

Social policy in the EU—Reform barometer 2016^[1]

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Social Inclusion Monitor Europe (SIM Europe) project invited social policy experts from across Europe to participate in the Reform Barometer 2016 survey and assess the reform need, activity and quality with respect to 55 policy objectives in the 28 member states of the European Union between July 2014 and January 2016. This report presents the analysis of the replies from over 1,000 survey participants in five dimensions: Poverty Prevention, Equitable Education, Labour Market Access, Social Cohesion and Non-discrimination, and Health. For each member state, the experts' quantitative assessments have been aggregated to different levels of analysis, yielding a reform need score, an activity rate and a quality score at the levels of policy objectives and of dimensions as well as at the overall level. In addition, the reform performance score is a composite measure that captures each member state's reform activity and quality using a single number. In what follows, we present a summary of the key findings.

Governments of EU member states are struggling to meet the most pressing future challenges

Educational reforms have been largely neglected

A good education is a vital prerequisite for individual success, specifically in today's knowledge-based society. Likewise, a well-functioning education system providing high-quality education to all independent of their socioeconomic status is a sine qua non for a country to have a prosperous future. Moreover, for the EU's ageing societies, lifelong learning is gaining in importance. The Reform Barometer expert survey, however, underlines that governments of the EU member states have hardly made any efforts towards educational reforms, and that only one-third of the reform need has been addressed across the EU on average. Reform activity is reported to be at its lowest in Greece, Lithuania and Spain. The level of reform activity addressing lifelong learning in the survey period was particularly low: For 10 countries, participants unanimously reported that governments had not taken any relevant action aimed at improving the financial or human resources committed to it, and for nine countries, that governments had given no thought at all to improving teaching quality.

The survey participants reported a very strong need for governmental action to weaken the link between students' learning success and their socioeconomic background. Nevertheless, participants reported that no relevant activity at all had taken place in six countries (Croatia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Slovakia, Spain). This is particularly alarming because a lack of upward achievement in learning reinforces the inheritance of socioeconomic status, and almost certainly leads to a growing social divide.

The situation is at its worse in the United Kingdom, where reform activity in the education sector was reported to be above average but with detrimental effects. As an example, survey participants sharply criticised the hugely negative impact of recently introduced university tuition fees on fostering social mobility through education.

The best reform performance in the education sector was ascribed to Malta, followed by Romania. Malta's government was assessed to be the most active in the EU. For instance, it introduced an 'Alternative Learning Programme' to reduce the number of early school leavers as well as free child care centres, improved the training of preschool teachers, and supported the provision of evening and online courses to allow people to study flexibly. Malta also ranks first regarding reform performance in addressing lifelong learning as well as promoting social mobility. Reforms in Romania, on the other hand, were expected to have the most positive effects for ensuring equitable education, especially regarding the guaranteeing of equal opportunities.

Governments have failed to address the integration of foreigners properly

When it comes to integration policies for foreigners, participants in the Reform Barometer expert survey assigned poor marks to national governments. In most surveyed countries, reform activity was either rated as very low or expected to have negative effects. Examples of the latter are Denmark, Spain and Austria. Italy was the only country given a positive score for its initiatives to improve integration of the foreign-born population.

The survey results show that this picture is not the result of the refugee crisis alone. In fact, comparing integration policies for refugees

and for the foreign-born population in general, the failure rate in implementing reforms was assessed to be higher and the reform quality to be lower for the latter group. Migration experts generally assume that a government's willingness and capacity to integrate foreign-born people as a whole is a prerequisite for the successful integration of refugees. If this assumption is true, these results are particularly troubling.

Although the influx of millions of refugees into the EU entails a newly emerging need for huge integration efforts, integrating foreigners has already been a challenge for governments ever since the EU was formed. The sudden refugee crisis thus hit the EU at its weakest point concerning social inclusion, as it was already struggling with the integration of foreigners living in its individual member states.

Regarding the country-specific need to integrate refugees and the foreign-born population more generally, the EU is split into two distinct groups. While the perception of need is very strong among respondents from EU-15 countries, it is rather weak among respondents from countries that joined the EU in or after 2004.

The Reform Barometer survey also asked participants to assess the issues of reducing poverty and unemployment amongst the foreign-born population. For both issues, reform activity was reported to be either very low or of low quality in the vast majority of member states.

Reducing economic inequality is among the most pressing challenges, yet poorly addressed

Several scholars have concluded in recent years that the assumption of a 'trickle-down economy', where growth automatically brings prosperity for all, is flawed. Indeed, despite notable growth effects from globalisation recently analysed in the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Globalization Report 2016, real wages have been stagnating in many industrialised countries and in the EU, in particular. Moreover, recent studies by the IMF, the OECD and other similar institutions have shown that social inequality can be a major obstacle to economic growth. Likewise, in its Outlook on the Global Agenda 2015 report, the World Economic Forum stated that "deepening income inequality" will be the trend with "the biggest impact on the world in the coming 12 to 18 months."

Similarly, Reform Barometer survey participants rate the policy objective of reducing income and wealth inequality to be of very high importance. This particularly concerns the five largest EU member states: Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain. At the same time, responses by governments aimed at addressing this issue were rated to be the second-least effective among all investigated policy objectives (only integration policies rate worse). Participants expected government (in)activity to be most damaging in Greece.

While some have made strong efforts to catch up, others have failed to improve social inclusion

South-eastern member states have invested in quality reforms

Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania, the latest states to join the EU, take top ranks, with high levels of both reform activity and quality. For these countries, EU membership functions as an effective reform catalyst.

The United Kingdom has been failing to improve social inclusion

The UK comes last in the overall reform performance ranking as well as in the dimension rankings for Poverty Prevention and Equitable Education.

The crisis states Greece and Spain continue to lag behind

Among the Southern European countries, Greece and Spain have performed poorly across almost all dimensions. These countries suffer most severely from budget squeezes imposed by the EU during the eurozone crisis. Italy has shown mixed results, while Portugal has performed best in this group.

Finland has thrived, while Denmark has rested on its laurels

Finland is an example of a country that scored high marks with respect to the state of social justice within its borders and its reform performance. Specifically, survey participants reported that Finland's government had initiated the most comprehensive and effective health care reforms. By contrast, Denmark, scoring even higher than Finland in the Social Justice Index, ranks fourth-to-last in overall reform performance and even second-to-last in the Poverty Prevention dimension.

-reprinted from Social Inclusion Monitor Europe

*Note: For early childhood education and care, see pages 61-81, *Equitable Education*

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