

# **Political Implications of the Current Debate on Poverty, Deprivation and Social Exclusion in Europe**

*What guidance do scholarly perspectives and conceptualisations offer?*

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## Contents

1. Preface	3
2. Introduction – the Current European Context, Growing Concern for persistent or increasing Poverty and Social Exclusion	5
3. Analytical Framework for Discussing the Diversity of Existing Approaches	11
4. Genealogies of Different Perspectives and Conceptualisations	15
5. Strengths and Weaknesses of Existing Conceptualisations – towards Multidimensional Approaches	23
6. Conclusions: Some Political Implications of Current Debates about Poverty and Social exclusion In Europe	26
<i>References</i>	28

## 1. Preface

This paper is a result of work carried out in the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework project “Combating Poverty in Europe: Re-organising Active Inclusion through Participatory and Integrated Modes of Multilevel Governance” (COPE), coordinated by the University of Oldenburg, Germany. COPE takes as its starting point that the fight against poverty faces serious conceptual and governance challenges. A number of work packages carry out empirical studies of the ways in which governance issues are dealt with at European, national and local arenas (and through interrelationships between these arenas) and in targeting groups along the life courses.

Work package 2 of COPE is focused on “Poverty and social exclusion as a theoretical challenge with practical implications”. First, this paper aims to provide a review of the most important perspectives and conceptual approaches in this field and outline an analytical framework for promoting greater conceptual clarity. Second, the paper seeks to link social science perspectives and approaches to recent and on-going political and policy developments in this area, especially at the European arena. Although discussions in the social science and political spheres are interrelated and mutually stimulating each other, we can also observe some divergences related to the meanings-in-use of the same terms and concepts, both within and between the two spheres. Different terms can be used about the same concept, while the same term can refer to different concepts.

Despite somewhat bewildering differences in how the same terms and concepts are used within the social science sphere, there is still a strong general norm that scholars’ use of concepts should aim at preciseness, consistency and explicitness. By contrast, in the political sphere a degree of ambiguity or lack of consistency and preciseness can serve as a means for reaching consensus or at least compromise between different interests and preferences. Implicit changes in the meaning of term and concepts can help to accommodate de facto changes in the relative influence of different political aims or forces. But the political use of ambiguity and implicit changes of meaning or emphasis appears to involve some risks. By creating an impression of vagueness or instability in the stated goals and political ambitions it comes difficult to formulate credible anti-poverty policy guidelines or assess and document the achievements of the policies put in practice. If voters and organised stakeholders find it hard to see whether - and how - policies made a practical difference; the results may be estrangement, disillusionment and cynicism.

The paper aims at contributing to reflection and awareness about the implications of different conceptual practices, both within the social science sphere and the political sphere. At the same it is a hope the paper will serve as a backdrop for the empirical parts of the COPE project, interchanges with stakeholders during the project and eventually in the dissemination from the project.

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## 2. Introduction – a growing concern for persistent or increasing poverty and social exclusion in Europe

Issues of poverty and social exclusion have a long history in EU politics. An explicit European focus on *poverty* dates back to the 1970s with the introduction of the first poverty programme (1975-80). This and two later programmes (1984-89 and 1989-94) provided resources for time-limited projects involving research, exchange of information, experimental anti-poverty action, and efforts to define best practice. Plans for a fourth poverty programme in the early 1990s were not implemented, as least partly because of disagreements about what role the EU should have in combatting poverty, apart from stimulating research and exchange of knowledge (see Council 1975, 1985; see Daly, 2010 for further discussion).

Already in 1975 the European Council was adopting the *term* “exclude” in its definition of poverty, as well as suggesting a multi-dimensional concept going beyond income poverty:

“Persons beset by poverty: individuals or families whose resources are so small as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life of the Member State in which they live; ... resources: goods, cash income, plus services from public and private sources” (Council, 1975, p. 2)

The Council rephrased this definition ten years later:

“For the purposes of this Definition ‘the poor’ shall be taken to mean persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the Member States in which they live” (Council, 1985, p.1)

An outcome of the early 1990s impasse was a shift towards an explicit *concept* of social exclusion in the EU context. In this context it was probably significant that social exclusion gave somewhat different associations or connotations than poverty; that is, being less negatively laden than poverty and to less extent directly associated with perceived failures and shortcomings of existing provisions in Member States (e.g. Berghman, 1995).

Emphasising social exclusion could be justified as pointing towards new and neglected problems, and rather than just being a new term for old problems, could be presented as an important political innovation, initiated and brought forward by the EU. Together with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and a few other transnational organisations, the EU has indeed contributed to a new and enduring focus on social exclusion – and later also on social inclusion – in Member States and beyond (Daly, 2010).

- In 1989 the *concept* of social exclusion were first adopted in official EU documents; in particular in the *Resolution of the Council of Ministers for Social Affairs on*

*Combating Social Exclusion* (Council, 1989), and in the *Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights for Workers* (Community Charter, 1989).

- The 1992 Communication from the Commission, *Towards a Europe of Solidarity – Intensifying the Fight against Social Exclusion, Fostering Integration*, offered a more elaborate account of what was meant by social exclusion and how this concept differed from and complemented the concept of poverty (European Commission, 1992).
- The 1992 Council Recommendation on common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social protection systems (Council, 1992) similarly clarified what social exclusion involved.
- Later the 1994 White Paper on social policy called for an EU engagement against poverty and exclusion, in particular to promote the integration of persons at a distance from the labour market (European Commission, 1994).
- The inclusion of a new Article (137(2) TEC) in the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty opened up for EU efforts to promote cooperation among Member States to combat social exclusion. If this provision at first look appeared rather weak as a policy instrument it created the legal basis for a particular EU-wide OMC process from 2000.

The initial elaboration of the EU *concept* of social exclusion relied on a number of examples but with no explicit theoretical framework or precise definition. Documents referred in rather in general terms to

“the structural nature of a phenomenon which excludes part of the population from economic and social life and from their share of the general prosperity .... not only [a] disparity between the top and bottom of the social scale (up/down), but also between those comfortably placed within society and those on the fringe (in/out) (European Commission 1992, p. 7).

At best the several examples given had in common that substantial sections of the population in Member States were locked into situations leading to persistent disadvantage for the affected individuals and groups, for instance:

- “Homeless people in the street”
- “marginalisation of the very long-term unemployed”
- “the persistence of poverty in certain rural areas”
- “households falling into severe debt”
- (Commission 1992, p.3)
- “the conditions of access to public services” (ibid. p. 5)
- “groups ... subject to discrimination and segregation”
- “victims of the weakening of the traditional forms of social relations” (ibid. p. 8)

It is equally striking the several examples pointed to perceived threats to the social order of the broader community or society, for instance:

- “violent riots in urban areas”
- “upsurges in ethnic conflict”
- “rejection of refugees or minorities” (ibid., p.3)
- “the risks of cracks appearing in the social fabric ... and ... of a two-tier or fragmented society” (ibid. p. 8)
- “social exclusion processes and risks have become more prevalent and more diversified over the last 10 years, owing primarily to a combination of developments in the labour market with, in particular, growth in long-term unemployment, and in family structures with, in particular, an increase in social isolation“(Council, 1992),
- “social exclusion is an endemic phenomenon, stemming from the structural changes affecting our economies and societies. It threatens the social cohesion of each Member State and of the Union as a whole” (European Commission, 1994, p. 37).

This dual perspective has reappeared several times since 1992, and most recently in the discussion of indicators of poverty and social exclusion in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed analysis of the process leading up to the adoption of this strategy and the decision on indicators, it is a widely shared perception that Europe 2020 represented a shift away on (i) from the multidimensional dashboard of indicators of the Social OMC (the Laeken indicators, revised in 2006/2008) and (ii) from a single priority indicator of a relative poverty threshold – towards a priority indicator that sought to combine relative and more absolute measurement. As we will return to later, these indicators included two elements directly related to income poverty (at risk of poverty and severe material deprivation) as well as an element focusing on low work intensity/jobless households. While the latter could be seen as just taking a slightly different approach to the disadvantage experienced by individuals and families, the discourse related to this element tipped towards a concern for a weakening of social order and family responsibility (e.g. Copeland and Daly, 2012).

Both the examples of signs of social exclusion quoted earlier and the more recent discourse on diminishing family responsibility suggest a rather pessimistic assessment of the consequences of structural change and social differentiation that not the least European economic integration has been promoting, as well as a somewhat nostalgic and unrealistic perception of the strength and virtues of pre-existing forms of social integration in Member States.

The initial documents emphasised that the concept of social exclusion is a dynamic one, referring both to processes and subsequent situations. Unlike the link usually drawn between poverty and income, social exclusion was supposed to point to

“the multidimensional nature of the mechanisms whereby individuals and groups are excluded from taking part in social exchanges, from the component practices and rights of social integration and of identity ... [going] beyond participation in working life, [being also expressed] in the field of housing, education, health and access to services” ( Commission, 1992, p. 8)

“Exclusion processes are dynamic and multidimensional in nature. They are linked not only to unemployment and/or to low incomes, but also to housing conditions, levels of education and opportunities, health, discrimination, citizenship and integration in the local community (European Commission, 1994, p. 37).

The understanding of social and economic disadvantage as multidimensional and the strong emphasis on housing, education, health and access to services were later to be reinforced in the Commission’s 2008 Recommendation on “Active inclusion”, focusing on the need for a combination of adequate income support, several measures to promote inclusive labour markets and access to quality services for people excluded from the labour market (European Commission, 2008). More recently, the use of integrated active inclusion strategies – involving the mentioned elements – has been emphasised as means to reach the targets for the Europe 2020 strategy (see for instance Social Protection Committee, 2011, p. 35).

The 2000 Lisbon agreement and at least the first five years of the Lisbon process involved a joint commitment and coordinated efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion (alongside achieving job creation and economic growth). With the relaunch of the Lisbon strategy in 2005 and the streamlining of the OMC of social inclusion with the OMCs’ on pensions, and health and long-term care to create the OMC on social protection and social inclusion, the goal of combatting social exclusion was upheld, although the emphasis and formulation of objectives changed (toward addressing “extreme” exclusion and fighting poverty and exclusion among the most marginal groups). Eventually the second phase of the Lisbon strategy was to be replaced by the Europe 2020 strategy.

In March 2010, the European Commission presented its proposal for launching a new strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth – *Europe 2020* (European Commission, 2010a) While the emphasis in the subsequent process has been very much on integrated efforts – expressed in five interrelated headline targets and seven flagship initiatives – it took some time to flesh out the details of the strategy and how they were to be implemented. One of the five headline targets was to reduce the number of Europeans living below national poverty lines and lifting 20 million people out of poverty. Although all seven flagships initiatives were seen as contributing to this and the other headline targets the most specific follow-up of the goal to fight poverty was the flagship initiative of a “European platform against poverty”. The operational goal of the flagship was defined as



“to ensure social and territorial cohesion such that the benefits of growth and jobs are widely shared and people experiencing poverty and social exclusion are enabled to live in dignity and take active part in society”.

It is debatable whether the headline targets and the flagship goals included an explicit objective to fight social exclusion or promote inclusion. Apparently no attempt was made to present a measurable joint target in this respect. Moreover, exactly what the Flagship was to do in practical terms was not spelled out in any great detail. Unlike the OMCs related to social inclusion there was not to be matching processes at national level. The flagship was only to be established at EU level.

When the Commission eventually presented its proposal for a Council Decision on Europe 2020 guidelines for employment policies of Member States 27 April 2010 (European Commission, 2010b), later followed up by the Council Decision of 21 October 2010, the title of the final guideline 10 was „Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty“ (Council, 2010b).

The period between April and October 2010 was one of heated controversy between representatives of Member States, not the least within the Social Protection Committee. Several Member States (including countries like Sweden) were directly against stating concrete and measurable goals (target) for reduction in poverty and social exclusion and in favour of a three-legged ”definition” (low-work intensity, relative poverty and material deprivation) of poverty as part of the EU2020 strategy. A few countries (once again Sweden) persisted in arguing that poverty should be measured according to a labour-market oriented definition of poverty (Social Protection Committee, 2010; Copeland and Daly, 2012).

The October 2010 guideline emphasised the goals of ensuring equal opportunities and gender equality, providing access to high quality, affordable and sustainable services and effective anti-discrimination measures, empowering people by promoting labour market participation and preventing in-work poverty, and the role of social protection systems, lifelong learning and active inclusion policies in achieving these and related goals. Social protection systems should promote adequate income support and services, be sustainable and encourage participation in society and the labour market. The guideline concludes by explicating the headline target in this way:

“The EU headline target, on the basis of which Member States will set their national targets, taking into account their relative starting conditions and national circumstances; will aim at promoting social inclusion, in particular through the reduction of poverty by aiming to lift at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and exclusion“

A footnote added:

“The population is defined as the number of persons who are at risk of poverty and

exclusion according to three indicators (at risk of poverty, material deprivation, jobless households), leaving Member States free to set their national targets on the basis of the most appropriate indicators, taking into account their national circumstances and priorities“.

Arguably, the conclusion and explanatory footnote left the Member States with considerable scope for discretion, not only by leaving to governments to decide the relevant means to achieve their national targets, but also to specify these targets – “taking into account their national circumstances and priorities“ (Council 2010b, p.12, footnote 2). Unlike the other targets where indicators have been agreed and then used by Member States, Member States are here left with the discretion to pick which indicator they wish for each target. This approach appears not only to undermine any ambition about coordination and policy coherence, but also to make comparability and calculation of achievement of the final EU target impossible. To our knowledge, the Commission’s own assessments of progress made in 2011 and 2012 have not included any estimate of how far Member States’ national targets have approached the overall EU target

### **Concluding comment**

The evolving European agenda on how to combat poverty and social exclusion, the introduction of the notion of active inclusion and various aspects of the on-going Europe 2020 process – combined with the persistent or even increased prevalence of poverty and social exclusion in Member States, caused by the current crisis – call for a review of the shifting conceptualisations of poverty and social exclusion and the ways in which goals and targets based on these conceptualisations have been operationalised in indicators. There are reasons to ask whether the Europe 2020 strategy has involved a narrowing of the debate, away from the broad and coherent common objectives of the OMC in 2006 and 2008, towards a largely employment-focused analysis of poverty. What appears to have been lacking is a coherent, multidimensional EU strategy to fight poverty and social exclusion.

### 3. Analytical framework for discussing the diversity of existing approaches

Taking a step back from the immediate concerns of how to combat poverty and social exclusion in the most effective way, we will outline a more general framework for linking and assessing the most significant efforts to conceptualise these phenomena. We locate inequality-generating processes within a framework of broader processes creating divisions, cleavages and differences between the parts or units of society. In this sense we see inequality-generating processes as falling under the interrelated and encompassing categories of “social differentiation” and “social integration” (e.g. Parsons, 1969: 25-26). The more differentiated society is, the greater the risk that the differentiation will not be matched by sufficiently strong mechanisms to ensure social integration or cohesion between the parts or units of society. We can identify three main ways in which mechanisms integrating units (individuals, households, groups, and communities) fail to match a given society’s differentiation (Fig. 1):

- Impoverishment and deprivation
- Disempowerment
- Social exclusion

*Impoverishment and deprivation* refer to a socially structured insufficiency of needs-fulfilling resources in relation to socially expected levels of consumption, for instance expressed in too low purchase power. In other words, we emphasise forms of insufficiency that are clearly related to social processes, rather than forms created solely by nature-given shocks or shortages. However, as shown by Amartya Sen (2000) and others apparent natural disasters like famine or far-reaching erosion may by closer look turn out to have been man-made – fully or partially.

*Disempowerment* involves socially structured barriers for exercising agency and capability, for instance related to unequal access to education and training, illiteracy or learned dependence or incapacity to decide on issues of relevance for one’s own welfare or well-being. For instance, severe illness, cognitive impairment or intellectual disabilities may influence a person’s scope for autonomy and informed decision-making. Yet, the social environment may offer accommodation in terms of adjusted guidance and supported decision-making in these situations (UN CRPD, 2006, Article 12). More generally, Amartya Sen and others have pointed to the vital importance of factors allowing persons in disadvantaged positions the possibility to *convert* available resources, goods and opportunities into conditions for improved functionings, and eventually, for effective freedom to live the life they have reasons to want (Sen 1983, 1999). Finally, it is worth emphasising that not only individuals but also families, groups and communities may be experience disempowerment.

*Exclusion* includes a range of social mechanisms distancing or separating an individual (household, group) from the broader community or larger society, through the closure of social settings, milieu, organisations or associations vis-à-vis individuals (households,

groups), the active or passive exclusion from such settings, involving a socially structured lack of equal participation, for instance by means of ostracism, misrecognition, contempt, derogation, prejudice, discrimination, the absence of accessible environments, or more generally; processes weakening the linkages between individuals and society at large, and consequently less effective social cohesion.

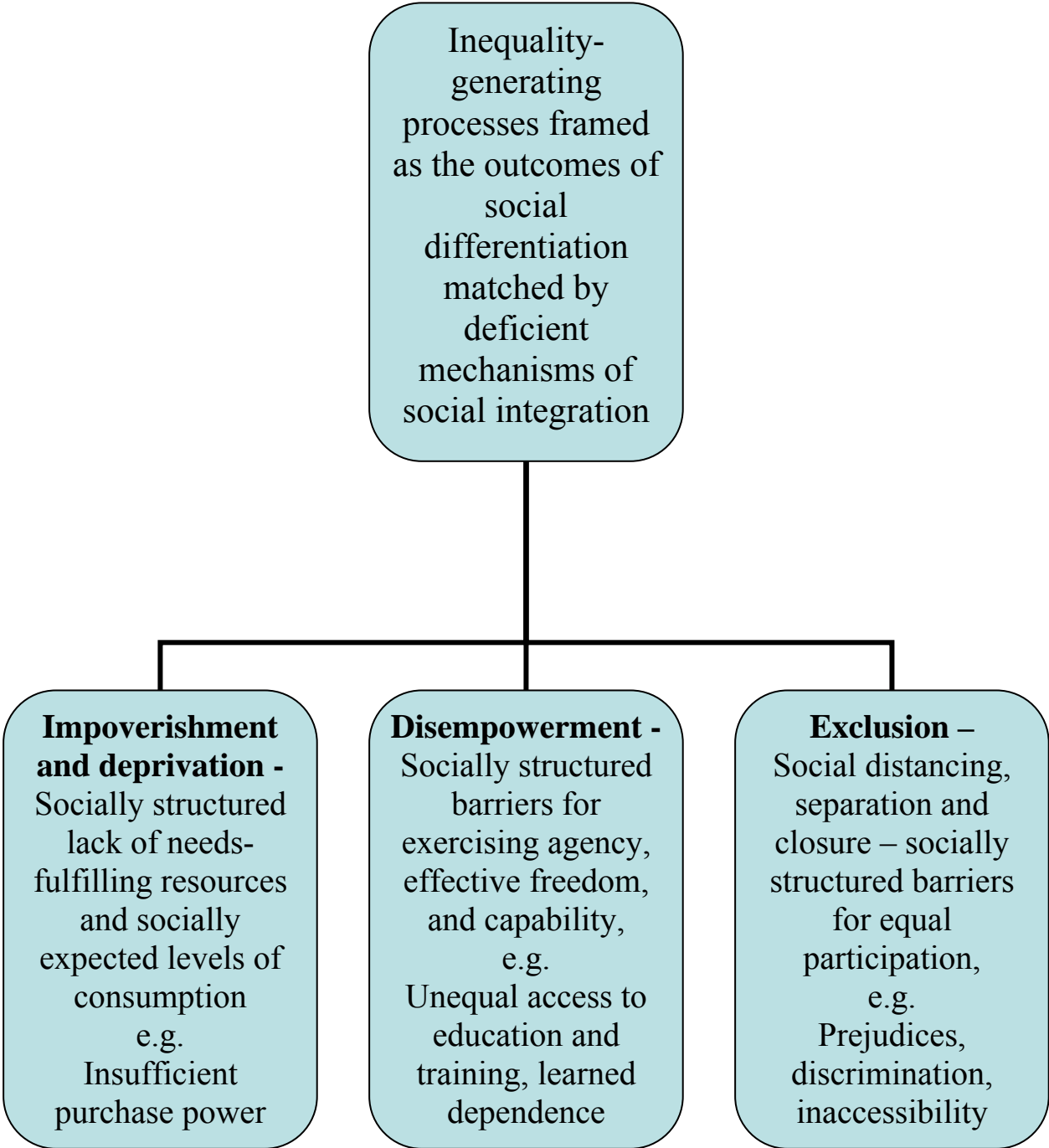
As emphasised by Sen (2000, pp. 14-18), exclusion may be active or passive, intentional or happening by accident or default, as an unintended result of various forms of purposeful behaviour or simply ignorance. For instance, discrimination does necessarily result from an intention to treat persons unequally.

It is worth stressing that although impoverishment, disempowerment and exclusion are *analytical distinct perspectives*, they may in practice be referring to the same aspects of social reality, for instance to overlapping or interrelated processes. The perspectives are in this sense somewhat different ways of framing similar lived personal or social experience or different vocabularies for talking about or describing the same empirical realities, such as processes leading to greater inequality in income and wealth, as well as in access to goods and services. One may also argue that the three processes emphasise slightly different dimensions of or approaches to basically the same social phenomena.

A somewhat simpler but related distinction can be made between perspectives focusing on *distributive processes* and processes focusing on *the dynamics of social relationships*. *Distributional perspectives* are most directly addressing impoverishment and deprivation, while *relational perspectives* have a particular affinity to inclusionary and exclusionary processes (Room 1995; Hvinden, 1995).

*Distributional perspectives* on poverty have primarily been concerned with the position of poor people within quantifiable distributions, that is, mainly distributions of income, purchase power, property and other assets. Key questions within these approaches are *where* to set the boundaries between the poor and the non-poor, and how large, in absolute or relative terms, the poor section of the population is, if one adopts these boundaries. The major difficulty of these approaches tend to be a lack of agreement or clarity on which criteria to use when deciding where to set the boundaries, what relative weight to give different criteria, etc.

**Figure 1: Framework for conceptualising three key dimensions of poverty and exclusion**



*Relational perspectives* appear to have played a limited role in research on poverty. We do, however, find a substantial body of both theoretical and empirical work adopting relational perspectives on poverty, and more generally; on social disadvantage and marginality (see Hvinden, 1995, for elaboration). Empirical studies have in most instances taken the form of in-depth case studies and qualitative designs, focused on the relationships or networks of particular categories and/or localities of poor people (e.g. Bloor and McIntosh, 1990). The analytical models have been inspired by actor-oriented strands of social theory, for instance symbolic interactionism; cf. the weight attributed to processes, emergent patterns of interaction and interpretation, stigmatisation and avoidance of interaction, *and* social exchange and network theory, cf. the emphasis on reciprocity *versus* unilaterality in interaction and transactions.

Yet, we again emphasise that the distinction between distributional and relational understandings is also analytical. In practice it is fully feasible to combine these perspectives in empirical research. For instance, research may seek to identify under what circumstances low incomes or material deprivation have adverse effects on social relationships and participation, for instance through mechanisms of shaming and social withdrawal (Townsend, 1978; Sen, 1999, 2000). Similarly, research may study how belonging to a socially vulnerable group experiencing discrimination in the labour market may cause economic hardship (e.g. Atkinson, 1998; Ward and Grammenos, 2007; Grammenos 2011).

### **Concluding comment**

In this chapter we have presented a framework where we draw a distinction between three main conceptual approaches to social disadvantage and marginality:

- Impoverishment and deprivation
- Disempowerment
- Exclusion

We have indicated that these approaches to different extent have affinities to distributional and relational perspectives, but not in a one-to-one way. In empirical investigation of social disadvantage these approaches and perspectives may be mixed in diverse ways. Still the analytical distinctions drawn may serve as benchmark against which one can identify underlying understandings and assumptions in substantial studies of disadvantage and marginality.

## 4. Genealogies of the three main perspectives and conceptualisations

In this section we will discuss the origins and broader contexts of the three main perspectives and conceptualisations of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion we presented in chapter 3.

### **Impoverishment**

The impoverishment perspective is associated with a long tradition of describing and collecting statistics about the financial or material deprivation of individuals, families or households, and somewhat more rarely; on neighbourhoods and local communities. An important purpose has been to make politicians and the general public more aware of the extent and severity of such problems. This tradition has been particularly strong in Great Britain. Pioneers in the tradition include Charles Booth (1889) with his studies of the poor and destitute in the London of the 1880s and Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree with his repeated studies of poverty in York in 1889, the 1930s and the 1950s (Rowntree, 1901, 1941, Rowntree and Lavers, 1951). Later this tradition was followed up and developed by researchers like Brian Abel-Smith, Peter Townsend, Tony Atkinson and others (e.g. Abel-Smith and Townsend, 1965; Townsend 1979, 1993; Atkinson 1998).

Much of the research in this tradition relies on micro-level data about incomes (more rarely on wealth or more durable assets) or the patterns of consumption of individuals and households. Within the tradition one has tried to differentiate between different degrees or forms of poverty (Donnison, 1982: 7; Alcock, 1993: 8):

- Destitution (extreme hardship or misery, at risk of not surviving)
- Subsistence poverty (just having enough to getting by or meeting one's needs)
- Relative poverty (poverty in an affluent but unequal society, involving comparisons between members of this society)

In practice, the distinction between subsistence (or “absolute”) poverty and relative poverty has proved most significant. Sometimes this is seen as equivalent to a distinction between objective and subjective poverty but this is misleading. Operationalisation of both subsistence and relative poverty concepts requires judgment about criteria for setting the dividing line between the poor and the non-poor. Different researchers have indeed had different views on these issues, based on different judgments. Historically researchers have spent time and energy on defining subsistence or absolute poverty lines, for instance based on experiments on non-voluntary participation (e.g. people in prisons or other forms of captivity). Yet, most of the research in recent decades has focused on ways of conceptualising and measuring relative poverty.

Often these efforts have referred to or nodded toward the idea that there in a given society is *one* “ordinary” or “normal” level of consumption or at least a widely shared perception of

what a person or family requires or ought to have. This idea is debatable as it obviously gives a simplified picture of social reality. We are more likely to find a mix of similar and different perceptions of “what one needs in a society like ours”, or put differently, only partly overlapping preferences in the given society. Attempts to define a proxy for this normal – or even normatively prescribed – level of consumption will easily end up with somewhat arbitrary results.

Arguably this arbitrariness may be reduced by adopting reference or standard budget approaches, which have been developed in the United Kingdom and a number of other countries, where a consensualised budget is developed through surveys or together with focus groups involving different income groups and household types, to agree what is an acceptable budget to live a dignified life (e.g. Gordon et al, 2000). Yet, one may also ask whether one reaches the most disadvantaged groups and their perceptions through these approaches.

Townsend, one of the giants in empirical poverty research in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, defined poverty in this way:

“Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least are widely encouraged and approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns and activities” (Townsend, 1979: 31).<sup>1</sup>

Based on this definition, Townsend sought in his large study of poverty in Great Britain to establish empirically what level of resources one needed not to be poor at the time of the study. Whether Townsend succeeded in this ambition has been contested (see Hvinden, 1995 for elaboration).

At the same time one could argue that Townsend in his definition presented an embryo for a theory of *social exclusion*; according to which lacking a certain minimum set of resources, the person in question will be at risk of social exclusion, being prevented from participating on equal terms with others in society; whether this exclusion happens through rejection from others or because the person – by anticipating such rejection – withdraws from the social arenas in question. Still Townsend was for a long time reluctant to fully embrace the concept of *social exclusion*, seeing it more of an effect than a cause of economic hardship, but in 1997 stated that he had been wrong in his reservations against the concept of exclusion (Townsend, 1997, p. 269). We also see that Townsend implied a multidimensional perspective on material and social deprivation.

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, as we have already seen in chapter 2, the core of the Townsend’s definition was echoed in European Council Decisions in 1975 and 1984 (Council, 1975; 1984.)



Townsend (1974) explicitly linked his approach to relative poverty to the concepts of *reference groups* and *relative deprivation* and as these concepts had been developed by Samuel Stouffer and his co-authors of *The American Soldier* and later codified and elaborated by Robert K. Merton (1968) and Walter Garrison Runciman (1966). A basic premise for these concepts is the importance of the social identifications and comparisons that people make in the assessment of their own well-being and prospects for improvements. In this sense the theoretical concept of relative poverty has a clear sociological and social psychological frame of reference.

Yet, to operationalise the concept of relative poverty for large scale surveys using standardised questionnaires and still retain this socio-psychological reference has proved difficult. In practice, public statistical agencies as well researchers have very often adopted various proxies, for instance by:

- Establishing how large percentage of a population that has less than a certain per cent (40, 50 or 60) of the median equivalised income in this population
- Establishing how large percentage of a population that lack a certain number of items, consumer goods or services that are seen as common or customary to have access to in this population (i.e. material deprivation; although some would see this operationalisation as approximating an absolute approach rather than a relative one and currently used in the context of Europe 2020, what is customary is dependent on the income or purchase power of most people in this country).
- Establishing how large percentage of a population with a disposable income that predefined budget standards suggest that one needs to uphold a given standard of living (given the size and composition of the household).

A common challenge for these and other operationalisations is to what extent one can actually give generally convincing arguments for the choice of cutting lines or thresholds between poor and other people, given that we are dealing with a continuum from the most disadvantaged to the most privileged sections of a population. How can one avoid that such cutting lines or thresholds appear arbitrary and weakly related to the ways in which we theoretically – or intuitively – think about poverty? A major challenge is the lack of agreement or clarity on which criteria to use when deciding where to set the cutting lines or boundaries, what relative weight to give different criteria, etc. As we have argued already, consensualised budget standards involving focus groups and a participative process to confirm the appropriate levels in a particularly context/country/, may to some extent diminish but not completely remove this problem.

### **Disempowerment**

According to the disempowerment perspective we ought to interest us for the restricted agency of persons in disadvantaged positions and the diverse mechanisms or contextual factors leading to or sustaining such restricted agency. In this context agency encompasses the

whole range of human actions from coping with disadvantage on a day-to-day basis to efforts to get out of disadvantaged s situation.

The disempowerment perspective has a close affinity to the scholarship on capability, as pioneered by Amartya Sen (1983; 1999; 2000) and later followed up or developed further by Marta Nussbaum (2000), Robert Salais (2011, 2012), and others (Alkire 2008). Sen pointed early to the intriguing situation that a person may have resources at his or her disposal but still be unable to convert these into well-being or functionings that the person has reasons to value and pursue. Both individual (but socially structured) factors like having chronic illness or impairment, lacking of knowledge and skills, and obstacles in the environment, such as discrimination, segregation or inaccessibility, may serve to limit a person's capability or effective freedom (for elaborations of this point, see for instance Lister, 2004, pp. 15-20; Kuklys, 2010). As larger sections of the populations may face similar disempowering factors and barriers, there is often a basis for collective mobilisation and agency for fighting together for solutions of common problems. We can find an increasing number of examples of such mobilisation among members of disadvantaged groups (e.g. Anker and Halvorsen, 2007).

While Sen has preferred to retain capability as a general and not context-specific concept, Marta Nussbaum (2000) has proposed a list of what she sees as capabilities that are necessary to ensure the basis dignity of all persons. These capabilities include longevity and bodily integrity, emotional, social and mental development; the ability to form conception of what is good; the ability to live with the natural environment; and individual control over one's political and material environment.

Even if both Sen's and Nussbaum's conceptualisations move at a fairly abstract level, they have inspired attempts to find more standardised empirical indicators related to the notions of capability and functioning. The United Nations index for human development is inspired by the ideas of Sen, although the shortage of comparable data covering all countries of the world has led to adopting a combination of rather crude proxies at an aggregate level (UNDP, <http://www.undp.org>).

Recently economists like Wiebke Kuklys, Ingrid Robeyns, Mario Biggeri and colleagues (Biggeri and Nicolo, 2011; Trani et al., 2011) have sought to use the capability concept in analyses at less aggregate levels. Trani et al. (2011) as well as Kuklys (2010) have succeed in using a capability framework to clarify the how the obstacles faced by persons with disabilities diminish their effective freedom and put them at greater risk of material deprivation, compared to persons without disabilities. All together, these efforts to use the capability perspective for empirical and statistical purposes suggest that there is also a scope for developing and adding capability indicators in the context of monitoring the progress of European and Member State policies.

Finally, we can note an interesting convergence between the capability approach and the Nordic "level of living" approach. For instance, Sten Johansson (1970, p.25), one of the founding fathers of Nordic welfare research, defined an individual's level of living as

‘the command of over resources in terms of money possessions, knowledge, psychological and physical energy, social relations, security and so on by means which the individual can control and consciously direct her conditions of life’.

We see that Johansson’s definition emphasises the agency of the individual, that is, the scope for controlling and directing one’s own life conditions. Moreover, we notice that the definition reflects a multidimensional concept of welfare (and by implication, of deprivation).

A multi-dimensional concept of well-being was also the basis for the report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress in the first decade of the 2000s (see Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2010, p.15). The Commission pointed to the following eight dimensions, arguing that they should be considered simultaneously:

- i. “Material living standards (income, consumption and wealth);
- ii. Health;
- iii. Education;
- iv. Personal activities including work;
- v. Political voice and governance;
- vi. Social connections and relationships;
- vii. Environment (present and future conditions);
- viii. Insecurity, of an economic as well as physical nature.”

### **Exclusion**

In the context of the EU’s adoption of and advocacy for the concept of social exclusion as a complement to the poverty concept authors often refer to the influence of a French social policy emerging from the early 1970s (Silver, 1994; Room 1995; Touraine, 2000; Levitas, 1998; Daly, 2010). This discourse pointed to a number of social problems like unemployment, marginalisation and homelessness, in a somewhat unsystematic way, but often emphasising how such phenomena indicated a break with the notion of an integrated and unified society in line with the French Republican ideal (Touraine, 2000). Sometimes the literature about the influence from French social thinking also point to the legacy of Emile Durkheim’s pioneering studies of social anomie and the weakening of the normative integration of individuals, as expressed in diverse patterns of suicide and societal divisions of labour, around the turn from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Significant as these influences may have been, scholars have rarely pointed to the important antecedent represented by the work of the German sociologist George Simmel (1858-1918). In an essay on “The Poor” Simmel (1906) developed a perspective on social exclusion predating and anticipating more recent debates, and in some respects, even providing a more sophisticated and flexible understanding of social exclusion than most of the ones we find today (see Levine, 1971).

First, Simmel argued that – on account of the stigmatisation, isolation and powerlessness that poor people often experience – societal responses to this situation (for instance measures of relief, assistance or control aimed at them) have historically been vital in establishing poor people as a distinct social category (Abram de Swaan, 1989, has later developed this idea in his historical sociology of welfare).

Second, Simmel referred to the tendency to see poor people as standing outside society and this senses being unequivocally excluded from society. Simmel showed, however, that poor people usually occupy an ambiguous position; they are in some respects 'outside' society, in other respects 'inside' society. Instead of seeing this ambiguity as a result of vagueness or unclear thinking one could see the ways in which marginalised people are participating in society as a platform for strengthening their inclusion or integration.

Finally, Simmel discusses the tendency of many people living in economic hardship to conceal their problems, including abstaining from seeking assistance from other or withdrawing from others' attention, with adverse consequences for their possibilities for exercising agency, individually or as a group, and improving their situation. In these ways Simmel produced an early relational understanding of the situation of people experiencing material deprivation and marginalisation.

Interestingly Simmel also made explicit references to the *relative character* of poverty, and through this, anticipate later discussions of relative poverty or deprivation: In many different social milieus or strata we may find people who are 'poor' in the sense that they have 'too little' to fulfil their ambitions, wishes and needs or acquire the goods or services perceived as 'necessary' in their milieu or stratum. But although people in very diverse circumstances may in this sense experience 'wants' which are not supplied, this does not mean that they are seen as requiring assistance from others, e.g. public relief. Within families, local communities or social groups there is a transfer of resources from the more wealthy or well-to-do to those in less favourable circumstances, often disguised in the form of 'gifts', to avoid too obvious breaks with norms of reciprocity and equal moral worth. As also elaborated by more recent researchers, expressing gratitude may only to a certain extent compensate for other failures to reciprocate in ordinary social relationships.

Simmel claimed that it is almost always possible to present substantial gifts when there is either great social distance or particularly great intimacy between the parties. But it becomes more difficult to present such gifts when the social distance decreases or the degree of personal intimacy diminishes. These difficulties may be related to notions of pride or honour; it is experienced as too embarrassing, even threatening, not being able to present gifts in return (cf. 'debt of gratitude'). This is one of mechanisms behind forms of poverty that emerges as *socially invisible*, or in other words, states of individual want which do not result in any apparent social response. On this background Simmel puts forward one of the major theses of the essay: *Sociologically speaking nobody is poor unless they receive assistance from others or ought to have done so, given the sociological context they are in. In this sense*

*it is not 'poverty' that comes first and then the assistance next. If assistance is not provided, we are faced with personal fate, not poverty.*

In other words, seen as a *sociological category* the poor are not those who have certain needs which are not met. Rather it is people who receive assistance or who ought to have done so according to existing social norms, although they by chance do not. According to this perspective it is insufficient to regard poverty as synonymous with experiencing particular wants or renunciations. Only by looking at the social reactions that this individual state calls forth in others we will achieve a sound grasp of poverty as a sociological phenomenon.

More recently, for instance Suttles and Street (1970) have discussed how modern means-tested public assistance to poor people may contribute to the weakening of informal networks of transactions and help, both between poor people and between poor people and the rest of society. The ways in which poverty relief may contradict important relational norms, e.g. about autonomy, self-help and reciprocity, have been clarified by Coser (1965), Matza (1971) and Pinker (1971).

Scott (1993) has outlined the ways in which poverty and privilege are complementary social processes, and how each of them can only be understood in relation to the other and the social construction of citizenship. Based on discussions by Simmel (1908) and Max Weber (1968), more recent scholars have also clarified notions of *closure* and *closed positions* what have considerable potential for giving the concept of social exclusion and the underlying mechanisms more precise and specific meanings (e.g. Parkin, 1979; Bødtker Sørensen, 1983). For instance, Parkin (1979, p. 44) codified this Weber-inspired concept of social closure:

“... the process by which social collectivities seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles. This entails singling out certain social or physical attributes as justificatory basis of exclusion. Weber suggests that virtually any group attribute – race, language, social origin, religion – may be seized upon provided it can be used for ‘the monopolization of specific, usually economic opportunities.’”

Parkin also argued for the extension of Weber’s perspective to the strategies adopted by the excluded to challenge their status as outsiders: “Collective efforts to resist a pattern of dominance governed by exclusion principles can properly regarded as the other half of the social closure equation” (ibid.).

Interestingly Amartya Sen (1983, 1999, 2000, pp. 4-6) has – with references to some striking quotations from Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) – argued for the significance of shame in social relationship as a mechanism behind social withdrawal, concealment and eventually; a situation of social exclusion. One important source such shaming may be insufficient resources – or obstacles to converting resources into functionings.

More generally, processes of blaming, shaming or stigmatising people experiencing poverty or being in receipt of assistance or relief has historically been – and even today is – rooted in the belief that it was (is) possible to draw a distinction between deserving and undeserving poor (de Swaan 1989). The rhetoric of undeserving poor has been used historically to deny people in need help in a way that confirmed their dignity and more worth, and on contrary to justify harsh and demeaning forms of treatment. Arguably a similar rhetoric is currently being increasingly exploited in the context of policy discussions about reducing public finances and cutting expenditure on assistance to disadvantaged people.

### **Concluding comment**

The presentation and discussion of the approaches of impoverishment, disempowerment and exclusion have shown that while the approaches have different framework and starting points and are analytically distinct the specific issues dealt with on the basis these approaches tend *in practice* to be converging or overlapping. The multidimensionality of disadvantage and well-being turns up within each of the approaches.

#### **4. Strengths and weaknesses of existing conceptualisations – towards multidimensional approaches?**

In the previous chapter we have pointed to both strong and weak aspects of existing conceptualisation. Each conceptualisation highlights different aspect of being in a marginalised position in society.

In relation to the approaches focusing on *impoverishment* we have pointed to the potential or actual gap between the theoretical elaborations of these approaches and the ways in which they are translated into empirical indicators or methods of measurement. There is a risk of arbitrariness in deciding where to set the dividing lines or boundaries in what emerge as a continuous range from material disadvantage to material affluence, as illustrated the various adoption of poverty lines (financial poverty), for instance at 40, 50 or 60 per cent of median equivalised income.

A somewhat different problem is relative poverty rates' sensitivity to changes in the overall income distribution that occur even if the material situation of the less advantaged in "absolute" material terms is unchanged or even improved. Many have argued that measures of relative poverty are de facto indicators of aspects of the overall structure of the income distribution or rather a measure of inequality than poverty.

Similarly we have mentioned the possible arbitrariness in the decisions about what forms of consumptions or items to include in deprivation indicators. To what extent are such indicators based on assumption about universal significance of such forms of consumptions or items across life situations, life phases, cultures and preference structures, national political and economic contexts? Has one made efforts to reduce such uncertainly through participation of local populations and the poor themselves in the establishment of the 'norm'? There are reasons to expect substantial differences between rural and urban areas, as well as between other different groups and subsections of the population.

Do we find underlying assumptions to the effect that different forms of consumptions or items have equal significance, e.g. that they equivalent? Arguably there is a need for a ranking of the importance or severity of the different factors – i.e. not being able to eat or heat your home, is not of the same order as not having a holiday. What is the rationale for including many or fewer forms of consumptions or items?

One may also ask whether a source of arbitrariness is the need to make compromises between what indicators that one would ideally wish to have and pragmatic considerations about what indicators being available in existing surveys or registers, or easy to obtain at limited costs.

Approaches focusing on *disempowerment* have here mainly been illustrated by varieties of the capability approach. Despite of its theoretical strength this approach has until recently been

criticised for being too abstract to allow empirical operationalisation and measurement. Some have argued that recent efforts to clarify and operationalise the capability approach have been too narrow and individualistic and that collective aspects of capability-building and empowerment tend to be neglected. We do, however, find recent examples of operationalisation that has demonstrated the empirical potential of this approach, given the availability of suitable data.

Moreover, we have highlighted some aspects of approaches focusing on *exclusion*. A common challenge is the general vagueness and flexibility - even the instability - of concept as used in practice, allowing it to be adopted for strikingly different purposes, both by researchers and policy makers, in a rather ad hoc way.

As a consequence, we can find studies mainly addressing financial poverty or material deprivation but framing or interpreting results in terms of social exclusion. Some will see studies of multiple deprivations as synonymous with studies of social exclusion, without clarifying to what extent or how this linking is justified on principled or theoretical grounds.

On the other hand there are many small scale case studies using mainly qualitative methods (in-depth interviews, observation and/or analytical reading of documents) where findings as interpreted as demonstrating exclusion of members of particular social groups, but where the researcher is unable to make inferences about how widespread or prevalent such problems are.

In this context it may be worth reminding ourselves that some forms of social exclusion do not necessarily involve economic hardship, as it is also necessary to actually establish empirically to what extent, under which circumstances and in what ways economic hardship leads to social exclusion (however defined). By contrast, in societies where the majority lives in (absolute) poverty, economic hardship is less likely in itself to involve exclusion. But again, people who are most disadvantaged in these societies may be victims of exclusion or closure in the sense mentioned earlier.

Finally, we will emphasise that there are currently a number attempts to draw on impoverishment, disempowerment and exclusion approaches within the framework of the same study of *multidimensional* deprivation or disadvantage (Wagle, 2010; Kakwani and Silber, 2008; Jenkins and Micklewright, 2007; Nolan and Whelan, 2007, 2011; Burchardt et al., 2002; Besharov and Couch, 2012). The methodological developments in relations to multidimensionality appear, however, more advanced than the theoretical clarification of the meaning of multidimensionality. If one like Wagle seeks to combine (aspects of) impoverishment, disempowerment and exclusion in one study, it is not obvious that the phenomenon with multiple dimensions is *poverty*, but perhaps rather social disadvantage, marginality or vulnerability?



### **Concluding comment**

The *strength* of the main conceptualisations, operationalisations and indicators in use is that they point to complementary aspects or dimensions of disadvantage and that they together give a richer overall picture than any of these conceptualisations, operationalisations and indicators would be able to provide singly.

The main *weakness* of the main conceptualisations is that they judged one by one may be seen as involving or leading to

- Arbitrariness
- Abstractness
- Vagueness
- Instability, shifting contents, ad hoc-ness;

causing uncertainty in attempts of adopting them for operational guidance and use. This is particularly highlighted with the difficulties of in clarifying and operationalising the Europe 2020 poverty target.

## **5. Conclusions: Some political implications of current debates about poverty and social exclusion in Europe**

We have discussed how approaches to impoverishment, disempowerment and exclusion in different ways may be criticised for leading to arbitrary forms of operationalisation or being characterised by vagueness or indeterminism impeding the effective use of these approaches as basis for systematic empirical investigation or evaluation of achievements. To the extent that policymakers, the media or general public perceive or sense such weaknesses it will undermine the credibility not only of research or empirical monitoring, but also of policy measures to combat or mitigate problems of poverty, disempowerment or social exclusion.

Some observers have argued this kind criticism may also be directed towards the indicators or targets adopted by the Commission or through common agreement among representatives of Member State governments (Copeland and Daly, 2012). Daly (2010, pp. 152-153) demonstrates changes or shifts in thirteen different indicators of poverty and social exclusion between the years of 2001, 2006, 2009 and 2010. It is not evident that these changes or shifts were the result of systematic deliberation, evaluation or policy learning. Similarly, the three indicators or targets chosen by the Social Protection Committee of the Council (2010) in the context of Europe 2020 appear largely to be the result of a political compromise or attempt to accommodate contrasting preferences and priorities between representatives from different Member State governments:

- Relative poverty or low income (being below the 60% median threshold)
- And/Or: Being severely materially deprived (lacking 4 of 9 items) This was changed from the previous 3 out of 9 items, in 2010, based on these deliberations and because the number of people materially deprived under the previous definition was seen to be too ‘large’ and not operational politically
- And/Or: Living in a jobless household (low-work intensity).

Even if compromises may be necessary in European politics the results may still be criticised for being somewhat arbitrary and less than convincing as effective instruments for reaching the ambitious overall goals of Europe 2020 and promoting transparency about the process. Similarly, it is questionable whether the targets are operational, as the Commission appears not to have been able to assess the total achievement based on all the national targets and estimate their contribution to the overall EU target: Different indicators have been used, undermining not only transparency but the very objective of the target – to drive delivery.

In the autumn of 2011 the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion assessed the policies introduced by Member States to combat poverty and social exclusion in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy. Among the Network’s conclusions was the opinion that “where social inclusion goals are outlined, they are all too often lacking in substance and vague, and fail to exploit the potential benefits of synergies between different policies”. The

Network also found that most Member States failed to meet the need for high quality, affordable and sustainable services. Finally the Network regarded many of the targets of Member States as lacking clarity and insufficiently ambitious if the overall European 2020 targets are to be met<sup>2</sup> (Frazer and Marlier, 2011).

Finally, there are reasons to ask whether it would be more helpful if the EU developed and adopted a model of multidimensional social and economic disadvantage along the lines of Wagle (2010) and others. Such a model might allow a better overall assessment of changes in poverty and social exclusion than the current indicators, a more balanced coverage of impoverishment, disempowerment and exclusion dimensions within one model, and enabling more meaningful comparisons of achievements and developments across Member States and for the Union as a whole. Preferably this kind of model should be dynamic in order to give basis for inferences about causal relationships but this would increase the complexity of the model. Interestingly, the EU is currently developing a social performance indicator, which would through a multidimensional dashboard of indicators is meant to measure performance on the social objectives.

### **Concluding comment**

Arguably, if European policymakers operate on the basis of lists of somewhat arbitrary, unclear, ad hoc or shifting, indeterminate, multiple and overlapping concepts, vocabularies and indicators related to disadvantage, likely consequences may be:

- Superficial consensus and misunderstandings
- Uncertainty about what stated political goals involve in practical terms and how achievements and results can be assessed
- Weakened credibility of policies and the efforts of the EU and Member States – contribute to indifference and disillusion about what they are able to achieve.

For these reasons, it appears desirable to

- Seek a synthesis of existing conceptual approaches in combination with conceptual clarifications
- Explore further the basis of developing more refined multidimensional and unified models of disadvantage
- Promote dynamic analyses of multidimensional disadvantage, being aware of the challenges of succeeding with this project.
- Propose for the EU and Member States to adopt such models in the setting of goals, targets, indicators and the monitoring of progress

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<sup>2</sup> [www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/network-of-independent-experts/2011/assessment-of-progress-towards-the-europe-2020-social-inclusion-objectives](http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/network-of-independent-experts/2011/assessment-of-progress-towards-the-europe-2020-social-inclusion-objectives)

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