making good the damage caused by social exclusion.

⁽⁵⁾ Key Data on Education in Europe. (2009 Report by the European Commission on education in Europe). http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/105EN.pdf.

⁽⁶⁾ OJ C 128, 18.5.2010, p. 10.

⁽⁷⁾ OJ C 256, 27.10.2007, p. 93.

3.5 The EESC⁽⁸⁾ also adopted an opinion which supported the Commission Communication on *New Skills for New Jobs*. One point to highlight in its conclusions is the call for 'increasing skills at all levels [which] is the *sine qua non* not only for reenergising the economy in the short term and for long-term development, but also for increasing productivity, for competitiveness and employment, and for ensuring equal opportunities and social cohesion'.

3.6 In any event, there is one unavoidable question and that is defining the basic principle of education for inclusion, because as well as being a strategy, it is a process that requires us to review not only educational policies, but also those related to employment, the provision of quality public services, and attention to the diversity of those to be educated and where they are: men and women, children, young people and the elderly migrants, the unemployed, people living with a disability or with HIV/AIDS, etc.). Essentially, education for inclusion is ultimately intended to eliminate all forms of exclusion, either resulting from negative attitudes or a lack of appreciation of diversity. It can be carried out in a number of contexts, both formal and non-formal, within families or the community, ensuring that the burden does not fall entirely on schools.

3.7 Non-formal education is very often based on non-hierarchical, participative pedagogical forms and working methods as well as being closely associated with and run by civil society organisations. The very nature and bottom-up approach of non-formal education has proved an effective tool for combating poverty and social exclusion. Therefore, the EESC wishes to underline the significant role of non-formal education in the implementation of the EU 2020 strategy.

3.8 The success of lifelong learning is reinforced by non-formal education which complements and supports formal education. This linkage can for instance play an important role to make learning more attractive for young people in order to combat school drop-outs by introducing new methods, facilitating transitions between formal and non-formal education and recognising skills⁽⁹⁾.

3.9 The OECD has paid special attention to non-formal education with a number of studies and plans⁽¹⁰⁾. There are as yet no general agreements as to how, and to what extent the knowledge gained via 'non-formal education' and even less 'informal education' should be recognised. This requires, inter alia, recognising that other stakeholders such as civil society organisations have the ability to teach outside the formal education system and establishing evaluation standards to assess competences gained in this way. Recognition of the competences and skills thus acquired has developed through

lifelong learning strategies in the different Member States. In some, procedures for the legal recognition of these competences and skills via the existing national qualification framework are being examined, which facilitates the process of accessing the labour market. The EESC considers that the EU should look at this aspect at national level and recommends that Member States exchange positive experiences and models of practice.

3.10 Another important pitfall to avoid is that education strategies for inclusion are only available to the poor, immigrants and those who have abandoned the school system for whatever reason. This would isolate rather than include the participants. One possible alternative is to leave open the door to such systems to other groups that might need them⁽¹¹⁾. On the other hand, non-formal education does not replace formal education, but in recognising the value of the knowledge acquired in this way, it complements formal educations in as much as the beneficiaries of these measures are equipped to move back into the circuit of formal education if they need to and wish to.

3.11 The EESC considers it essential that all those excluded benefit from a quality and, for the most part, public education⁽¹²⁾, which gives them access to the labour market and to decent, well-paid work. It is no less important that this education passes on fundamental values of citizenship, of effective equality between the sexes and of active democratic involvement. The EESC is committed to education that is not just utilitarian, focusing solely on passing on skills, but contributes to personal and social development, producing open and critical individuals who are able to become actively involved in more politically mature and increasingly socially equitable societies.

3.12 The EESC believes that promoting inclusion in education means increasing the capacity for critical analysis. It also helps to improve learners' educational and social frameworks so they can cope with the new demands of the labour market and society. In short, linking education to social inclusion also means tying it in with the development goals of society and the regions in which it is being dispensed. In this way, education can also serve as a tool for progressively eradicating poverty.

3.13 To sum up, the reasons why we need to choose inclusive education are:

- Educational: the requirement that the education system is accessible to all – 'the goal of education for all by 2015' – means that this system must open up to the diversity of all those to be educated.

⁽⁸⁾ OJ C 128, 18.5.2010, p. 74.

⁽⁹⁾ OJ C 151, 17.6.2008, p. 45 and OJ C 318, 23.12.2009, p. 113.

⁽¹⁰⁾ For example *Recognition of non-formal and informal learning in OECD countries: A very good idea in jeopardy?*, *Lifelong Learning in Europe*, Patrick Werquin, Paris, 2008.

⁽¹¹⁾ OECD, *Beyond Rhetoric: Adult learning policies and practices*, Paris, 2003, and *Promoting Adult learning*, Paris, 2005.

⁽¹²⁾ See the *UNESCO guidelines on inclusion policies in education*, Paris, 2009.

- Social: education can and must help to change mentalities, helping to build societies that are free of discrimination and prejudice, in which everyone can exercise their basic rights.
- Economic: inclusive education will help increase the real competitiveness of societies facing the new economic challenges. Competitiveness based on real skills rather than unfair competition. Inclusion and quality are mutually reinforcing.

4. Specific objectives

4.1 The European Year of Combating Poverty has four specific objectives:

- **recognition:** recognising the right of people in a situation of poverty and social exclusion to live in dignity and to play a full part in society;
- **ownership:** increasing public ownership of social inclusion policies and actions, emphasising everyone's responsibility to tackle poverty and marginalisation;
- **cohesion:** seeking to promote a more cohesive society, by raising public awareness of the benefits for all of a society where poverty is eradicated and no-one is condemned to live in the margins;
- **commitment:** reiterating the strong political commitment of the EU to the fight against poverty and social exclusion, and promoting this commitment at all levels of governance.

4.2 The European Year will focus on the following themes:

- a) child poverty and the intergenerational transmission of poverty;
- b) an inclusive labour market;

- c) lack of access to education and training;
- d) the gender dimension of poverty;
- e) access to basic services;
- f) overcoming discrimination and promoting the integration of immigrants and the social and labour market inclusion of ethnic minorities;
- g) addressing the needs of disabled people and other vulnerable groups.

4.3 Thus the year 2010 in Europe will provide a unique opportunity for mobilising and raising the awareness of a very broad and diversified public to combat poverty and highlighting the role that education can play in moving towards the eradication of poverty. This goal can only be achieved if a strong and clear message is put across, rather than a variety of unfocused messages. That is why the EESC is proposing to concentrate its activities on a central platform: **Education for inclusion: a powerful tool for combating poverty. Towards a Europe without social exclusion.**

4.4 The Spanish Government assumed the Presidency of the European Union during the first half of 2010. In recent years, Spain has shown particular interest in the topic of combating poverty, eradicating social exclusion and inclusive education. Spain takes over the Presidency at the beginning of the European Year devoted to this subject. The opening ceremony took place in Madrid on 21 January 2010 and the traditional European Summit, when Spain will hand on the rotating Presidency to Belgium, will be held at the end of June. The interest and commitment Spain has shown in the subject of Education for All seems to provide a good opportunity to undertake a whole series of activities that will ensure that this year leaves its enduring mark in the shape of political decisions that will bring us closer to achieving the desired objective of eliminating poverty and social exclusion.

Brussels, 28 April 2010.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Mario SEPI

APPENDIX

to the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

The following amendments, which received at least a quarter of the votes cast, were rejected during the discussions:

Point 1.5

“Non-formal education” is in various countries an educational form that has been used in large scale by employers, trade unions and civil society in general over many generations. By its participative pedagogical forms and working methods it has been very performing as a tool for fighting poverty and social exclusion. Therefore the EESC underlines that in order to implement the EU 2020 strategy on inclusive growth, “non-formal” education can play a very important role by complementing formal education.

Outcome of the vote

Votes for: 44

Votes against: 61

Abstentions: 14

Point 3.7

‘Non-formal education is recognised in various countries as an educational form to better include people in society and work-life. It has been used on a large scale by employers, trade unions and civil society organisations over many generations. Non-formal education is very often based on non-hierarchical, participative pedagogical forms and working methods as well as being closely associated with and run by civil society organisations. The very nature and bottom-up approach of non-formal education has proved an effective tool for combating poverty and social exclusion. Therefore, the EESC wishes to underline the significant role of non-formal education in the implementation of the EU 2020 strategy.’

Outcome of the vote

Votes for: 37

Votes against: 73

Abstentions: 10
