

## **Supporting the development of New Learning pathways for Adults**

New trends in raising demand for learning among adults at risk of social exclusion

LATVIA

### **Latvian Adult Education Association, LAEA**

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#### 1. General information

The Latvian Education law declares that every resident of Latvia has equal rights to education. Education policy documents stress the importance of equal access to education for everybody, and some policy measures are employed to ensure equal rights to education, integration into the Latvian educational system and society in general.

Different reports and observations focusing on living conditions in Latvia recognise that the Latvian society is characterized by material conditions, which are multidimensional and contradictory. Assessment of welfare should be made using different methods and indicators. Since the risk of social exclusion is closely linked to poverty, the government's attention has been formally mainly focused on the integration of the society and poverty reduction.

Already in 2000 the Cabinet of Ministers accepted the Strategy for Poverty Reduction, and an Action Plan for the implementation of this strategy was created.

In 2001 the Cabinet of Ministers approved the National Programme on "The Integration of Society in Latvia". This programme pays attention to the need to diminish the risk of social exclusion. In particular, it focuses on demographically endangered groups of society.

The aims of social integration in Latvia are:

- To create a society with equal opportunities for all
- To extend possibilities for social participation to all individuals and groups of residents
- To secure equal opportunities for members of society to gain access to resources of the society and to live life to the fullest
- To promote the formation of a middle class

Social integration is constrained by poverty, unemployment, inadequate education and lack of information, insufficient social mobility and shortcomings in the social security system. In this context the programme addresses the following problems of social development:

- An increase in social polarization caused mainly by gaps in income levels and by widespread poverty
- Marginalization of individuals, families and social groups
- An increased number of beggars, homeless and "street" children
- The prevalence of unnatural and violent deaths
- The spread of violence (in society and in the mass media)
- The spread of alcoholism as "an escape" from long-term stress, as well as an increasing incidence of drug and substance

An important role on diminishing of social exclusion belongs to employment support measures. The concept "On Promotion of Employment" was adopted in 1999 and set the following main targets:

- To establish a system for developing the National Employment Plan; the Ministry of Economics was nominated as the responsible body for the implementation of the National Employment Plan
- To establish a system for cooperation of state institutions, local governments, employers and trade unions in solving employment problems; the National Tripartite Sub-council for Cooperation in Vocational Education and Employment was founded to reach this objective
- To establish a system of financing measures under the National Employment Plan; this is carried out through budget programmes of the responsible ministries

The first National Employment Plan of Latvia was developed in 2000. The National Employment Plan 2002 respected goals for the employment policy for the years 2005 - 2010. It considers the documents accepted in the Lisbon and Stockholm EU summits and the EU Council Employment Guidelines for 2002.

Additionally, in the last years some important documents connected with accession to EU membership were adopted.

The Cabinet of Ministers accepted the National Development Plan in 2001. Under the priority - Development of human resources and promotion of employability - it foresees the following activities:

- To increase the quality of labour force according the labour market demands
- To implement an active labour market policy to promote employability
- To develop social infrastructure and services

The draft of the Single Programming Document for 2004 - 2006 was adopted in March 2003 and foresees the following measures for the priority - Development of human resources and promotion of employment:

- Promotion of employment
- Development of education and continuing training
- Combating social exclusion

In accordance with the provisions of the Accession Partnership the Government of Latvia has signed in February 2003 a Joint Assessment of Latvia's employment and labour market policy priorities with the European Commission, Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs.

During the last years positive trends of growth in national economy can be seen. The dynamics of macro-economical indicators show that the state policies have formed a stable foundation for market economy and that they have made a positive impact on social and economic reforms. Many sectors of the economy have experienced an increase in activity, in particular processing industries and areas of public services. In 2001 the GDP of Latvia increased by 7,9% and in 2002 by 6,1%. The Ministry of Economics of Latvia forecasts a GDP growth of 7% in 2003.

Unfortunately, the majority of economical activities is concentrated in the capital Riga and the Riga region, as well as in some bigger cities. On the other hand, economic and social problems are increasing in many rural areas and small towns.

## 2. General characteristics of groups faced to the risk of social exclusion

In spite of the fast economic development during the last years severe social problems continue to exist. The situation is quite difficult for several groups, which face increasing social differentiation.

According to the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Latvia is in 2002 placed in the 53rd position in the world according to the standard of living (92nd in 1997, 63 rd in 2000).

According to Eurostat data, in 2002 the per capita GDP estimated in purchasing parity units equalled 35% of the average in the EU. Wages of

people employed in the national economy and disposable income of households continue to increase for several years. However, growth of income is very divided uneven, the polarization of material well-being is increasing. The Gini index has increased from 0.30 in 1996 till 0.34 in 2002. Additionally, over the last decade the natural growth of the population has been negative.

Main risk groups of social exclusion in Latvia are:

- Socially disadvantaged persons
- Early school leavers and drop-outs
- Persons with special needs (persons with minor disabilities are integrated in mainstream education, persons with greater disabilities attend schools for persons with special needs)
- Representatives of disadvantaged groups who have limited access to continuing training
- Some ethnic minorities
- Other groups which are subject of different risks (regional differences in regard to access to education in general, and quality education in specific, life in " crisis districts", and other)

Economic disparities become more important in regard to access to education and success in education. The Household budget survey shows that families with children under 15 constitute 41% of the population with income within the 1st (lowest) income quintile and 11% within 5th quintile. Poor families have difficulties to provide their children with qualitative education.

After graduation from basic education children from poor families usually chose a vocational education. Some of them have to quit education because life far from home is too expensive and youth at the age of 16 are not mature enough to manage the different problems they encounter living away from the family. These young people, who do not learn and do not work wage labour for a group faced to risk of social exclusion - especially in rural areas. Lack of work experience and limited education possibilities are important obstacles for their development. Among the unemployed 13,9 % are young unemployed people in 2002 (20,0% in 1996).

Students of tertiary education from poor families can apply for study and student loans, but students usually have to cover fees for the first semester. Poor households cannot manage with that. There is no special support for students from families with low income.

Another important factor are regional disparities. There are better possibilities to get education and a job in the capital, cities and the central region of Latvia. The total unemployment rate in Latvia was 8.9% in 2002, but it varied significantly from 5.2% in Riga region to 18.1% in Latgale region. Main economical activities in Latvia are concentrated in the Riga (capital) region, but the Latgale region is underdeveloped and the unemployment rate in some towns and local municipalities reaches 20%. This is connected with painful

social problems and face many people to the risk of social exclusion. Education quality in these rural areas is lower and for some parts of the rural population further education or retraining is not accessible at all. On some occasions the education quality level in small schools, night schools and vocational schools is lower than on average.

During the last years the number of dropouts increased. Dropouts are more frequent in "vocational" and "basic vocational" programmes and less in "secondary vocational" programmes. Among those who graduate vocational programmes, about one out of six enter higher education, while the remaining graduates enter the labour market directly from vocational education. Long-term poverty is one of the factors that influence the concentration of students with poor knowledge in the vocational education sector. In many cases economical problems are closely related to social and behaviour problems. Vocational school dropouts form another part of people faced to the risk of social exclusion.

Education is not compulsory beyond the basic stage in Latvia. People have a right to a secondary education regardless of their age. There is a system of night schools in Latvia, where adult learners can finish primary and secondary education. Traditionally, this possibility has been used by young adults but over the last years the age range of learners is widening. Pilot projects have been run to introduce in night schools a module based curriculum, based on the Danish night school model.

Professional Career and Counselling Centres offer counselling to clients: assessing of the most appropriate areas of activities and occupation, their professional suitability, psychological aspects related to job-seeking, also they provide information about educational establishments. However, the guidance and counselling in this form does not work with the socially excluded groups.

Retraining of unemployed forms the basis for inclusion. Unfortunately, the number of unemployed who participate in continuous vocational training has decreased over the last years due to the reduction of funding. Only one out of three of those who wish to participate in such trainings get access. Long-term unemployed form 26.4% of the total number of unemployed, and also they face special problems.

A special group among the unemployed are senior people (pre pension and pension age) in rural areas. They face a lack of job and training opportunities.

The link between social exclusion and basic skills is increasing in Latvia. Until now there are no policy papers or official strategies in regard to the improvement of basic skills. Main emphasis is placed on "new skills", such as languages, computer literacy and social skills. Only slowly an understanding is developing that there are many people in Latvia, who lack basic skills - numeracy and literacy. The level of need in regard to basic skills could be around 30%. This guess is based on the IALS and ALL studies were all participating Eastern and Central European countries had poor results. Also in

the PISA study Latvia was at the lower end. In 1999 the Latvian Adult Education Association carried out a small survey (not representative), where possible target groups were investigated (inmates, unemployed and night school students). The results showed that 30-50% had an insufficient level of basic skills. There is a hope that in the nearest future more emphasis will be placed on this issues: On the one hand, the demand in regard to the skill's level of employees is increasing - due to the implementation of new technologies and intensification of job processes. On the other hand, some promising activities are taking place on a policy level.

### 3. Lifelong learning perspectives

There is no life-long learning policy in Latvia. The Concept of Education Development 2002 - 2005 is focused more on the vocational aspects of lifelong learning. Vocational training is not balanced with the learning for active citizenship and self-fulfilment. The implementation of a lifelong learning policy would be extremely important for socially excluded people and people faced to the risk of social exclusion.

The Latvian Adult Education Association is working on lifelong learning issues already for ten years. Socially excluded people and people faced to the risk of social exclusion were the target groups of many projects implemented by LAEA and its members, mainly Regional Adult Education Centres.

The Ministry of Welfare is mainly responsible for issues connected with social exclusion. At the same time some responsibilities belong to the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Economics.

Municipalities and numerous non-governmental organisations are involved in activities to diminish risks of social exclusion.

In 2003 the Cabinet of Ministers accepted the foundation of the Advisory Council " Education for All". The objective of the Advisory Council " Education for All" is to promote closer cooperation and concerted activities between ministries, governmental authorities, local governments, the private sector and non-governmental organisations, in order to:

- Promote access to education by all population irrespective of age, place of residence, sex, ethnicity, income level and foster the development of life-long learning in Latvia;
- Promote the integration into society of vulnerable and socially excluded groups by fostering the offer of diverse learning possibilities;
- Expand the interaction between life-long formal and informal education with a view to promote the population's participation in civic society and rising their competitiveness in the labour market;
- Promote the development of basic life skills and the ability of using them in accordance with the needs of individual and society.

It is expected that the accession to the EU and the possibilities provided by the Structural Funds will help to improve the social and economical situation in Latvia.

#### 4. Conclusions

- Adult education is not accessible enough for all people, especially for those who are socially excluded or and for those who face the risk of social exclusion, especially in rural areas.
- Financial limits, territorial differences and other aspects connected with social exclusion are the most important factors.
- The lack of a life long learning policy is an obstacle for access to education for people faced to the risk of social exclusion.
- There is a lack of coordination among different stakeholders in regard to the diminishing of social exclusion, e.g. involved ministries, NGOs, municipalities, and other agents. The same is true for different policies, which have been developed over the last years; also these are in many cases not interlinked.

#### 5. Sources of information

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