

SOLIDAR Round Table: Investing in people - the Importance of Social Infrastructures



4 November 2009

Hosted by **Bernadette Vergnaud MEP**

Co-chaired by **Proinsias de Rossa MEP** and **Elisabeth Schroedter MEP**

Summary

A panel made up of hosts, Bernadette Vergnaud MEP, Proinsias de Rossa MEP, Elisabeth Schroedter MEP as well as representatives from SOLIDAR members Arbeiterwohlfahrt (Germany) and CSV (United Kingdom) exchanged views on the topic of social services and volunteering. Speakers noted that while the economic crisis is turning into a job crisis, and a shift to the centre-right has taken place in European politics, new alliances need to be built in order to guarantee equality, solidarity and sustainability in European social policy.

Panel members highlighted the importance of putting in place a legal framework for social services at EU level by establishing a sectoral directive on Social Services of General Interest (SSGI) that might be accompanied by a Framework Directive on Services of General Interest (SGI). Competition in the field of social services should be based on quality, not price, and carried out in the framework of regulated social markets. Applying the logic of competition and internal market principles and rules to social services does not work; it can only work if they are adapted to the specificities of the social services and their users.

Volunteering can be instrumental in view of labour market inclusion. Participants, however, agreed that we clearly need to look beyond this and not forget the value volunteering brings to improving skills, a sense of belonging, usefulness and purpose, and being an expression of active citizenship, all results that help to achieve meaningful social inclusion.


Full Report

Conny Reuter, Secretary General of SOLIDAR, opened the first Round Table - held in the framework of the **Together for Social Europe project** - by explaining the political and economic background behind which the debate on social services of general interest and volunteering is taking place.

First of all, Mr. Reuter pointed out that Europe is being confronted with a financial and economic crisis which is now starting to heavily affect the labour market. This crisis increases the risk of exclusion for vulnerable and disadvantaged persons in society. Systems of social security are one of Europe's strongest assets in this crisis. Social services of general interest can actually serve as a driver of European recovery since a significant amount of jobs is created in this sector.

The jobs crisis urges us to put the European Social Model back at the heart of European policy making. This is a difficult goal to realise given the current political climate that exists in the European Institutions and the Member States. The European elections in June 2009 have brought about a shift to the centre-right in the European Parliament. This imposes a new challenge on the progressive political forces and socially-driven civil society organisations. Only by cooperating closely and forming new alliances, we can stop the European Social Model from being corroded.

Conny Reuter concluded by saying that the two upcoming European years will provide a special opportunity to launch a debate on the topic of social services and volunteering. 2010 will be the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, thereby creating the possibility to obtain political commitments to address challenges related to the 80 million people in Europe who live in poverty or are at risk of poverty. This will be followed by the European Year of Volunteering in 2011.



Bernadette Vergnaud MEP (S&D Group, France) began her intervention by pointing out how essential social services close to citizens are for the cohesion of European societies. She stated that solidarity should remain a core value of the European Union. Since the internal market has been at the centre of attention to EU policy makers for a while now, often competitiveness rather than solidarity is the main guideline in the framework under which social services fall. This wrong orientation should be addressed in the revision of the Post-Lisbon Strategy (Europe 2020 Strategy), as well as matters such as socially and environmentally sustainable housing, and transparency.

Ms Vergnaud argued that the current logic in European law that is applied to the field of social services does not correspond to reality. Instead of adapting economic provisions to the field of social services of general interest, a framework should be designed to the specific nature of these services. With the entry in force of the Lisbon Treaty, this can be changed. However, given that the Commission led by President Barroso did not support requests to draft a proposal of a Framework Directive on SGI and/or of a sectoral directive on SSGI during the past legislature, and that the Commission President just has started his second mandate from 2009 to 2014, things do not look very promising.

The challenges for social EU legislation to come out are vast, said Ms Vergnaud. Although health services have been excluded from the services directive in 2006, inequality in this sector is increasing. Strong cooperation between Member States with respect to subsidiarity should combat this trend. The Commission so far did not propose any substantial measures to tackle the problem of health inequalities in a way that prevents social segregation to increase. The tendency to liberalisation that has been set off with the Bolkestein directive can have devastating effects on the public interest if abided in the care sector. She deplored that the directive on patient mobility and patient rights in cross-border healthcare did not contain an explicit reference to the general interest character of these services.


Finally, Ms Vergnaud spoke out against the terminology of “consumers” of social services that is often used. This approach undermines the fundamental *rights* of citizens to social services, and creates inequality.

Mathias Maucher (SOLIDAR) presented the contribution of the German SOLIDAR member organisation **Arbeiterwohlfahrt (AWO)** about social services from a social worker’s perspective. AWO provides a wide range of social services to all groups of society. From its practical experiences, AWO calls for a stronger focus on the individual needs of people relying on social services. The example of Gökhan, who was assisted by AWO after suffering from depression and lack of self esteem, illustrates that individual guidance provided by community-based organisations rather than treatment by the social and health care system according to defined procedures, ensures self-determination, choice, self-help and participation of users.

In order to realise this kind of social services, certain legal and policy framework conditions need to be fulfilled. Adequate funding for sufficiently qualified staff, quality working conditions for staff and quality management and assurance systems should be guaranteed. If the EU wants social services providers to compete with one another, this should happen on the basis of quality, not on price.

Prionsias de Rossa MEP (S&D Group, Ireland) outlined three broad criteria key to policy choices on social services of general interest: equality, solidarity and sustainability. First, whilst some Member States respond to the economic crisis by cutting down provision in public services, equality as a goal in itself must be put back at the heart of policy making. This means that if measures to tackle the crisis will increase inequality, they can never be the desired policy choices.

Second, solidarity between individuals is key to cohesion in society. Facilitating volunteering is one way in which solidarity can be encouraged. However, Mr de Rossa warned not to rely solely on volunteering and more importantly voluntary organisations, i.e. social NGOs, for the provision of core social services. Solidarity is also needed with the users of social services. In this context he reiterated the statement made by Bernadette Vergnaud not to substitute the concept of citizenship with the concept of consumers.



Finally, Prionsias de Rossa called for sustainability of provision and financing of social services of general interest. The provision of social services has to be reliable in the sense that both in times of economic downturn and growth, people should not be dependent on volunteering or charity.

These key criteria should be implemented by integrating economic, social and employment policy. As the EU lacks far reaching legislating competences in the social field, the Open Method of Coordination should be reinforced as to create pro-active EU policy. The Lisbon Treaty provides opportunities for this, which should be exploited by a coalition of progressive groups in the European Parliament, trade unions and NGOs.

Piotr Sadowski presented a project called Capital Volunteering offered by **Community Service Volunteering (CSV)**. Over 5000 people have been helped with this project, in which many of the volunteers have experienced mental health problems themselves.

A number of policy recommendations follow from the “on the ground” experiences of CSV. In the UK, volunteering is a highly recognised form of providing services, and is the only Member State to have a Minister for the third sector. Mr Sadowski called on other Member States to actively promote volunteering, for instance by supporting the European Year of Volunteering in 2011.

Other recommendations from CSV included the training of staff in the public sector in order to better receive volunteers, a focus on quality not quantity of outcomes, and the inclusion of volunteering in the mid-term review of the European Structural Funds program 2014-2020. Finally, in the revision of the Post-Lisbon Strategy, CSV noted that GDP should not be the decisive indicator. Instead, well-being must be the main objective of the strategy which implies that volunteering should be an essential part of it.

Elisabeth Schroedter MEP (Greens, Germany) reiterated the statement made by CSV that volunteering has not just a positive effect on economic performance, but contains an important intrinsic value as well. This insight has not been integrated in the Commission’s proposals on volunteering. Ms Schroedter argued that the Commission treats social services as separate from health care services, volunteering and social housing. In her view, these matters should be dealt with in an integrated way. Also, services provided to persons in need without official recognition such as health services for undocumented migrants should have a status.

Ms Schroedter brought up a question: Why is there no European legal framework on social services as it is indispensable for having a second pillar next to the services directive? Without such a framework, the Commission will keep enforcing competition law and internal market law through court cases. Resolving this on Member State level will pave the way for an economic approach to social services. Progressive European organisations and political groups should fight against proposals like privatisations since they will come up with another Commission presided by Barroso.

Follow-up and Recommendations

The first round table organised in the framework of the Together for Social Europe project is just the beginning of a series of events. On 2 December 2009 a second Round Table will be organised dealing with social/active inclusion and decent work and involving SOLIDAR members from Austria and Romania.

SOLIDAR is looking forward to joining forces and advancing together on the topics discussed during the Round Table and suggests the following:

1. Hearing on SSGI in the EP in the first half of 2010

In view of a follow-up at policy level, SOLIDAR would like to suggest to MEPs to organise, joining forces with other European networks of social service providers, a hearing in the EP on how to best develop a legal and policy framework at European level for SSGI.

We plan to discuss problems and open questions as well as suggestions on how to adapt rules and modalities on service organisation, provision and financing at both European level and within Member

States to guarantee the delivery of universally accessible, affordable, continuously provided social services of high quality. This could take place in the first half of 2010.

2. Make full use of stipulations on SGI in Lisbon Treaty

Art. 14 Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union defines a joint responsibility for both the European Union and Member States to work towards setting up legal and policy frameworks for SGI, in particular concerning organisational and financial modalities, in a way to allow them to fulfil their missions. Protocol No. 9 on SGI defines principles which should guarantee that in case of conflict between the application of Community law (in particular on competition, state aid, public procurement and freedoms of internal market) and general interest, the latter should prevail.

SOLIDAR is in favour of seriously advancing towards a maximum of legal security for service providers and users. This could be best achieved by adopting a sectoral directive on social and health services of general interest that could be established in a broader context of a Framework Directive for SGI.

3. Service Directive and Directive on Patient Mobility and Patient Rights

SOLIDAR sees a need to monitor the application of stipulations of the Service Directive after transposition into national legislation. What will be the impact of the implementation of those new or adapted national rules on the organisation, provision and financing of social services?

We also need to monitor the effects from the new Directive on Patient Mobility and Patient Rights on access to health services for all European citizens, as developments in the field of health care driven by the dynamics of the fundamental freedoms of the internal market are expected to “serve as a model” for similar developments in the field of social services, in particular in the sector of long-term care.

4. Public procurement in the field of SSGI – Socially-responsible public procurement

Currently an EP own-initiative report on new developments in public procurement is being drafted that will focus on how to set incentives for green and socially-responsible public procurement. SOLIDAR would be interested in being involved in this process to focus on issues related to the use of public procurement in the field of social services.

Together with other European networks of social NGOs we could also bring in insights and expertise from a recent process in view of drafting a Commission Guide on Socially-Responsible Public Procurement.

5. Social economy

SOLIDAR strongly advocates, in a broad coalition of social economy organisations, for a renewal of the Intergroup on Social Economy that should also focus on social and health services of general interest. The objectives, values and working methods of the social economy must be taken into account when developing EU-level policies and regulations as social economy plays a crucial role by combining profitability with solidarity and thereby strengthening social, economic and territorial cohesion, generating social capital and promoting active citizenship.

Social economy organisations link economic activities with the realisation of goals of social, health, employment and housing policy and thereby are not only responding to (new) needs in the community but also are an important provider of employment for vulnerable persons/disadvantaged groups

6. Volunteering

SOLIDAR wants a full recognition of the political, social and economic contributions that citizens make to society through volunteering.

Framework conditions should be developed to attract volunteers, including investment in the qualification of volunteers through lifelong learning programmes in both informal and non-formal learning.

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