

Social inclusion through education and training

- experiences from the SocInc-Net project



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About SocInc-Net

SocInc-Net

SocInc-Net is an information network project on social inclusion through education and training comprising 6 major European cities: Berlin, Bologna, Copenhagen, Dublin, Glasgow and Malmö.

Target Group

Young people between 16 and 25 who are at risk of marginalisation due to a lack of social, personal and/or vocational skills.

Activities

The SocInc- Net centres will, in close collaboration with local network partners, perform the following tasks:

Collection, analysis, classification and presentation of

- Actors in the field
- Social inclusion initiatives and projects
- Best practice
- Success stories
- Legal environment

Co-ordination

The co-ordinator of the SocInc-Net project is the Education and Youth Administration (EYA) of Copenhagen, assisted by the Centre for Guidance and the International Secretariat.

Funding

The SocInc-Net project is a shared cost project between the partnership and the Leonardo Programme of the European Union, DG Education & Culture. The funded project runs for two years, expiring at the end of 2004.

(From the SocInc-Net website [Http://www.socinc.net](http://www.socinc.net))

Introduction²

“Social inclusion is the process by which efforts are made to ensure that everyone, regardless of their experiences and circumstances, can achieve their potential in life. To achieve inclusion in income and employment are necessary but not sufficient. An inclusive society is also characterised by a striving for reduced inequality, a balance between individuals’ rights and duties and increased social cohesion.”¹

In late March 2003, Bologna hosted the first physical meeting of partners from all six cities³ participating in the EU Leonardo da Vinci II project ‘Network of Centres specialised in Social Inclusion’, commonly referred to as SocInc-Net. Among the essential tasks for the transnational group of partners was to agree on definitions and categories within the target group of youngsters in need of special initiatives and projects on their way into adulthood, education and/or employment. How inclusive should the inclusion network be? What kinds of projects and actors from the six cities should be invited to join the network and given the opportunity to present themselves on the international website and use it as a platform for exchanging experiences, establishing contact to and possible cooperation and collaboration with actors in other cities, and in a broader sense for gaining inspiration and ideas about how to develop better initiatives on a local basis?

The ‘simple’ task was to describe the target groups as defined in the application for the Leonardo project. A necessary precondition for the design of all-round templates to be used for the registration and presentation of local projects and actors with the aim of facilitating comparisons and connections between projects and actors cross-culturally and transnationally. The major goal and target groups were loosely specified as follows in the application for the project:

“The dedicated SocInc network has as its concrete goal to gather, analyse and disseminate the available information on new initiatives and projects, political as well as pedagogical, with the ultimate aim of ensuring more flexible and adequate vocational training and guidance to be offered to youngsters at risk of social exclusion.

The scope of the activities will encompass the transition phase between secondary school and vocational education and immediately after. This phase has proven extremely critical for those youths, who for a range of reasons are on the way to social exclusion (e.g. immigrant pupils, socially disadvantaged pupils in general and pupils with special needs).” (From the application, Section C.1.3).

The participants in the Bologna meeting never reached an explicit agreement on the question of ‘core’ target groups and projects. Partners from one city argued that all young boys and girls with various kinds of problems – including problems not related to education and job opportunities – should be considered as belonging to the target groups. Partners from a number of other cities emphasised that too open a definition would limit the usefulness of the registration of relevant projects and actors, while partners from yet another city proposed giving particular attention to pupils with special educational needs due to physical and mental handicaps.

¹ Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion (2002). Social inclusion. (<http://www.cesi.org.uk>). A copy of the quoted document can also be found on: www.socinc.net/News/Articles/articleInfo.aspx?ArticleID=4.

² As associate professor at the Danish University of Education my task during the project was to carry out scientific analysis and synthesise research and reporting. This report presents some of the summaries of the final report: Langager, S. (2005): Is there anybody out there? - social inclusion through education and training (90 pages). The entire report can be found on: www.socinc.net.

³ Berlin, Bologna, Copenhagen, Dublin, Glasgow and Malmö.

From a general point of view this was a problematic but not surprising situation. Initially the partners were asked to participate in the network on the basis of their practical engagement in social inclusion of at-risk youth in their local city, and the tacit 'conclusion' at the end of the Bologna meeting was, that any young person with some kind of problem in the cities of the six European countries involved might be included in the mutual network descriptions, represented and presented by actors and projects published on the international website.

The outcome of the first partner meeting in Bologna in March 2003 was thus the idea of a rapidly expanding volume of a huge variety of project and actor descriptions from all of the partner cities. The aim was to make it possible for all website visitors and partners within the SocInc-Net 'corporation' to get an overview of what is going on in the field of social inclusion of youngsters in the participating cities. In addition, a dedicated 'Google en miniature' would make it possible to find projects and partners that closely matched the searchers' professional interests. The sophisticated search function combined with easy access to further contact information and opportunities for the exchange of experiences, and possibly even the temporarily swapping of staff or students were envisioned as ways to connect people within the EU and to facilitate the development of an international inclusive society.

During 2004 the SocInc-Net developed into its current form. The website platform was replaced in the late spring with the present one, which has better functionality. The partner cities released their local websites, making it possible to enter local 'city websites' as well as the joint international website. In addition, the number of projects and actors in the database has increased considerably since the autumn of 2003. However, there is still a remarkable lack of supplementary information, articles on social inclusion and the situation of youths in the different cities/countries, discussions between the actors, et cetera.. It remains difficult from a research point of view to figure out the basic criteria for projects and actors, which are described in the application as "*...new initiatives and projects, political as well as pedagogical, with the ultimate aim of ensuring a more flexible and adequate vocational training and guidance to be offered to youngsters in risk of social exclusion*" are.

The issue of the criteria to be used for projects and actors is much more complicated than 'just' to deciding on core target groups of youngsters at risk of social exclusion. It demands reflections on what social inclusion means compared to, for example, social integration, what it means to be 'at risk' in a societal context, and much more.

Looking back at the first partner meeting in Bologna in March 2003, it seems reasonable to conclude that 'simple decisions' could not have been made due to the complexity of the topics.



Social inclusion between different ‘paradigms’

“Social inclusion is the process by which efforts are made to ensure that everyone, regardless of their experiences and circumstances, can achieve their potential in life.” This quotation from the article ‘Social inclusion’ from the Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion in the UK opened this report. A lot of similar definitions are to be found in other publications about social inclusion and integration. This short quotation illustrates the two dimensions of social inclusion: As a process, social inclusion can be endorsed more or less successfully in two very different ways. By focusing on the individual problems and potentials, or by identifying what must be changed in society (which includes a wide range of topics like improving physical access to institutions for handicapped persons, politically fulfilling the slogan ‘Education for all’, or making governmental decisions on a more fair economic policy). The first way refers to individual integration; the second, to social inclusion in its wider and more societal sense.

These two dimensions can also – as has been done by a Danish researcher on social inclusion, Bent Madsen – be analysed as a ‘split’ situation: *“But the vision of social inclusion is also a split vision! Although the political intention of the social and educational legislation means to construct communities around institutional frameworks, this vision is formulated in very individualized terms. This individual approach gives priority to the interests of the individuals, whereas communities are considered as a facilitating background. The concept of special need is often similar to individual needs. This gives rise to solve collective problems as individual problems, despite the notion of social inclusion as a vision of community centred social and educational measures.”*⁴

During the recent years there has been a tendency towards using the word ‘inclusion’ rather than ‘integration’ in reference to vulnerable or/and marginalized youth. Though often used as synonyms it is important to be aware of the different implications when dealing with the two categories.

Social inclusion as ‘societal inclusion’ basically concerns the ability of institutions/initiatives (and in a wider perspective, society) to include people that are in exposed or vulnerable positions by changing forms of organisation and culture to be more inclusive. A societal perspective, which involves encouraging the educational system, the workplace and other ‘institutions’ to change in order to make them more accessible and attractive for youth ‘at risk’. In other words, institutions must reorganise or develop themselves in such a way that they become capable of attracting and sustaining marginalised youth no matter who they are, and at the same time, giving them space to develop in a positive way together with other young people. The inclusion perspective is first and foremost sociological and cultural and involves critical and political reflections on what is ‘wrong’ with the existing concepts for youth education and other youth initiatives. How should they – and society – be changed in order to make them more comprehensive and able to include all citizens?

Social inclusion as ‘*individual integration*’ concerns the possibility of organizing special environments for education and other activities based on the identification and description of the exact special needs these young people have as individuals. It is, in other words, an individual perspective, dealing with the design of learning and training processes for every single identified young person to make them more skilled at fitting into the existing environment – education institutions or the labour market, for example. The integration perspective is to some extent psychological/diagnostic and involves specific individual social and pedagogical reflections as to which group is outside the ‘normal’, and which special initiatives ought to be initiated for exactly these young people due to their individual ‘profile’.

⁴ Bent Madsen (2003). The vision of social inclusion – a risky process for the professionals and the excluded. (http://www.socialwork2003.dk/the_seminar/Bent_madsen_paper.htm).

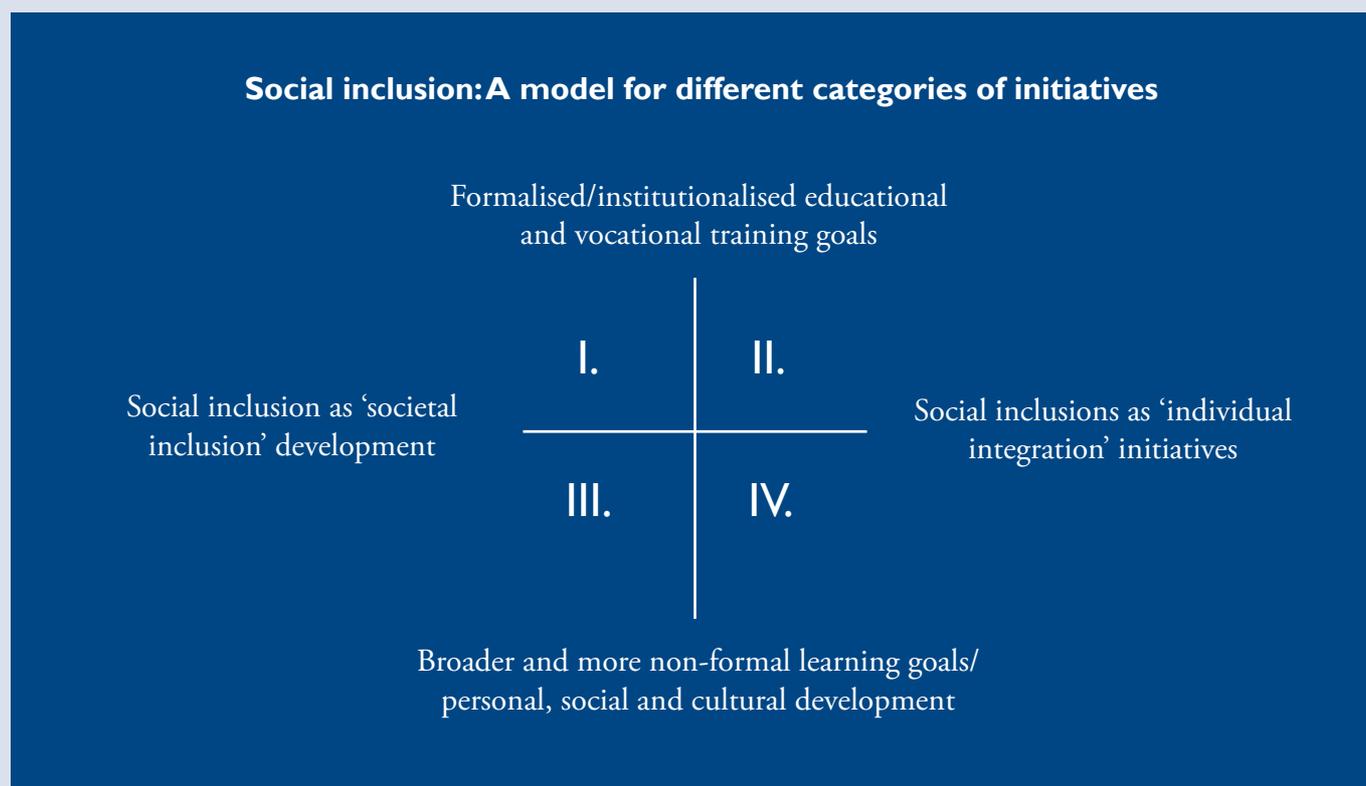
The theoretical differentiation between the two paradigms – ‘societal inclusion’ and ‘individual integration’ – is useful as a guideline, because it allows a distinction to be made between the challenge of changing institutional practices (and in a wider sense youth policy), and the description of different types of at-risk youths and what should be done especially for them as individuals.

This distinction emphasises once again the problems encountered in defining the target groups and relevant actors on a practical level. If the broad definition of social inclusion in a societal perspective is adopted, there are practically no limits to the kinds of projects and actors that in principle can be included in the SocInc-Net as long as they deal with youngsters, school and education, and formal and non-formal learning and training activities, because the focus is on how to change the ordinary institutions and social welfare opportunities.

If, on the other hand, focus is on the ‘narrow’ definition of social inclusion as special integration initiatives for youngsters already identified as belonging to defined marginalised groups or in severe risk of marginalisation, quite another type of project and actor becomes relevant for the SocInc-Network.

If such distinctions are neglected, so that any initiative that in one way or another involves ‘youth’ and ‘social inclusion’ is considered relevant for the network, there is a risk of the network becoming a mishmash involving the random selection of very different projects and actors according to very unclear and dissimilar criteria. This can have consequences for the usefulness of the project and actor database, because users may experience the findings as haphazard, incomparable and difficult to validate. Moreover, the vague distinction between projects and actors with ‘individual integration’ versus more general and political initiatives in the ‘societal inclusive’ sense might blur the political and social issues and thus become part of the social inclusion political rhetoric.

In addition to this more political question, there is another (closely connected) important differentiation between activities with formalised education and vocational training aims, and more non-formalised (or preventive) initiatives aimed at developing better life conditions and circumstances for all youths in general in the local communities. They are both important aspects of the mutual goal - better life conditions and future possibilities for the vulnerable youths, but with very different political and economical implications. Together with the distinction between the two ‘paradigms’ of the idea of social inclusion, these reflections can be illustrated in a model:



Examples of initiatives:

- I. Guarantee 'education for all' privileges in ordinary institutes of education
- II. Establish special 'second chance' schools and projects for school drop-outs
- III. Endorse better social and cultural opportunities for all young people in the local community
- IV. Realise social and cultural projects for the 'priority group' within the 'Youth' programme

A model like this, which could have been exemplified with other types of initiatives in the four fields⁵, can be useful as a practical tool for encouraging reflections and discussions about tendencies and priorities in the existing activities dealing with social inclusion of at-risk youth in the six partner cities (and in a wider sense, the European Community). This in turn will help point out the need for new or more intensified educational, social and cultural initiatives locally and internationally, selected on the basis of a differentiated overview of the situation.



⁵ December 2004 the SocInc-Net partners were asked to point out some of the projects from their city they meant are good examples of 'core' projects within the SocInc-Net frame. A list with 21 projects in total was the result, and a closer inspection of these projects showed, that all four categories were well represented (Category I: 4 projects, Category II: 8 projects, Category III: 4 projects, and finally Category IV: 5 projects).

Having discussed some of the political implications of a project like the 'Network of Centres specialised in social inclusion' and the difficulties encountered in attempting to identify and agree on accurate and distinct categories of core target groups of youngsters and relevant projects and actors regarding the goals and levels of social inclusion activities, we now take a closer look at the most important mutual part of the entire project: The website, <http://www.socinc.net>.

The website was planned to be the dynamic transnational hub of information exchange and the development of ideas and projects within the dedicated SocInc network, which *"has as its concrete goal to gather, analyse and disseminate the information available on new initiatives and projects, political as well as pedagogical, with the ultimate aim of ensuring a more flexible and adequate vocational training and guidance to be offered to youngsters in risk of social exclusion."*⁶

In the application the project's original and innovative aspects compared to already ongoing activities within the field of social inclusion of at-risk youngsters are described as follows:

"The potential for original contributions is there. In collecting, exchanging and disseminating at transnational level best practice and new concepts etc. in a value added and attractive form and promoting new transnational projects on the subject to the target groups, the network will raise awareness among European actors who eventually can turn the knowledge acquired into concrete innovations in the field of counselling and (pre)vocational training methods..."

*The innovative aspect is the fact, that major cities' administrations together with a widespread local network of different actors have agreed to exchange experience and best practice, seek common solutions etc., and disseminate the outcome to a whole range of actors including (political) decision-makers. To the best of our knowledge there has never been at city level a dedicated network on combating social exclusion of youths through education and (pre) vocational training and guidance. The network working structure including databases, mailing lists etc. will gradually be offered to other European cities via the Eurocities Association, which should ensure continuation in a much broader context."*⁷

These are grand ambitions for a project lasting only 24 months and involving partners that in general cannot be expected to be highly skilled and experienced users of ICT as the central distribution and communication media between partners from different local sites.

Though the filling in of a database template with descriptions of local projects and actors is neither very complicated nor time-consuming, the short 'history' of the SocInc-Net shows that a decision in principle to do this did not in itself encourage the local partners to go into action. The project status after six months was a total of five projects and eight actor descriptions – in other words, an average of two inputs from each city over a period of six months! Although the total number of projects and actors listed in the database increased to 134 projects and 118 actors at the end of the project period in December 2004, there is no doubt that the kick-off of the project's transnational goal (to *"disseminate information available on new initiatives and projects, political as well as pedagogical"*) was hardly noticeable in terms of the activity flow on the international website.

There are many possible explanations for this situation. Lack of experience with this kind of activity, uncertainty concerning the kind of projects and actors that should be invited to join the international website, local

⁶ From the Application (2002), Section C.1. Justification of the proposal

⁷ Ibid.

focus on establishing the city network as a preparation for 'going international', and the fact that the website at that time was, if not malfunctioning, at least in a very poor technical state seen from a user's point of view. Though all these explanations to some extent may be correct, as a research approach it seems more appropriate to compare the history of the SocInc-Net website to other similar digital or virtual communication and interaction platforms. In general, the experiences with these kinds of ICT platforms have up until now been rather disappointing. In general, there are a lot of good intentions and a great deal of good spirit among the participants, but they rarely lead to activities. Three factors in particular seem to explain this situation:

- Unfamiliarity with the virtual media and the lack of direct social interaction through face-to-face situations ('is there anybody out there?')
- Busy working days in general, and lack of priority given to tasks like these, which are the easiest to put in the 'to do' box ('nobody will notice the missing contribution')
- Oral communication culture traditions ('how shall I put this succinctly in writing?')

These three aspects are, of course, generalised descriptions, and are often used to explain the difficulties encountered when establishing learning and communication environments on a virtual basis. A very precise task like filling in a template for a database is probably mostly linked to the second bullet above, but all of the above-mentioned factors contribute to explaining other 'silent' aspects of the website.

Such reflections deal with the concept of a very dynamic and investigative transnational website designed to promote original contributions to the European development of better conditions for youth who are at risk socially, mentally, economically. In practice a less advanced website can achieve this aim, but it is remarkable that the 'less' in this case refers to what is to be found on the website aside from the database with registered projects and actors. Large amounts of prefabricated material - reports, evaluations, policy documents, prospects, working papers from local development groups and so on - might appropriately be placed on the website with a very limited use of time and resources.

The absence of material like this is the result of two closely-connected difficulties in moving websites into dynamic modes.

First, in general the pattern seems to be that the more specific and well-defined the topics on a website or in discussion forums are, the more activity there is, because the website and forums are attractive for the participants and periodical users. They represent 'value for money' in the sense that users get information and/or tips and tricks of immediate importance, whether they are about looking for colleagues with similar interests to their own, or they are about searching for answers to specific questions. At this level the reliability of the website is not at issue; rather, the relevance of the website is key, due to the close and specific connection to the daily work situation and challenges. In the case of the SocInc-Net website the question must be raised as to whether the topics are so varied and vaguely defined that their attractiveness to the potential participants and frequent users is reduced, thereby reducing the incentive to join in actively in developing the site. This question will be returned to later.

The second aspect is slightly more sophisticated. Again, with reference to research results from similar project (though in another field) there seems to be a delicate balance in projects built on the unique combination of local engagement and development tasks, and global mutual commitments and tasks.

To put it more succinctly: Projects like the SocInc-Net and many others are basically funded on the 'global' (European level) argument, but represent at the same time a very good opportunity to develop local activities (city level). This creates a fragile balance, which can lead to 'global rhetoric' but 'local focus' in practice. Keeping in mind the time/resource aspect, the question of immediate relevance, and the distance between the website and day-to-day practice, research results from other projects indicate that it is not unusual for a situation simply to arise involving local partners in local initiatives and activities, but when it comes to global

commitment, there is more hesitation on the part of prospective participants and only occasional activity, sometimes resulting in thinking like “What is the minimum we have to deliver to the global virtual community and when is the ultimate last deadline we can do so?”

Once again it must be emphasised, that the description and analysis of the website activities and the absence of examples of best practice, ‘good stories’, and new concepts for projects on a local basis or between the city partners etcetera on the international website, should not lead to the conclusion that this is a unique situation for this project compared to similar projects. On the contrary, it indicates what seem to be general difficulties when trying to build up dynamic websites with the participation of partners from different physical locations. Nevertheless, it underscores the necessity of approaching a task like building up a global website in a different way than is necessary in connection with simpler cooperation structures like partnerships between specific project actors who want to develop mutual physical projects through the exchange of experiences and possibly also students and staff in a very concrete way and with well-defined goals.

The barriers encountered in building up a dynamic website that have been mentioned so far point to the conclusion that there are several ‘good’ reasons why it is not a piece of cake to set up and run a website like the SocInc-Net’s. In particular, the complicated balance between ‘global intentions’ (wanting to contribute to the transnational website because it is a good idea) and ‘local realities’ (lots of urgent work to be done at a local level), and the relation between immediate relevance (usefulness today) and more vague and diffuse future potentials in building up a knowledge base, makes it easy to understand and to some extent accept the lack of contributions to the joint website, despite the commitments made and the numerous good intentions.

Therefore, in situations where communication on virtual sites with other rules for interaction is at stake compared to the usual face-to-face situation, it is often argued that initiatives like establishing a website or building up virtual conferences on a cooperative basis require very active and intensive management. Words like ‘facilitators’, ‘moderators’, ‘initiators’ and ‘mediators’ fly through the air, when ‘how to make a virtual knowledge base and knowledge sharing interaction’ is discussed.

The fact that virtual Internet-based communication and interaction is still in its early stages as a natural integrated part of cooperation and collaboration seems to lead many actors to underestimate the difficulties encountered in developing a well-functioning website, and the amount of resources (human resources and management) it takes to realise a virtual communication and interaction platform. It seems so simple. The technical part is ‘no big deal’ for the ordinary users and participants (but may be for the specialised webmasters), it is cheap to use, it is fast and there are practically no limits to what can be published – text, speech, pictures, sound, programmes and so on. However, the human factor often plays a significant role, and the gap between intentions and practice is often large. The experiences from the SocInc-Net and other web-based projects seem to fit the above explanations, which must be taken into consideration in the further development of the SocInc-Net website and other web-based initiatives.

Projects on social inclusion – tendencies and goals

Describing and analysing the 135 projects in the SocInc-Net database can follow different guidelines, but a way to approach the task is simply to count the number of projects that characterise themselves within the fixed categories included in the ‘Search for projects’ options. That may give an impression of the participating partners’ primary youth and project activities.

A simple registration of the number of hits for projects within one or several of the twenty possible combinations of ‘Target Groups’ and ‘Inclusive Initiatives’ shows the following picture:

Number of projects represented by combinations between ‘Target Groups’ and ‘Inclusive activities’⁵

	Target Groups:	
	Mainly socially excluded youngsters (remedying measures)	Youngsters at risk of social exclusion (preventive measures)
Inclusive Activities:		
Facilitating Teambuilding	13	22
Mentoring	24	35
Providing Alternative Curricula	14	19
Providing Enterprise Education	15	13
Providing Language and Cultural Training	8	10
Support in Transition Phases	22	26
Supporting Motivation Development	29	41
Supporting Personal Development	31	41
Supporting Transition from Primary to Secondary School	8	20
Tutoring / Buddy Schemes	9	18
Total (418)	(173) (average: 17.3)	(245) (average: 24.5)

⁸ ‘Snapshot’ January 2005. The project leaders were allowed to select as many of the options as they felt were representative for the project.

A total figure of 418, representing 135 projects, gives an average of approximately 3 hits per project. At first glance this seems like a reasonable figure. It shows that a 'typical' project lies within one of the two target groups in focus and features 2-4 of the ten possible 'Inclusive Activities' as core activities. However, in reality there is more difficulty and uncertainty involved in interpreting the figure. A closer examination of the material shows that some projects – not many, but some – have left one or both of the major options empty, and therefore they 'do not exist' if they are searched for by using the 'fixed' search opportunities. They will only be found through a manual search going through the entire body of material without trying to narrow the amount of findings by search procedures.

An approach to pointing out significant tendencies and goals through the description of results generated from automatic search procedures may therefore lead to false impressions. However, it seems appropriate to conclude that there is an apparent preponderance of projects dealing with at-risk youths (preventive measures) compared to projects dealing with youths who have already been excluded (remedying measures). Moreover, the most common way of describing the socially inclusive activities seem to involve notions such as 'supporting personal and motivational development', 'support in transition phases' and 'mentoring', and the overall picture is of a very wide range of projects and activities from 'one-day inspiration courses' for teachers in vocational schools to long-term and massive initiatives for criminal youth.



SocInc-Net actors – the balance between local and global networks

The actor list is by many SocInc-Net participants regarded as the essential part of the database registration, because it – as a potential basis for networking - represents the superior and long-term outcome of the SocInc-Net project. The actors embody the political framework (the ‘societal inclusion’ dimension) and are as well potential cooperation partners in attempts to develop new projects and initiatives for identified at-risk youngsters (the ‘individual integration’ dimension).

Although the total number of actors is almost the same as the number of projects in the database, this does not indicate a simple correspondence between the projects and the actors behind them. Many actors are listed without references to specific projects (and vice versa), and even in cities with approximately the same amount of projects and actors listed, there is no indication of a close connection between them.

An overview of the number of actors divided into cities and four categories of actors (company, NGO, public, private/public) provides the following figures:

Actors (numbers sort by city and type, January 2005)

	Company	NGO	Public	Public/Private	Total	(Number of projects
Berlin	0	15	16	10	41	40
Bologna	4	2	7	3	16	33
Copenhagen	4	0	13	0	17	18
Dublin	0	0	5	1	6	13
Glasgow	2	5	22	9	38	32
Malmö	1	3	10	2	16	8
Total	11	25	73	25	134	144)

As with the project list, there is remarkable variation in the numbers from city to city and in the spread within the major actor categories from city to city. A manual investigation of the complete list demonstrates a very broad preference for entrance as an actor in the ‘Network of Centres specialised in Social Inclusion’.

It is possible – as was done with the core projects – to divide all the actors into the four categories described earlier. However, this would not shed much light on tendencies in a transnational perspective because of the irregular criteria for the selection of actors in the different partner cities. Even if the criteria were mutually agreed upon, an important question remains: What is the idea behind the actor registration viewed from the double perspective of the local and the global?

“The innovative aspect is the fact that major cities’ administrations together with a widespread local network of different actors have agreed to exchange experiences and best practice, seek common solutions etc., and disseminate the outcome to a whole range of actors including (political) decision-makers. To the best of our knowledge there has never

*been at city level a dedicated network on combating social exclusion of youths through education and (pre) vocational training and guidance.”*⁹ This quotation from the SocInc-Net application provides a very good explanation of why the actor registration has a different function and aim compared to the project registration seen from the transnational perspective.

Whereas the intention behind the project database is to give practical inspiration to new ideas, projects, and cooperative efforts through illustrations of ‘best practice’ and tendencies in current initiatives aimed at the social inclusion of youth through education and training across city-limits, the actor database has another function. Its value and usefulness is first and foremost at a local city level.

An effective professional social inclusion network with flexible cooperation structures, easy access to political and economical support, possibilities to develop special initiatives for local youngsters at risk of social exclusion, and having political influence on the decisions made by municipalities and important institutions depends on personal relations, good experiences with cooperation and easy access to potential partners in appropriate situations. It depends on a wide-ranging network involving players from all levels, from the political decision makers to the social workers ‘in the street’, and encompassing projects and initiatives ranging from street workers and counsellors who work in close contact with the individual at-risk youth, over specialist educators in social inclusion, to institutions, schools and other initiatives, which are willing to assume the task of do something extraordinary for youths in various kinds of trouble.

In a transnational sense the description of the actors as important potential network partners at a local – not a global - level does not neglect the potential inspiration to be derived from looking at actor descriptions from other cities, and the possibility of looking for another actor who may be interested in creating a project together. But the actor registry on a local basis primarily serves to demonstrate diversity and flexible network potential and facilitates the selection of possible actors, very much depending on local political circumstances and local traditions and conditions in the field of socially inclusive activities primarily targeted at youths.

We have thus returned to the issue of the fragile balance between global commitment and local interests, but from a different angle. The analysis of the principle differences between the constitution of the lists and the function of the project list and the actor list gives a hint as to why many SocInc-Net partners expressed great interest in the actor dimension, while – from the transnational research perspective – the project dimension in many ways is more interesting as an expression of the major topics and aim for the entire SocInc-Net initiative.

Identifying the relations between local actors and networks at a community level also once again brings into focus the dissemination of information, ideas and much more in a transnational perspective. The excerpt from the application quoted above continues with the following passage: *“The network working structure including databases, mailing lists etc. will gradually be offered to other European cities via the Eurocities Association, which should ensure continuation in a much broader context.”*¹⁰

These two excerpts suggest a contradiction or at least a very unclear description of the mutual goal and the question is: What are the potentials of and differences between the two different types of network – the local and the transnational?

The actor list really does not make much sense if it is seen as potentially highly relevant for establishing committed transnational networks, and it is hard to imagine that putting all the actors together in a common e-mail list and then sending a network “we’re-all-together” message would be understood by many of the receivers in the actors’ organisations. However, at the moment it seems as if the conceptual agreement among the SocInc-Net partners is that both the project database and the actor database represent two ‘equal’ and parallel lists. Furthermore, while the question of ‘volume’ (i.e. numbers of projects) in the project list in the section

⁹ From the Application (2002), section C.1: Justification of the proposal

¹⁰ From the Application (2002), Section C.1: Justification of the proposal.

‘SocInc-Net projects on social inclusion – tendencies and goals’ was mainly discussed in terms of *representatively, comparability, validity and reliability*, the question of ‘volume’ according to the actors’ list is very different.

‘Volume’ at a transnational level when looking at the actors must be decided on the basis of the topics of relevance, commitment and engagement, which depend to a great extent on the context - ‘local’ or ‘global’? From a local perspective it is an important task to build up the right volume: Who are the important agents and actors? The motto is the more the merrier, as long as relevant actors are committed to making contributions from their specific angle to the joint local tasks. However, because this implicates actors that may be dealing with the social inclusion ‘business’ in only a very small segment of their total activities, and because it involves potential actors from almost all areas and activity levels in the local community (from the street worker to the mayor), this approach to the topic is absurd in a global sense. It would mean involving all institutions, companies, NGOs, political parties, labour market partners, the municipality, the research institutions, the cultural institutions, and so on.

In retrospect, the lack of awareness about the crucial distinction between actors and projects when combining the local and the global network aims, and the very slow kick-off of representatives in the database has led to the belief that ‘big is beautiful’ in terms of volume. This has meant that the actor list is quite full, but many of the actors listed are of no particular relevance (in terms of explicit commitment and concerned engagement) from a transnational point of view.

It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that there is ‘a missing’ link between the ‘local actor network’ and the ‘global dissemination network’ and that the overview documents, city-to-city discussions, explanations of why a local network initiative succeeded or failed, and so on, that should accompany the basic information about the actors listed in the database could be of key importance in understanding why and how the various actors represented in the database are considered to be part of the ‘Network of Centres specialised in Social Inclusion’.



Conclusions

'Is there anybody out there?' is the title of the final report from which the pages here are a slightly revised minor excerpt. This title was chosen not only because of its associations with Pink Floyd's 'The Wall' and the theme of 'breaking down the wall' – i.e. the imaginary wall between 'them and us', the excluded and the included, but also because it literally illustrates two of the ongoing and unsolved issues encountered when looking back at the two-year history of 'Network of Centres specialised in Social Inclusion' and the transnational website '<http://socinc.net>'.

The first issue has been how to delimit the core target groups of youngsters at risk of being excluded or already excluded? 'Who is actually out there?' Almost all youngsters, in reality, because everybody in that life period can be characterised as 'at risk' if their cultural and social life conditions, self-esteem and well-being, access to education and employment, skills and knowledge, etcetera are not optimal? Or 'the chosen few' already recognised and defined as more or less excluded due to problems in the family, at school and in everyday life in general?

The second issue concerns how to develop a living, exploring, dynamic and very active website across local community borders with the aim of expanding to become the website to visit for people interested in what is going on in the domain of socially inclusive activities, projects, networks, political tendencies, etcetera, with special attention to youth and their transition from school to adulthood, education and the labour market?

The 'silence' of the SocInc-Net international website has been significant, and the amount of documents, descriptions of best practice and ideas for cooperation and projects have been limited. Very few of the SocInc-Net partners have made use of the easy opportunity to disseminate additional material along with the formalised database information about their projects and activities through the web-site to 'anybody out there' in the virtual space, where the lack of face-to-face contact and the anonymity of the 'anybody' are circumstantial.

But seen from another angle – the practical outcome for the participants in a cross-city perspective and the local usefulness of the SocInc-Net activities - the picture is quite different.

The SocInc-Net project has without any doubt instigated many activities and called attention to the fact that there are a great number of initiatives and actors at many different levels – from social street work over special education and vocational training activities to political decision-makers – engaged in a mutual goal: To generate better life conditions and a more social, cultural and economically inclusive community for vulnerable, disadvantaged, marginalised youth dealing with poorer conditions than others in the transition from childhood to adulthood. In this sense, the diversity of the participating projects and actors is one of the really valuable outcomes of the project, together with the easy access to potential new cooperation partners through the database information. Moreover, in a narrower perspective, the direct contact and the physical meetings between the partner groups representing the six cities, as well as the insight into activities and initiatives in the different cities gained at the biannual meetings has produced constructive spin-offs, for example, the exchange of disabled students between some of the cities.

More significant, though, is the impact the SocInc-Net project seems to have had on a local basis in the participating cities. Local websites have been established, local newsletters released, local networks have been strengthened in ways that match the local definitions of the core target groups of youngsters and the relevant kinds of initiatives that should be included in the Local Social Inclusion Network. The 'diversity problem' in the transnational sense is a positive force in the local community sense, because it enables local solutions to be found to local problems based on local traditions and resources.



Despite the positive local outcome and the constructive relationships between the participating partners established through several meetings and the exchange of ideas and experiences during the last years, it must be emphasised that one of the main reasons for establishing the project was the transnational cooperation and collaboration between cities in the European Community. Therefore, the international website remains the core initiative, and reflections on the difficulties encountered in establishing this site are important. The main aim should not be to view the creation of the website in retrospect, but rather to look at it with the intention of identifying general problems and possibilities that arise when constructing websites like this, and – if it is decided to continue the SocInc-Net website in one or another way – what should be considered in a future perspective.

The lack of a standard of reference on mutual definitions and categories had great influence on the development of the website database but cannot be explained simply by disagreement or a lack of interest in such ‘academic’ discussions among the partners. It reflects the nature of the term ‘social inclusion’ and the different connotations that exist of the idea of social inclusion depending on the point of view. That is why a great deal of attention has been put in the report on definitions and paradigms connected to the term ‘social inclusion’ and the reason why everybody, regardless of their political orientation, can agree on the necessity of working towards a more inclusive society and education for all as demonstrated by going through some of the important origins of ‘social inclusion’ and ‘education for all’ as political mantras within the policy of the European Community.

The crucial matters are, on the one hand, the implications at a practical ‘political’ level: The more imprecise the term ‘social inclusion’ remains, the fewer the possibilities of influencing the social and educational institutions and the political leadership both locally, nationally and internationally to intensify action plans and initiatives toward more inclusive legal rights and opportunities for the weakest in society. This is simply because a vague and broad use of the term ‘social inclusion’ makes it easy for anyone to argue that they are contributing to a more socially inclusive society, no matter what they are (not) doing in practice.

On the other hand, there is the more practical question of the usability of a website with ‘social inclusion’ as key words. At a time when there is very hard competition between websites to be ‘the best website to visit’, the demand on reliable, comparable and relevant information and easy access to them is essential. To be attractive, a website with an ‘anonymous’ public (everybody interested in social inclusion and youths), must facilitate information searches and other options in a very precise and convincing way. This can be done, for example, by distinguishing between whether it is possible to find almost everything going on in the field (‘volume’) or simply the projects and actors that are deemed to be the most important and worth looking closer at (‘excel-

lence'). Alternatively, a distinction could be made between activities related to already marginalised youth ('individual integration') or more preventive initiatives aiming for better inclusive conditions in general ('societal inclusion'). A further distinction could be made in terms of whether the target group comprises first and foremost school-dropouts, ethnic minority groups, young persons with mental or physical disabilities, etcetera.

If a database on closer inspection appears to be a 'mishmash' with limited guidelines on how to extract information from specific parts of the total database, and tends to give the impression of relatively random or maybe even haphazard findings, it will not be very attractive and it will be difficult to encourage potential users to become frequent visitors.

Such topics may seem somewhat theoretical if the aim is to build up a website with a database like SocInc-Net's through a practical learning-by-doing way, based on expectations of collective great enthusiasm and commitment to 'filling in' the website. However, a balance must be found for implementing 'old traditions' for developing practice in 'new surroundings', that is, the virtual media with its dissimilarity to usual ways of communication and interaction modes within the sphere of social work and inclusive activities involving vulnerable and/or marginalised youth.

The use of the Internet as an easy and flexible way to create global networks draws attention to the purpose of different types of networks – 'global' or 'local', 'open' or 'closed'?

The SocInc-Net aims for open network options in the sense that the 'closed' network between the six partner groups has defined one of its major mutual goals to be to provide dissemination of information on actors and projects as a starting point for new open networks by linking either concrete projects or actors.

In principle, the project registration has almost the same rationale on local and global levels: To provide information and contact possibilities among the actors in the field. But the actor list is more double-sided. On the one hand it is aimed at presenting an overview of the ways relevant actors deal with social inclusion at all levels, from political decisions makers over various initiatives involving special projects for at-risk youth as only a tiny part of their activities (from education institutions to theatre companies), to the social street workers within the local community (city). On the other hand, it has the potential for promoting international cooperation and networking across city limits and national borders. However, this potential is based on other criteria for relevance. The choice of core actors varies depending on whether it is made from an international perspective or from a local perspective. The connection is tenuous between, for example, a local municipality in one city and the confederation of private industries in another and a music ensemble in a third city, at least in an immediate sense as equal potential partners in a network of actors committed to socially inclusive activities.

Thus the actors' network at a local level is diverse in terms of both the aims and functions of the different actors, while the global network is of more relevance between partners in the same institutional or political area, for example, educational institutions dealing with disabled youth, social and pedagogical actors working with criminal youth in the suburbs, artist groups or companies try to develop new ways of 'inclusion through art and performance', and so on.

Finally, in relation to the future, it is necessary to mention the more technical side of the SocInc-Net common website.

As mentioned previously, the usability and functionality of the website facilities are, to put it mildly, not optimal. Though the second platform is much better than the original and the web design (in an esthetical sense) is good, the search facilities are not yet up to standard. The use of the search facilities in a modern 'logical' way is not only met with limited success in many situations, it can, especially when free text searches are made, be directly misleading. However, such problems can be dealt with, and the webmaster group is aware of them.

Nonetheless, an improved technical setup of the search facilities and other features will not solve another aspect of the functionality of the website, and this brings us back to the starting point of this report: The question of definitions and categories – the fixed options to be filled in when registering a project or an actor. These major guidelines are substantial as criteria for determining who or what is relevant/irrelevant for a website like this, and, as argued earlier, if almost ‘everything’ is classified as relevant, the website is of limited use, because it lacks a distinct profile. The fixed options related to the specific groups of at-risk youngsters, the types of projects and actors, the core activities, the organisation level etcetera is very imprecise at present.¹¹

With ‘only’ about 150 projects, the same number of actors and a limited geographic spread (six cities) it is still possible to go through the lists of projects and actors manually, but if the database expands in terms of both numbers and geography, it can only be strongly recommended that a decision be made as to whether it may be the right time to change such options. It is easy enough to rearrange the existing lists, and prepare the website for the time to come.

The future of the SocInc-Net common website has been an underlying issue throughout this report. Looking back on the last two years of the existence of the ‘Network of Centres specialised in Social Inclusion’ there is no doubt that a lot of good experiences and practical outcomes have been derived from the SocInc-Net initiative, especially on the local level in the six participating cities and among the closed network of the partner groups across the city limits. However, it must be concluded that one of the major mutual tasks – a dynamic, living, developing and, in an international perspective, the website on crucial initiatives within social inclusion of youth at risk of being excluded or already excluded – has not yet been fulfilled. The impression is that a continuation without any changes will not lead to a ‘sudden death’, but to a rather rapidly decreasing use of the international website and a lack of continual maintenance of information on new projects, actors and initiatives. This scenario does not imply any faults with the SocInc-Net idea itself; it simply reflects the experience of many similar initiatives with lots of stated commitment but too little action in practice.

If it is decided that the SocInc-Net website should be expanded either as a stand-alone initiative or associated with an initiative like ‘Eurocities’ (mentioned as a possibility in the application for the project in 2002), the final conclusion is the recommendation to use the transition phase - from the termination of the funded SocInc-Net development period to the future situation as a possibly permanent international initiative - to evaluate the actual design and management with focus on the following topics:

¹¹ A generalised matrix as inspiration for a possible revision of the major categories and subcategories was developed by me during the SocInc-Net period: Langager, S. (2005): Social inclusion through education and training - proposals for definitions and categories (included in the original report but can also be found on: www.socinc.net/documents/generic/socialinclusionthrougheducation.pdf).

Recommendations for a future SocInc-Net website and similar web-based initiatives

1. Website management

Experiences in general emphasise the difficulties in maintaining and developing websites with wide goals without a very active and devoted responsible management group.

1. It is necessary to insist that all participants contribute to the website – good intentions and idealistic visions are up against very strong realities that - due to the character of the virtual media – makes it the easiest thing to leave ‘undone’ in a busy working day.
2. The more vague and unfocused the common setting, goals and tasks are, the more intensive the specific task-defining and ‘authoritative’ management of the activities in connection to the website must be.
3. Since the mutual network centred on the website builds upon relatively strong local networks with legitimate sub-interests, it is all the more necessary to be exact and well defined in relation to agreements on managing the resources in the balance between the local and the global level.

2. Website design (technical)

Faced with hard competition between different websites and the advanced possibilities to search across websites using search machines like Google it's important to be aware of the necessity of giving website design and the resources it demands high priority.

1. Easy and well-functioning free text search options that are not dependent on pre-selection of fixed options (categories) must be considered as the modern standard.
2. A database aimed at representing potential cooperation partners and projects must be up to date. Therefore, it is important that precise and well-functioning (semiautomatic) ‘expiry date’ procedures are in place, so that old projects do not remain listed as ongoing. It may be a good idea to make a sub-database area with ‘expired projects’ as an inspiration catalogue.
3. The greater the total number of registered projects and actors, the more important an advanced overall categorisation option is (allowing projects and actors to be sorted by city, alphabetically, by date, etcetera).

3. Social inclusion categories and ‘fixed options’

Because of the very vague and undefined nature of the term ‘social inclusion’ it is necessary to be very specific about the main categories within this topic if the database shall fulfil its purpose.

1. The actual definitions and ‘fixed category’ options do not seem to support a relevant and clear distinction, and should be changed. One way of doing this is to look at the user profile – what seems ‘logical’ to search for? For example: Location, kind of youngsters (disabled youngsters, school-dropouts, culturally marginalised ethnic youth, etc.), kind of activity (education, vocational training, non-institutionalised activities, secondary school initiatives, etc.), level of activity (practical, administrative, etc.), duration of the initiative and interest in cooperation with others. Another way would be to make a clearer distinction between ‘societal inclusion’ and ‘individual integration’ activities and initiative.
2. Developing the database must pay considerable attention to the significant difference between aiming for ‘volume’ (as many projects as possible) and aiming for ‘excellence’ (fewer core representative projects). Both strategies are possibilities, as well as the solution of selecting ‘volume’ concerning projects and ‘excellence’ concerning actors.
3. A clearer understanding of the distinction between the ‘local’ and ‘the ‘global’ levels is important for the further development and expansion of the international SocInc-Net website. Important actors at a local level are not necessarily of relevance in a transnational ‘global’ perspective, and if/when the international database is released from the six original participating cities, this distinction between what is of local and global relevance respectively will become even more important.

4. Other website options

A dynamic website offers more than ‘raw’ database information, and the attractiveness for users depends on what is to be found besides lists of projects and actors.

1. The difficulties encountered in widening the SocInc-Net website with examples of best practice, success stories, discussion forums, and dissemination of information about what is going on within the field of social inclusion of youths in the European Community must lead to intensified activities providing this dimension. The experience so far clearly emphasises that this does not ‘just happen’ even though the participants have expressed their commitment to such mutual tasks. A real kick-off probably requires investment in event makers.
2. A strategic short cut might be to divide the website into more major categories like ‘EU on social inclusion today’, ‘Best practice’, ‘Articles on at-risk youths’, etcetera.
3. Another approach could involve branding original and attractive options to form an ongoing series of ‘stories from practice in EU’, but naturally, this cannot be done without the investment of many work hours.

