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Learn to Coexist. Learn to Thrive the Impact of Lifelong Learning Policies on the Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups

Papageorgiou et al., (2007), *Learn to coexist. Learn to thrive*, Euracademy Association, Athens.

This book introduces the findings of research¹ carried out by an international team. The purpose of the project was to investigate the effect and introduce the practice of policy measures and strategies included in the National Action Plans against poverty and social exclusion (NAPincl) of the participating countries².

The book covers the main steps of the research process – literature review, audit of NAP policies, fieldwork with survey method and focus groups – and draws conclusions from each of them, beginning with the theoretical framework, overviewing the problems of decision-making and ending with the application of measures.

Two main target groups were identified for the project:

1. Economic and political immigrants (Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain)
2. Members of disadvantaged or marginalised rural communities (Hungary, Poland, United Kingdom).

The partners have defined accurate target groups in accordance with the classifications and priorities of their own country's NAP.

International literature shows that the concept of social exclusion is a multi-faceted topic and it is hard to specify it with unequivocal definitions. The symptoms and processes are closely linked with various disadvantaged situations, paying particular attention to poverty, difficulties in labour market integration, disabilities, discrimination and deprivation based on belonging to

¹ The Impact of Lifelong Learning Policies on the Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups.

² Participating countries: Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom.

ethnic minorities and disadvantageous situations which arose from spatial inequalities. The concept of social exclusion includes not only the conclusions but also the causes of poverty and deprivation with an accentuated role of the restraint and low level of social activity and disability in accessing some basic goods and services. The disadvantageous situations mentioned above are based on disendowment from some basic rights.

Decreasing the level of social exclusion, education and training – especially life-long learning – make up the core of the community strategy for dynamic and sustainable economic development laid down by the Lisbon Summit. Accelerating the process of socio-economic integration is a multilateral challenge that demands active contribution from the target groups, the state and community decision making bodies and the 'transmitter' organisations. The main task of decision making and governing bodies is to provide a framework for the social inclusion strategies along with the adequate legal environment. Delivery agencies have a primary role in the disclosure of information towards the target groups and raising the level of motivation next to the execution of the defined policy measures. The project follows these steps in its methodology; examining the strategies themselves by the audits of NAPs then gathering information from the actors of various levels and the target groups by the surveys and focus group discussions.

The concept of lifelong learning is a key element in creating a well-functioning knowledge-based society. It is necessary to consider equal chances in point of the opportunities for social activity and the accession to education and training as key conditions. Planning lifelong learning strategies must be a careful process emphasizing local distinctiveness because there is no way of creating a uniform European framework considering the different conditions and circumstances of countries or even regions. Accordingly different emphases can be found in the NAPs of the participating countries next to the common basic structure. We can consider the NAPS as political documents so the opportunity of drawing conclusions is limited to putting the policy measures into practice. In spite of this fact, analysis of NAPs is appropriate for recognizing the various theoretical conceptions and 'plans of use' of lifelong learning. The most significant rupture lies between the 'old' and 'new' member countries of the European Union. A traditional practice of lifelong learning can be explored in the East European countries which joined the EU in 2004 but this is not familiar with the EU concept so it must be reformed, new policies have to be implemented. Differences can also be found among the 'old' members; while in Germany, Denmark and Sweden, lifelong learning and social inclusion are not just a set of

policy measures, these concepts also show signs of social absorption, then in Greece and Spain this social consciousness is still missing.

The further part of this review concentrates on the second target group, disadvantaged rural communities. Making a comparison between the three countries (Hungary, Poland, United Kingdom) is not easy because the situation in Poland and Hungary is similar whereas the United Kingdom is totally different as regards standard of living or infrastructural provision. In contempt of these facts there are lots of correspondences in the basic NAP policies or even similarities on the level of certain initiatives like the adaptation of the United Kingdom's 'Sure Start Programme' in Hungary.

The most unambiguous link between lifelong learning and social integration is the positive effect of training and education in accessing the labour market. Lack of foundation is the biggest problem in all three countries. This means that the level of basic skills and key competences is poor amongst the disadvantaged rural social groups, so the possibilities of continuous and specialized training are limited. The consequences of rapid and radical political and economic transition in the early nineties are increasing the problems in the East European countries; the crisis was most evident in the area of vocational education. Handling of cumulative disadvantageous situations is an emphasized task in Hungary so the majority of initiatives are just partially dealing with lifelong learning because training and education can't solve these situations on their own. Lack of systematic labour market analysis is a widely discussed problem in Poland. This is the main reason behind the fact that education cannot guarantee employment.

The better situation in the United Kingdom is not only a consequence of better economic conditions, the NGO sector is stronger and more effective than in the two East European countries. The number of involved organisations is bigger and they have greater experience in this field.

The classification of the types of constraints mentioned by decision makers and implementation agencies results in three separate groups:

Policy related constraints: these are mostly organisational and governance problems. The most significant barrier is the financing. These issues not only contain inadequate funding but also an inflexible system and a lack of post-financing endangering the sustainability of the programmes and making long-term planning almost impossible. Another problem is bureaucracy and there are deficiencies in communication between the various organisational levels of coordination and execution.

Client related constraints: these are the main individual and social characteristics of the target group. Not only the factors affected by living standard and

lifestyle belong to this category but some personal problems such as lack of motivation for participation in the programmes.

Service related constraints: these are in close connection with the factors determining the success of initiatives such as flexibility, adequate monitoring system or proper recognition of needs of the target group.

Following the introduction and examination of the functioning of social inclusion and lifelong learning initiatives and the introduction of problems and constraints from the side of implementation and delivery agencies, the book summarizes the findings of the surveys and provides some recommendations along with an evaluation model of the impact of lifelong learning policies. The recommendations are aggregated in four key points:

1. Need for an integrated policy approach to social inclusion
2. Meeting the lifelong learning needs of the target groups
3. Overcoming the constraints do not allow vulnerable groups to benefit from lifelong learning
4. Ensuring the delivery of quality services by lifelong learning providers.

The evaluation model is a methodological approach using mostly qualitative indicators based on the surveys carried out in seven countries. This is, of course, not a full set of indicators applicable to each country but simply a core group of criteria and it can work properly with the inclusion and application of the main local factors. This is an integrated evaluation model containing three main factors: needs of clients, policy environment and provision of services.

On the whole, the research project and the book based on it, is a useful tool of the development and evaluation of social inclusion and lifelong learning policy measures. The findings of comparative analysis underline the needs of considering local specialities and differences as an indispensable factor in planning lifelong learning programmes and initiatives. This approach requires appropriate assessment of clients' needs not merely by provisional measurements but also by monitoring the effects of running and completed programmes.