

High Commissioner for active Inclusion against poverty

Mandate

Martin Hirsch was appointed the French Government's **High Commissioner for active Inclusion against poverty** in May 2007.

He holds the rank of junior Minister before the Prime Minister.

The President of the Republic entrusted him, in particular, to "radically overhaul the minima-sociaux (welfare system) in order to consistently reward work as opposed to government benefits, and to ensure that work invariably provides a door out of, and protection from, poverty."

The French government has set out to cut poverty by at least one-third over the five-year period starting October 2007.

Besides reforming the welfare system, the High Commissioner for active Inclusion against poverty is in charge of running experimental programmes with local authorities.

Hirsch's scope of duties therefore stretches to encompass the education of poor-children, early-childhood day care and access to bank services. He is working with all relevant ministries and public-sector agencies (employment, in particular) defining and monitoring progress towards the goal that France has set.

The other players, the State's key partners – territorial authorities, departments¹, trade unions, firms, NGO's and the people concerned – are also involved in the initiatives that the High Commissioner for active Inclusion against poverty is undertaking.

¹ A department is an administrative subdivision of France. France counts 100 departments, including four overseas.

A national-level poverty-reduction target, in figures

Nicolas Sarkozy reasserted France's pledge to curb poverty on the World Day to Overcome Extreme Poverty.

An excerpt from the French President's speech on 17 October 2007 follows :

"This is intolerable and unworthy of a country such as ours. And this is why, for the first time, France is officially and publicly setting a poverty-reduction target in figures*.

I have charged the government to reduce poverty in this country by at least one-third over five years. I want to see this long neglected social issue become a political issue. I set this target to force us to deliver. It will force us to unearth the mechanisms that spawn poverty and to set up the ones that will eradicate it. I have asked Martin Hirsch to meet this goal.

But it is a goal for the government as a whole. So it is a goal for every minister regardless of his or her field of action."

* By Eurostat figures, France's poverty rate stood at 13% in 2006.

Reforming baseline welfare and supporting earned income with the revenu de Solidarité active

The “revenu de Solidarité active” (or **rSa**) is the key to the welfare reform that the High Commissioner for active Inclusion against poverty has developed. It also favours earned over welfare-derived income. rSa is part a bold plan to reduce poverty by one-third over five years, and involves broaching a number of delicate issues.

It was devised to complement resources for poor workers, welfare beneficiaries and people earning low salaries. It is based on the principal that people can be encouraged to resume work by better articulating welfare and earned income. It also promotes long-term job-based inclusion. This reform aims to address baseline-welfare complexity and its many counterproductive upshots, including inactivity traps.

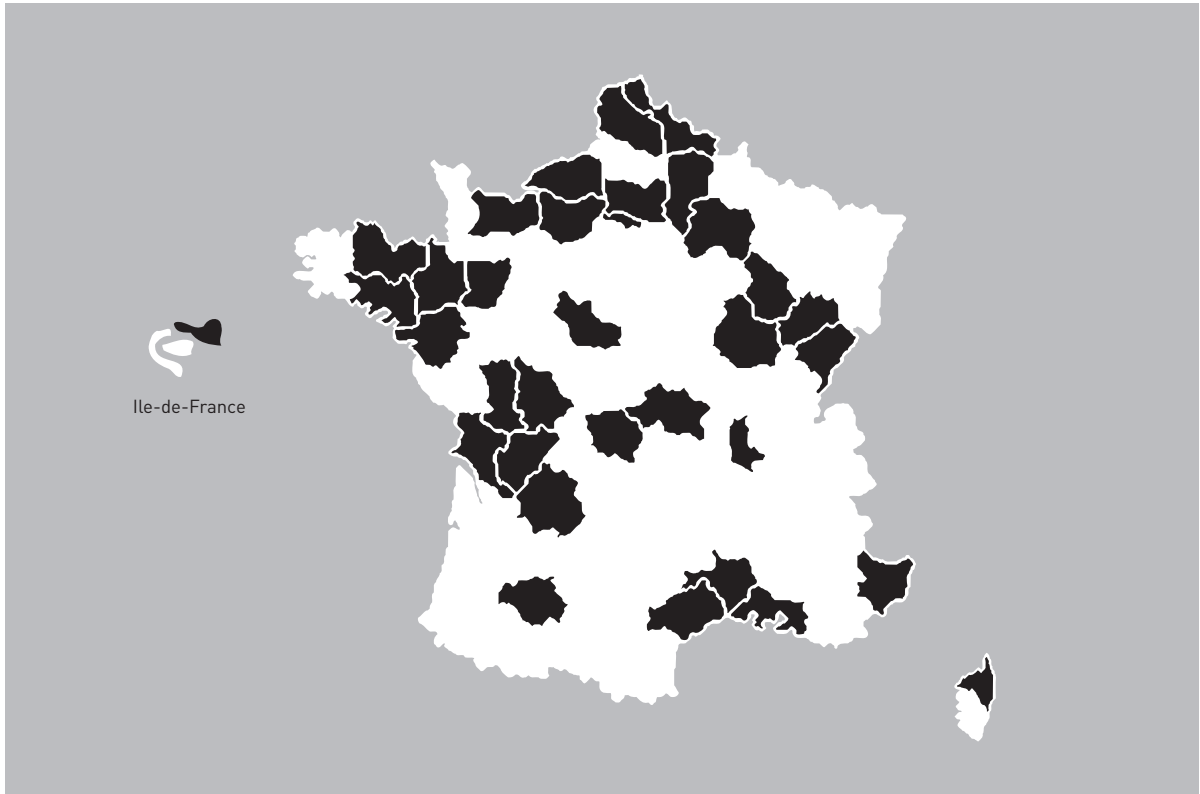
Plans involve testing this system in a limited number of departments before applying it across France during the first half of 2009.

The **rSa** programme is similar to most European systems today. These initiatives concurrently aim to encourage people to resume work and to curb poverty without compromising financial sustainability. A number of these reforms were also tested before country-wide rollout. The german Kombilohn is perhaps the most noteworthy example.

Indicators

The pledge to monitor poverty over the next five years, which the French government reasserted on 17 October 2007 (World Day to Overcome Extreme Poverty), entails compiling indicators that the High Commissioner for active Inclusion against poverty can use to track poverty, with the Observatoire National de la Pauvreté and de l'Exclusion Sociale (national poverty and social exclusion a research center), the relevant government agencies, the main associations working to relieve poverty, and management and labour organisations. No poverty indicator is perfect and they all have their limits or only reflect one facet of a multifaceted phenomenon. That is why a number of indicators are warranted: they each cast light on one complementary aspect of the overall poverty rate and how it will evolve over time towards the goal to diminish poverty by one-third over five years.

The 34 departments experimenting the rSa



Departments authorised to run rSa experiments : Aisne, Allier, Alpes-Maritimes, Bouches-du-Rhône, Calvados, Charente, Charente-Maritime, Côte-d'Or, Côtes-d'Armor, Creuse, Deux-Sèvres, Dordogne, Doubs, Eure, Gard, Gers, Haute-Corse, Haute-Marne, Haute-Saône, Hérault, Ille-et-Vilaine, Loire-Atlantique, Loir-et-Cher, Marne, Mayenne, Morbihan, Nord, Oise, Pas-de-Calais, Rhône, Seine-Maritime, Seine-Saint-Denis, Val-d'Oise, Vienne.

Experimentations in 34 departments

Experimentations will allow this system to be fine-tuned, as comparing territories is a necessary step. This is why witness areas have been chosen in each department by methods that the Comité National d'Evaluation pour les Expérimentations (national experimentations assessment committee) established. Each department was also able to choose in a number of test variables (programme start date, benefit distribution mode). There is one key principle underlying these experimentations: they involve listening to and taking into account the expectations that people experiencing difficulties voice, acknowledging their ability to build relevant solutions that address their own needs, and entrusting beneficiaries with an active role in the social-policy agenda.

The grenelle de l'Insertion (round-table on Inclusion): an all-encompassing approach to put inclusion back at the core of social debate

France's President introduced the idea of an Grenelle de l'insertion* in October 2007, in response to requests from inclusion professionals, in Dijon, France. This grenelle was launched in Grenoble on 23 and 24 November 2007 in the presence of several trade unions, management, association and local elected representatives.

The grenelle de l'Insertion rounded up six work-packed months later, on 27 May 2008 – exactly 40 years after the Accords de Grenelle . Three task forces counting more than 200 people spent six months working in eight “colleges” of experts or professional-inclusion stakeholders, i.e. beneficiaries, users, workers on inclusion schemes, territorial authorities, field players, employee representatives, management representatives, associations working to curb poverty, qualified authorities, and the State.

Based on this forum's report, members worked together to plot a roadmap listing 12 top-priority projects and shared guidelines. The work programme stemming from this roadmap will be implemented in the summer of 2008.

The projects involve improving public employment agency services for people on the path to integration, drafting a “single inclusion contract”, developing professionalisation contracts, developing employer clusters, reforming financing for work-based inclusion channels, improving prisoner integration and fresh momentum for personal microcredit initiatives.

* Government, employee and management representatives negotiated the Accords de Grenelle on 25 and 26 May 1968 in the midst of a then widespread social crisis and, in essence, led to a 35% rise in minimum wages. A grenelle has since become synonymous with accomplished dialogue.

Round-table on Inclusion / “grenelle de l'Insertion”

This forum gathered to review the policy of inclusion based on stakeholder feedback, on opportunities to discuss principles and action plans, on promoting existing initiatives on the ground and understanding the difficulties encountered on a daily basis, on redefining support policies for people in difficulty, on providing a consistent framework for work-based inclusion, on further involving private- and public-sector employers, and on enhancing public-policy efficiency.

An innovative tool to curb poverty: social experimentation

The high commissioner for active Inclusion against poverty considers that social experimentation can play a key role in shaping efforts to reform poverty-curbing social instruments.

social experimentation can indeed be an important aspect of social-system reform and an efficient tool to determine active inclusion strategies. It involves innovative social policy in one or more territories and in conditions that allow for effects to be assessed in the light of plans to take that policy mainstream.

He accordingly called for projects in autumn 2007. A number of innovative programmes have been identified as a result. The goal was to allow local authorities, associations, public -and private- sector organisations, research teams and beneficiaries to work together on shared initiatives to enrich collective discussions on efforts to curb poverty and social inequality spanning the path back to employment, healthcare, inclusion and education.

Call for projects – the figures

- more than 600 statements of intent
- more than 300 projects reviewed by a 12-member jury
- 37 projects selected
- a €6 million budget for those projects in 2008

Active inclusion and curbing poverty in Europe: a top social priority

Curbing poverty, a solidarity “must”

In 2006, 16% of Europe’s population was living under the poverty line. This calls for effective and coordinated action to guarantee access to all the fundamental rights acknowledged by the European Union and thereby meet concrete citizen expectations.

The “active inclusion” strategy for people on the outermost fringes of the job market tallies with the solidarity principle at the heart of Europe’s identity and values.

This strategy leans on three complementary and inseparable principles: guaranteed adequate minimum income, policy promoting work-market integration, and access to quality social services. Stakeholders (central and local authorities, business firms, labour organisations, management organisations, NGO’s and beneficiaries) worked hand in hand to develop this initiative, which aims to facilitate social integration based on rights and responsibilities. The goal, in this case, is to contribute to efforts to strike the balance between economic prosperity and social justice that lies at the core of Europe’s social model.

Measures “of major importance”

In March 2000, with the Lisbon Strategy, the European Council asked Member States and the Commission to take measures to eradicate poverty by 2010. In 2007, following the strategy review in 2005, the Spring European Council meeting underlined the point of better accommodating Member States’ common social goals. In March 2008, during talks on the reviewed social agenda, the European Council pointed out that, “In this context combating poverty and social exclusion, promoting active inclusion and increasing employment opportunities for those furthest from the labour market are all of major importance. To this end all the appropriate instruments and tools available at the Community level should be used.”

A top priority for the French Presidency of the European Union in the social arena

In keeping with the principle of subsidiarity, The French Presidency will work to define shared principles and methods to develop the active-inclusion strategy in order to contribute to the mutual reinforcement of national poverty-curbing strategies. This Presidency hopes to secure conclusions on active inclusion at the EPSSCO Council meeting next December.

France hopes to identify best practices in Member States and to promote the use of common methods involving all stakeholders (local and central government, business firms, trade unions, NGOs and people in difficulty).

These methods include figure-based, consensual and national initiatives and the main goal is to hone in on options to leverage public action. Developing social experiments in Member States’ active-inclusion strategies is also a concrete and relevant option in efforts to reduce poverty in Europe. Each State will be able to distil conclusions and thereby identify pointers for innovative action that will in turn cement national poverty-curbing strategies. That is why this Presidency intends to promote these programmes, and establish a European experience-pooling network.

It will do so over the course of several gatherings:

– 7th European Round-Table on Poverty and Social Exclusion, 15 and 16 October (Marseille, France)

Round-table delegates from the 27 Member States will issue concrete proposals regarding active inclusion for ministers in charge of curbing poverty and inclusion, who will meet informally for the first time immediately following this round table.

– Informal meeting of ministers in charge of poverty and social exclusion, 16 October (Marseille, France)

This meeting will be another step towards defining common principles for active inclusion. It will contribute to efforts to forge concrete methods and suitable instruments to unfurl and monitor active-inclusion strategy with a view to mutually reinforcing national poverty-curbing strategies.

– Conference on social experiments in Europe, 21 and 22 November (Grenoble, France)

This conference will provide an opportunity to draw conclusions on the social experiments underway in Member States and to discuss ways of taking them to the next level. It will also encourage social experimentation programmes across the European Union in the field of active Inclusion and establish a European network to support this drive.

Calendar

- october: European Commission recommendation on common principles for active inclusion
- october: CESE exploratory opinion on social experimentation in Europe
- 15-16 october: 7th European Round-Table on Poverty and Social Exclusion (on active inclusion) in Marseille, France
- 16 october: Informal meeting of ministers in charge of poverty and social exclusion in Marseille, France
- 21 and 22 november: Conference on social emperiments in Europe in Grenoble, France
- 15 and 16 december: EPSSCO (Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs) Council

Biography

Martin Hirsch, 44, was appointed **High Commissioner for active Inclusion against poverty** in May 2007.

Hirsch holds degrees from the Ecole Normale Supérieure and Ecole Nationale d'Administration, as well as a degree in neurobiology. He has served on the French State Council and as Health and Social Action Minister as Mr. Bernard Kouchner's chief of staff. He was the first chief executive of the French Food Safety Agency.

He headed the Emmaüs Community Union from 1995 to 2002, and then chaired Emmaüs France (in founder Abbé Pierre's stead) until he joined the government. He chaired the Commission on Families, Vulnerability and Poverty in 2005, and his report led to the notion of "**revenu de Solidarité active**". He co-founded the Agence Nouvelle des Solidarités Actives in January 2006, to be a forerunner of innovative, experimental and territorial action plans to curb poverty through partnerships between public authorities and business firms.

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