

socialplatform

To: José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission

cc: Vladimir Špidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities
Catherine Day, Secretary General of the European Commission
Nikolaus Van der Pas, Director-General, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities

Monday, 28 April 2008

Dear President,

Re: The EU social Agenda – Let's portray the EU as an actor of social progress, not a threat to social rights

Ahead of the European elections, the renewed EU Social Agenda is to set a vision for the EU we want to live in: According to Social NGOs, the EU social Agenda must set the EU as an actor of social justice, solidarity and progress rather than a threat to social rights. Europe is not about creating a society of winners and losers but about ensuring a cohesive and inclusive society in a context of a globalised economy.

Working with or voicing out concerns of the poorest or the most disadvantaged, social NGOs draw their experience from community, neighbourhood or social local work. They are at the fore-front of experiencing social changes and therefore make recommendations for a cohesive and inclusive Social Agenda:

- *A must have: a social agenda that fits the social reality*
- *Get back to the basis: fundamental rights are the raison d'être of Europe and social policies*
- *The future of the EU is social and sustainable: growth and jobs alone do not deliver lasting well-being*
- *Serious about fighting poverty? Time to invest in solid social infrastructures*
- *Responding to demographic change by promote a life-cycle approach to policy making*
- *An economic boom in the social services' sector: it deserves support*
- *Start an equality revolution – further legal steps are needed to advance equality for all*
- *Promoting fairness, solidarity and sustainability is a task for all Directorate General. Social policies alone cannot do the trick*
- *LEGISLATION is the most cost-effective tool to achieve social objectives*
- *Do not re-invent the wheel: strengthen and improve the Open Method of Coordination*

- *Be coherent: Social policies deserve their own budget*
- *How to achieve an ambitious EU Social Agenda? By counting on active citizens' organisations*

A must-have: a Social Agenda that fits the social reality

In order to be effective, the Social Agenda must reflect people's reality and the existing social differences between Member States. The Lisbon Strategy hardly takes people's every day life into account: presenting it as a success story when too many people are confronted with an increase of basic goods' prices, precarious working conditions, low quality jobs, threatens the legitimacy and trust in the European project. A social agenda that responds adequately to challenges faced by people in Europe would certainly narrow down the gap between the EU and its citizens.

Europe's reality in 2008 portrays 78 million people living in or at risk of poverty in the EU-27 Member States, among them 1 child out of 5 aged 0 to 15. Today's reality is that an individual's socio-economic status at birth is still one of the most important determinants of future well-being and life chances as an adult. The Social Agenda of the EU must propose concrete measures to tackle existing and prevent new poverty, exclusion and inequalities.

Get back to the basis: fundamental rights are the *raison d'être* of Europe

Fundamental rights are at the core of the European project and rightly so. Not only the Social Agenda must be based on and refer to the values mentioned in the EU Treaty such as human dignity, equality, solidarity and human rights; but this is not enough: it must design mechanisms to ensure the implementation of these values. In that respect, the Social Agenda should use the wording of the EU treaties rather than the cold terminology of "access" and "opportunities" as outlined in the communication on the social vision for 21st century Europe: These concepts are unclear, and do not reflect the social reality. In a changing environment, fundamental rights are and must remain the cement of Europe's unity.

Change the paradigm to social and sustainable: growth and jobs alone do not deliver lasting well-being

Thanks to the Social Agenda, the EU can become a pioneer in adopting and applying indicators of development that go beyond the limitations of GDP calculation; take a lead in developing a model based on a green and social market economy, high levels of social protection and human rights driven approach to policy making.

In other words, this entails a change of paradigm in which EU Social Agenda supports the implementation of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy, in which, Heads of States and Governments committed to *"create a socially inclusive society by taking into account solidarity between and within generations and increase the quality of life of citizens as a precondition for lasting individual well-being."*¹ Economic growth does not automatically increase people's well being, nor does it reduce social exclusion and poverty. The EU we want to live in is an EU that combines economic, employment, social and environmental objectives.

¹ Conclusions of the Council of the European Union, 15/16 June 2006, *Renewed EU sustainable development strategy*

Serious about fighting poverty? Time to invest in solid social infrastructures

Political responses to fight against poverty and social exclusion are fairly well known: social protection systems, minimum income schemes, redistribution of wealth through taxes, labour law and quality jobs, universal public services are concrete political responses that the EU must commit to address in the EU social Agenda; because the best way to prevent social exclusion and poverty is to invest in social infrastructures for all.

The so-called European social model is based on that approach and yet it is under increase pressure: atypical work, “working poor”, the conditionality of social benefits, unequal access to health services, increasing prices for essential public services like energy supply services, risk eroding these social achievements. Investing in social infrastructures must be part of the vision the Social Agenda sets for the EU.

Responding to demographic change by promoting a life-cycle approach to policy making

Concretely addressing longer life expectancy and low birth rates means targeted and adapted actions across the lifespan of individuals: enabling them to get a proper education and training, to take care of their family, to work and to fully participate in society as an active citizen. These processes no longer happen in a succession of life phases but often simultaneously. Quality care facilities in the community, family-friendly work settings, care leaves, flexible working hours and compensation policies for carers are key elements of any modern societies. They help reducing poverty of women, children, elderly and disabled people through enabling employment and a healthy work-life balance. However the support for people with caring responsibilities should not be limited to the employment field. It should also allow people to study, get training or engage in volunteering activities.

An economic boom in the social services’ sector: it deserves support

The Social Agenda, while recognising this reality must target creating favourable conditions in Europe to help the sector to develop. An ageing Europe implies that more social and health services will be necessary to support the elderly, children and people living with disabilities. In other words, social services are and will remain a booming economy. This includes an integrated and coherent policy approach to develop infrastructures, ensuring a sustainable financing, incentives for workers to join the sector, the promotion of quality social and health services and decent employment conditions.

It also means that the Social Agenda has to support the specificities and added-value of non-for profit social service providers and the recognition of the work done by millions of committed formal and informal carers.

Start an equality revolution – further legal steps are needed to advance equality for all

The Social Agenda must include a clear recommendation to broaden the scope of anti-discrimination legislation for all grounds and policies beyond Article 13. Within the “Social Package” to be presented in June 2008, you are to adopt new legal steps to protect all people from all forms of discriminations. Social NGOs believe that the fight for more equality in Europe requires new initiatives from the Commission to ensure equality for each individual living in the EU and avoid any hierarchy of rights.

Eight years ago, the so-called “Race equality” and “Employment framework” directives were outstanding achievements for a Europe based on values and fundamental rights. Today, the EU must not miss this opportunity to build on this legacy to adopt new legal steps to protect all people from all forms of discriminations.

Promoting fairness, solidarity and sustainability is a task for all Directorate General. Social policies alone cannot do the trick

The Social Agenda being a European Commission document involving all DGs, must present clear commitments from all sectors to fulfil their role and promote fairness, solidarity and sustainability. It is an illusion to believe that investing in social policies alone will work: All EU policies must play in that game and be mutually reinforcing to fight against exclusion and poverty, ensure equality for all and fight against discrimination. Below are examples of actions that we think are important from each Directorate General:

- Mainstreaming the clauses of general applications of the Lisbon Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights in all policies;
- Justice and Home Affairs: adopting a holistic and rights-based approach to immigration and promote social inclusion of migrants in the host countries.
- Public Health: promoting non-discrimination in the access to health services and ensuring mental well-being across all EU policies.
- Internal Market and competition: In case of conflict between EU Internal Market rules and Fundamental Rights or the general interest, the EU has to make sure that Fundamental Rights and the general interest prevail.
- Enterprise: recognising of the added value of non-for profit undertakings and creating favourable conditions for their activity and development.
- Education: Education and Training policies are conducive of equal opportunities, including for migrants and ensure life-long learning possibilities that they are accessible to all, especially those most excluded from society.

LEGISLATION is the most cost-effective tool to achieve social objectives

The vision set in the European Social Agenda must not forget about legislation and make clear commitment that the EU will use this tool to protect effectively people living in Europe. European legislation has this unique power to protect from discrimination any woman and man residing in the EU, from Paris to Warsaw, from Stockholm to Lisbon. Legislation remains the most efficient tool to achieve the social objectives of the EU treaties and guarantee the respect of people's social rights.

Do not re-invent the wheel: strengthen and improve the Open Method of Coordination

The Social Agenda must make use of the existing tools and strengthen them, in particular the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the field of social inclusion and social protection. Although it is only complementary to EU legislation and should not replace it, the European Commission can strengthen it by:

- Setting up clear political targets such as apolitical declaration on the need to eradicate poverty (with relevant EU-wide targets);
- Developing qualitative and quantitative indicators that fit with a social and sustainable approach;
- A clear focus on results
- Structuring an inclusive dialogue with social NGOs, that would ensure that grass-root actors have a say in policy making

Be coherent: Social policies deserve their own budget line

The renewed Social Agenda has to make a clear commitment that EU structural and cohesion funds will help to achieve the objectives of the Social Agenda. In particular it is crucial that:

- the European Social Fund (ESF) is not only used to improve “employability” of people, but contributes actively to improve “social infrastructure”;
- More social quality indicators need to be incorporated into the ESF selection process;
- A specific EU funding scheme to develop innovative approaches, pilot projects and actions to fight poverty is developed.

In that sense, albeit the Structural Funds remain largely the main funding instrument to deliver social objectives, one should not forget to promote synergies with other programmes and support coherence across the multiannual framework programmes (eg DAPHNE, PROGRESS, the Public Health Programme, Europe for citizens’ programme). Combating social exclusion and promoting social justice requires a mix of programmes from different equally important fields.

How to achieve an ambitious EU Social Agenda? By counting on citizens’ organisations

Any decision on the priorities and implementation mechanisms of social policies should truly involve people living in Europe. The renewed Social Policy Agenda must take the lead in bridging the gap between governing and governed and set out clear indications how EU policy-making will involve to the highest degree representatives of public interest organisations. Particular efforts are needed to directly involve in decision-making those most excluded from society.

This goes well beyond mere consultations and requires a set of tools that would support the implementation of the article 118b of the Treaty of the European Union, as modified by the Lisbon Treaty – which introduces participatory governance as a democratic principle governing the EU.

This process would seek to ensure that all voices are heard and not only the ones with more resources to voice it out.

Europe must take a lead in setting up high standards of social justice, solidarity and progress. The Social Agenda is an opportunity, do not miss it.

Should you need further information, do not hesitate to contact us

Yours sincerely,



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