Connecting Scotland - how Scottish organisations engage internationally

The Poverty Alliance

Background

The Poverty Alliance welcomes the opportunity to respond to the European and External Relation Committee inquiry into ‘Connecting Scotland: how Scottish organisations engage internationally’. The Poverty Alliance is the national anti-poverty network in Scotland, formally established in 1992. We are an independent organisation with around 200 members, drawn from the voluntary and public sectors, trade unions, researchers, faith groups and individuals with direct experience of poverty. Our aim is to work with others to enable communities and individuals to tackle poverty. We have a number of key policy areas that provide the focus for our activities; these are addressing low incomes, supporting services to address poverty, enhancing the participation of people with direct experience of poverty in policy development processes, and addressing attitudes to poverty. The Poverty Alliance has more than 20 years of engaging internationally with issues related to poverty and inequality. Much of this engagement has been at the European level, through our involvement with the European Anti-Poverty Network\(^1\), which we represent in Scotland, and it is this experience that particularly informs this response.

1. What international activities are happening now in your sector and/or organisation? Please describe how and why these activities take place. Are other sectors or organisations involved? What do these activities contribute or achieve?

The Poverty Alliance’s primary international engagement is at the European level. We have been involved in the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) since we were established in 1992. Our desire to engage internationally is primarily driven by three broad issues. First, we recognize that poverty is the result not only of decisions taken in Scotland or the UK, but is influenced by global issues. This means if we are to address fundamental issues of poverty it is necessary to influence different decision making levels. Second, there is much that can be learned from other countries experience of addressing problems of poverty and social exclusion. We have always sought to exchange and contribute to policy development through the sharing of practical experience. Finally, there is a sense of solidarity that international activities can bring. Whilst the experience of poverty can vary widely across Europe, many of the problems are shared and we have found it important to build a shared sense of purpose for addressing poverty across the European Union. With more than 85 million people across Europe living in poverty, there

\(^1\) EAPN was established in 1990 and is one of the key social European Organisations. It has grown to have member networks in 31 counties (including some outside the EU) and 18 European Organisations. EAPN is funded by the European Commission and lobbies and campaigns on a wide range of issues related to poverty and social exclusion in Europe. Peter Kelly, Director of the Poverty Alliance, is currently Vice-President of EAPN.
is a need for concerted and coherent action to address problems every member state experiences.²

Our involvement in European activity covers three broad areas. By describing these areas we will highlight the kinds of things we do internationally, why we do them and why we hope to achieve with them.

**Policy activity:** Central to the Poverty Alliance’s role as an anti-poverty network is the desire to influence policy that may have an impact on poverty. This has been the main element of our engagement in European activity – to influence European level policy that may have an impact on poverty in the UK or Scotland. The opportunities for engagement in European policy have varied significantly over the years, which have been driven by policy agenda’s at both the UK and European levels. For example, during the period of the Lisbon Strategy (2000-2010) EAPN was particularly active in engaging with the European Commission and with National Governments. This was in part a result of the opportunities that were afforded to NGOs as a result of the Open Method of Coordination on Social Inclusion as part of the Lisbon Strategy. There was an emphasis on the involvement of NGOs, and people with direct experience of poverty and social exclusion, in the social inclusion process. This allowed EAPN in the UK, and the Poverty Alliance in Scotland, to have ongoing discussions with DWP at the UK level and with the Scottish Government. In this period, European policy developments could be seen as helping to provide opportunities for ‘domestic’ engagement in the policy development. Under the current Europe 2020 Strategy, many of those opportunities are less apparent. The lack engagement of civil society organisations in the development of the National Reform Programme’s across Europe has been consistently criticized by EAPN.³

Despite the challenges in engaging with European social policy developments at the UK, which we return to below, the Poverty Alliance has sought to maintain an active engagement through our work with EAPN. We have regularly attended the Annual Convention of the European Platform Against Poverty⁴, which has been held each year since 2010. Our involvement has been part of the UK delegation which has been a useful opportunity to engage with civil servants working on parts of the European strategy at the UK level.

We regularly feed into the development of EAPN positions on a variety of important issues such as the development of the Social Investment Package, the ongoing development of the Europe 2020 strategy, the Fund for European Aid for the Most Deprived (FEAD) and, importantly, the overall shape of the European Social Fund. Being part of a European network has allowed the


⁴ The EPAP is part of the Europe 2020 Strategy. For further information visit http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=961
Poverty Alliance to effectively feed into the development of these policy areas that would otherwise be difficult to engage with.

Another key part of the Poverty Alliance’s approach to policy development work is to find ways to have people with direct experience of poverty play a central role. Our work as part of EAPN has allowed us to support people with direct experience of poverty to feed into discussions at the European level. This has primarily been through our involvement in the annual People Experiencing Poverty Meeting, which has been held in Brussels each year since 2001. We have coordinated and supported UK participants to take part in the meeting in 2014 and will do so again in 2015. This activity not only allows us to feed in directly to European discussions, but helps to build the capacity of those who have taken part.

Sharing good practice: Given that the European Union largely does not have competency in relation to social policy measures the scope for direct policy influencing work can sometimes appear limited. The role for the sharing of good practice is therefore more important. The Poverty Alliance has attempted to share policy and practice developments through a variety of activities that we have been involved in at the European levels. Our engagement with EAPN has allowed us to be involved in a variety of opportunities to share good practice. The structure of EAPN in part facilitates opportunities for exchange and learning, both formally and informally. For example, we have given presentations in Spain, Norway, Germany, Ireland and Italy on our experience of developing the Living Wage campaign in Scotland. We have also fed into an EAPN policy task Force looking at in-work poverty. The approaches that have been taken in Scotland to support the involvement of people with experience of poverty in policy has also been included in EAPN publications which have been distributed widely across Europe.

We have also taken part in more formal Peer Reviews, which were part of the OMC on Social Inclusion. We have represented EAPN at peer reviews on participation in 2007 and on in-work poverty in 2011. These have been practical and important opportunities to share experience and good practice. In the case of the Irish Peer Review of the National Social Inclusion Forum, this experience led the Poverty Alliance to develop and launch the Scottish Assembly for Tackling Poverty in 2010. This has become a series of event and we intend to hold the sixth Assembly in 2015.

We have also organized events to allow our members and others to engage directly with European policy issues. This has included events on the National

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5 See, for example, EAPN (2014) ‘Giving a Voice to Citizens’


7 Ides Nicase (2011) Building the tools to fight In-work Poverty,
Action Plans on Social Inclusion, child poverty in the European context, on the role of ‘smaller’ nations in tackling poverty, seminars on the European Year for Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion in 2010. These events, and others, have been important opportunities for representatives from a wide range of organisations to be involved in discussions and debates about anti-poverty in Europe.

**Project activity:** Over the last 10 years the Poverty Alliance has increasingly sought to support our engagement in European work with project activity. The resources we are able to commit to European activity are limited. We have integrated engagement with European social policy issues into our core work programme, but it is a small element when considered against our activity that is focused at the grassroots and Scottish levels. Carrying out project based activity allows us to be financially supported to engage in European activity. Since 2005 there have been a number of key projects:

- **Get Heard:** This was a UK wide project funded by the European Commission and coordinated by Oxfam GB. The Poverty Alliance was responsible for the Scottish activity. We organized around 50 workshops to enable people with direct experience of poverty feed into the UK National Action Plan on Social Inclusion in 2006.

- **Bridging the Policy Gap:** Funded by the European Commission, this project carried out three ‘peer reviews’ across the UK looking at different aspects of anti-poverty activity and brought key stakeholders together at the local regional and UK levels. This evidence was fed into the 2008 NAP on Social Inclusion.

- **Making A Difference:** This project was funding by the DWP/EC as part of the European Year Against Poverty in 2010. The project was a joint collaboration between three community groups and Scottish artists to make short films about the experience of poverty in Scotland. The films were shown at venues across Scotland and internationally.

- **Drivers of Health Inequality:** This project was managed by Eurohealthnet, and looks at the causes and consequences of health inequalities. EAPN provided input into research by working with people with experience of poverty in six counties, including in Scotland. The Poverty Alliance carried out research in Scotland in 2013-14 look at the role of social protection and health inequalities.

- **Re-Invest:** This is a new project funded through the Commission’s Horizon 2020 research funding stream. The Poverty Alliance is one of 19 partners in this research project which will look at what kind of social investment package is really needed to address poverty in the EU. The project was launched in March 2015 and will run for four years.

All of these projects have helped our network directly engage in European related policy issues and has helped build the capacity of the network. Together with our European policy orientated activity and sharing of good

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8 For further information visit: [http://ukcap.org/getheard/index.htm](http://ukcap.org/getheard/index.htm)
10 For further information visit: [http://documentfilmfestival.org/makingadifference/](http://documentfilmfestival.org/makingadifference/)
11 The full project website is now available at [http://health-gradient.eu/](http://health-gradient.eu/)
12 For more information visit: [http://www.re-invest.eu/](http://www.re-invest.eu/)
practice this work has helped raise aware of the importance of the EU in
Scottish anti-poverty policy issues and of the approaches that been taken in
other parts of the EU to address poverty.

2. Do you think your sector and/or organisation is effective in
participating in international activities? If not, what would help you to
make improvements? What prevents you from making improvements
now?

Most organisations that are concerned about addressing poverty and social
exclusion in Scotland focus their activities at the local, national, and the UK
levels. Whilst there are areas where there are significant implications for
social policy, for example in relation to employment, direct policy
development on key issues such as social security, minimum wages, taxation, etc, remains
principally the concern of Member States, particularly those outside the
Eurozone. Given this constraint, it is perhaps understandable that some
organisations do not place a great deal of importance in engaging at the
European level. There is undoubtedly activity by many Scottish organisations,
particularly in ESF funded work or transnational projects, but engagement at
the European policy level appears to be relatively weak.

In relation to our own involvement in European activities, our involvement with
a broader network of organisations across Europe allows the Poverty Alliance
to be effective at this level. Like other Scottish based networks that engage at
the European level, for example Children in Scotland who work with Eurochild
or Scottish Homeless Action who work with FEANTSA, our ability to
understand and engage with European policy is enhanced through our
participation in a network that has Brussels based offices that are able to track
key policy developments. We have been able to identify key issues and
engage with them in accordance with our own priorities. The examples of the
activities outlined above highlights our effectiveness at engaging at the
European level.

It should be recognized, however, that engagement at these levels remains
challenging. The European Union is often described as remote and
inaccessible, and for many organisations seeking to influence policy this can
be the case. The policy language of Europe is often significantly different, and
the policy processes are not well understood. Even for those organisations
that have managed to develop some expertise, it can still a challenge to
effectively engage at this level. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, many organisations do not have the resources to prioritise
engagement at the European level. With limited resources, many voluntary
sector organisations will choose to focus their attention on areas where the
impact of their activity will be seen more clearly and quickly. This means that
intermediary organisations (like the Poverty Alliance) have a responsibility to
engage via already established networks in order to have an impact
internationally. Even where there are functioning and effective networks like
EAPN, Eurochild, FEANTSA or ENAR, there remain challenges in
consistently engaging with processes at the European level. For example,
following the development and implementation of a single Directive or keeping up to date with negotiations around key issues such as TTIP can be complex and time consuming. One way that Scottish organisations could improve their practice is by working together more effectively on shared agenda’s at the European level. The Poverty Alliance is currently leading on the re-development of the EAPN network in the UK and it is hoped that the end result of this will be opportunities for better joint working across the sector in relation to the European social inclusion agenda.

Second, there is a need for better engagement between key stakeholders such as the Scottish group of MEPs, the Scottish Office of the European Commission, the Office of the European Parliament, the EER Committee, etc. and interested civil society organisations. There have been many examples in the past where there has been good engagement between all of these stakeholders, however there is a need to put this on a stronger, more consistent basis.

Third, the question of resources is critical. Beyond limited project funding, few organisations have resources to engage at the policy level in Europe. It is unlikely that sufficient resources are likely to be found soon to facilitate the work of civil society organisations in this area. In this scenario, it becomes all the more important that organisations and stakeholders pull their resources to find ways to enable them to engage to work together more effectively. It is hoped that the current enquiry will help stimulate such joint working.

3. What should organisations in Scotland do to be effective internationally? Are you aware of any good examples of this from Scotland or another country?

There is a need to recognize the challenges that exist for many organisations to be effective internationally. As stated above, for most voluntary organisations that are concerned about issues of poverty and social justice their focus will be on the ‘domestic’ arena, rather than European. We would repeat that for our organisations to be more effective there is a need for improved joint working and networking. There are already examples of where this is happening already. Children in Scotland and Homeless Action Scotland regularly update and involve their members in the European dimensions of their work. SCVO has been very active on the issues of the new ESF funding. NIDOS and the Poverty Alliance are increasingly working together to better link domestic, European and international anti-poverty agendas. However, there is a need for better coordination and collaboration between these parts of civil society.

Crucially, there is a need for organisations to find ways to bridge the gap between the concerns of their members and supporters and the policy agendas at the European level. There is no doubt that these agenda are linked. Whether it is the need to reform our social security systems, the potential impact of TTIP in Scotland, the on-going impact of austerity policies on public services, or the need for preventative approaches to poverty reduction, there is much that Scotland can contribute to European policy.
discussions and much that we can learn from them. To do this, civil society organisations must find ways to translate European policy discussions to ways that make sense for their members and supporters. EAPN, for example, has produced a number of publications, ‘explainers’, which highlight the connections between key areas of European policy and wider anti-poverty concerns. It is publications such as these that can help bridge the gap between European and domestic concerns, and that will in turn make our own efforts to engage on European matters more effective.

For further information contact:

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