

## SOLIDAR contribution to Europe's social reality stocktaking exercise

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1. Social reality stocktaking as part of Citizens' Agenda – Old, current and forthcoming Social Agenda**

In the framework of its Citizens' Agenda the European Commission on 10 May 2006 adopted a Communication which set out a number of policy initiatives to deliver results for Europe, comprising a stocktaking of social changes and trends with a specific emphasise on questions of access, opportunities and solidarity. To reflect own analyses prepared by the BEPA an Interim report to the 2007 Spring European Council announced a consultation on the social issues and challenges facing Europe. It was launched in early 2007 to help generate a debate on social realities amongst a wide range of stakeholders across Europe.

SOLIDAR welcomes the initiative taken by the European Commission to start a reflection and discussion process with the aim to identify major trends affecting European societies, to describe current social realities across Europe and to elaborate on challenges ahead for European societies and on the role Europe could play in adequately tackling them. It came timely and the social reality stocktaking exercise rightfully becomes one element of the Citizens' Agenda. However, SOLIDAR does not consider that in general questions of societal well-being and happiness of European citizens are most appropriately addressed by the European Commission and that they consequently should not rank high on its agenda. What should be at the heart of debates and policy initiatives are questions related to social rights and the social situation, i.e. the living and working conditions, of European citizens.

SOLIDAR would like to see the Citizens' Agenda supportive of bringing about a Europe also delivering on the social and citizenship dimensions of the European integration process in order to rebalance framework conditions set and dynamics created by the economic and financial integration of the EU. In SOLIDAR's view this need has become even more obvious and crucial in order to better take into account – even more so after the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty for Europe in referenda in France and the Netherlands – concerns and expectations raised by many European citizens and civil society organisations, including social NGOs.

SOLIDAR expects that the analyses prepared by the BEPA and this consultation will contribute to advance broadly shared views on major trends and challenges related to essential elements of social realities across Europe. This even more so as replies will feed into the process of elaborating a Social Agenda for the period 2008 to 2010 which will set out policy priorities, strategies and instruments to implement the social policy dimension of the revised Lisbon strategy. SOLIDAR was supportive of the Social Agenda 2000 to 2005 as it promoted policies in the fields of gender equality, anti-discrimination, solidarity between generations, and the European Initiative for Youth. SOLIDAR calls for a strengthening of the solidarity objective of the current Social Agenda, i.e. of measures to fight poverty, social exclusion and different forms of discrimination and to promote equal opportunities, in the 2008-2010 Social Agenda. It will support all efforts to "mainstream" social policy issues and goals into EU policy-making across the board. When designing, implementing and evaluating objectives and measures under the 2008-2010 Social Agenda, SOLIDAR calls for a policy approach comprising regular exchanges, consultation and partnership between public authorities at local, regional and national level, employers' associations and trade unions and NGOs.

## **1.2 Focus of SOLIDAR contribution**

SOLIDAR's contribution will focus on this "feeding-in" aspect of the social reality stocktaking rather than assessing in detail the analyses and descriptions presented in the BEPA Consultation Paper "Europe's Social Reality" and in the Communication "Opportunities, access and solidarity: towards a new social vision for 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe", COM(2007)726 final of 20 November 2007, adopted as part of the non-legislative package on issues concerning the single market and services of general interest including social services of general interest.

## **1.3 Short presentation of SOLIDAR**

SOLIDAR is a European network of 42 non-governmental organisations in 20 countries (17 of which Member States of the EU) working in development co-operation and humanitarian aid, social policy, social service provision, migration and lifelong learning. Our partners and strategic allies are the trade unions and the Party of European Socialist (PES). SOLIDAR members are civic movements and service providers at the same time. They offer social services for vulnerable, socially excluded, disadvantaged and underprivileged people and social services responding to needs across the life cycle. They deliver a broad range of quality services comprising child care facilities, children's holidays, adult education, ambulance and first rescue services, day-care centres for elderly and disabled, old people's homes, advice service in many fields of social work and support for migrants and asylum seekers. As civic movements they contribute to social cohesion of local communities and encourage civic engagement, as well as mobilise social capital. As service providers members of SOLIDAR are organising efficient and high-quality social services close to people. The users of our

services are at the same time clients and partners in the provision of the service delivered.

#### **1.4 Social Europe and the European Social Model**

SOLIDAR and its member organisations advocate for a European Social Model which is supportive of a socially inclusive Europe, providing economic security for all, fighting poverty, inequality and discriminations, promoting equal opportunities for all across all fields of life. Such an approach is rights-based, builds on comprehensive and integrated social policies and is grounded on the availability, accessibility and affordability of services of general interest, in particular in the social, health, employment, education and housing sectors.

In 2006 and 2007 SOLIDAR organised two conferences (in Austria and Germany) and a trans-national campaign around the topic of a social Europe (cf. [http://www.solidar.org/Page\\_Generale.asp?DocID=14407&la=1&langue=EN](http://www.solidar.org/Page_Generale.asp?DocID=14407&la=1&langue=EN)), to be followed up end of June 2008 by a third event in France on which assessments and requests contained in this contribution also build on.

## **2. Brief assessment of the BEPA Consultation Paper and some comments on the Commission Communication**

### **2.1 BEPA Consultation Paper “Europe’s Social Reality”**

Fundamental changes, including in values, are transforming our societies. As also underlined by the Green Paper “Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations” of 13 March 2005, profound shifts are bringing significant social structural changes. Ageing population and falling birth rates, an increase in migration flows and new dynamics in the working life cycle along with transformation of welfare systems call for elaborating partly innovative and tailored solutions to a wide range of problems related to employment, social protection, gender equalities and the integration of migrants within Europe. As a consequence of the demographic and societal changes the need for quality social, health, employment and education services, as also offered by social NGOs, amongst them the members of SOLIDAR, will increase.

Of the keys trends identified during the stocktaking exercise and already set out in the Consultation Paper, for social NGOs the most relevant in SOLIDAR’s view are: the transition to a post-industrial knowledge and service economy (entailing changes in the workforce); the impact of demographic and societal changes on the organisation and financing of the welfare state (also implying a more caring needs to be organised outside families) and gender equality; a stronger focus on the citizen as a consumer across the board; the trend towards individualisation (often entailing a decrease in membership and in general endangering involvement in civil society organisations). SOLIDAR wants to stress the importance of the issues elaborated on and the relevance of a number of results presented under section 3. “Issues in raising social quality” of the Consultation Paper.

- This holds e.g. for unequal access to and usage of lifelong learning opportunities biased to those that already have education and with an reinforcing effect on educational inequalities and a negative influence on social mobility and the transmission of life changes.
- This is also true for strong institutional thresholds to equal access to employment opportunities, the barriers of poverty, ethnic and language diversity when it comes to access to educational opportunities.
- Building on knowledge from our members active on the ground in the field of migration and integration services and based on a trans-national project recently terminated (cf. [http://www.solidar.org/Page\\_Generale.asp?DocID=14389&la=1&langue=EN](http://www.solidar.org/Page_Generale.asp?DocID=14389&la=1&langue=EN)) we can underline the statement that for migrants “there remain huge problems of discrimination, unemployment and access to decent public services such as housing, health and good schools” (p. 38 of the Consultation Paper) and that problems are particularly acute for undocumented migrants.

SOLIDAR shares the view set out in the Consultation Paper that social, employment, health, education, housing and anti-discrimination policies should include measures to actively address different social barriers in order to reduce or overcome them. SOLIDAR

supports strategies and policies aiming at setting up conditions and guarantees for equal opportunities based on a rights-based approach. SOLIDAR underlines the statement made that “... *equal opportunity is a weak goal unless accompanied by strong efforts to ensure that all citizens have access to the resources, conditions and capabilities that make theoretical equality of opportunity real and meaningful.*” (p. 5). In our view this can only be effectively safeguarded by implementing fundamental and social rights for individuals and social groups. In this regard particular attention has to be devoted to (multiple) disadvantaged, discriminated or vulnerable persons and groups, although measures which help realising equal opportunities at and from the start should be designed to embrace all members of society.

SOLIDAR deplores that neither the Consultation Paper nor the Communication comprise a separate (sub-)section dealing with active citizenship and the role of volunteers, although section 1.6 mentions the importance of social capital, and insofar does not reflect one element of Europe’s social reality to the extent volunteering is part of it. Taking due account of this element seems even more relevant to avoid the somewhat one-sided assessment of processes of individualisation and of the role of the citizen as consumer. European citizens also are users (e.g. of social and health services of general interest).

## **2.2 Commission Communication “Opportunities, access and solidarity: towards a new social vision for 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe”**

SOLIDAR considers that Europe’s changing social realities (section 2.) as enumerated and described in the Communication “Opportunities, access and solidarity: towards a new social vision for 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe” of 20 November 2007 in general correspond well with realities of European societies as already chartered by research institutions, national and supranational organisations and scholars. It also mentions “old” and “new” social risks and differences in income and opportunities across regions as well as between rural and urban areas as well as the incidence of child poverty, with negative mid- and long-term effects on social inclusion. It does, however, not (explicitly, at least) take up two important insights from the Consultation paper from sub-section 3.8 which seem crucial for SOLIDAR:

- The first is the statement that high levels of inequality and poverty go together (p. 29).
- The second is the statement that “*if the consequence of existing inequalities is to embed disadvantage between the generations, the society will lose out as social mobility declines and all the talents of the people are not developed to the full. This is a particularly crucial point in the knowledge economy where the ability of parents to buy educational advantages for their children, ..., becomes more decisive*” (p. 31)

In SOLIDAR’s view the Communication does also not put sufficient emphasis on the existing and often increasing unequal distribution of income and assets and (also consequently) of a whole range of life chances. In addition, in the large majority of EU Member States the gap between the 1<sup>st</sup> decile of the income pyramid (i.e. the 10%

economically most well off of the population) and low-income groups is widening. The Consultation Paper (p. 31) tentatively refers to this issue by mentioning the possibility of a reduced wealth trickle down effect with regard to benefits of recent periods of economic growth. In order to strengthen solidarity and social cohesion within European societies, SOLIDAR therefore underlines the need to set up or reinforce, within Member States, policies also aiming at a more effective redistribution of wealth. The same holds for policies to advance a more equal distribution of life changes in order to effectively reduce the transmission of social risks and promoting equal life changes at and from the start. This danger clearly is referred to under sub-section 3.8 “Does inequality matter?” of the Consultation paper, stating the high levels of inequality and poverty go together. To prevent European policies and legislative measures from producing counteracting effects in this regard, SOLIDAR proposes to broadly make use at European level of social impact assessments.

In guise of summing up SOLIDAR believes that the stocktaking exercise constitutes one additional valuable base to further advance the analysis and debates on a social Europe. Many elements contained in the descriptions and analyses can be used to newly formulate or to reformulate objectives and guidelines for European policies. The social reality stocktaking once again clearly shows that Europe faces common challenges which also need to be addressed jointly and in a co-ordinated manner, if its social dimension is to be strengthened. To do so existing instruments of hard and soft law seem to be sufficient, however, surely need to be further developed, as already indicated above.

### **3. Key areas for action and SOLIDAR comments on Europe's role in this regard**

SOLIDAR in principle supports the agenda of opportunities, access and solidarity as sketched out in section 4. "Key areas for action" in the Communication and shares the related investments (in youth, in fulfilling careers, in longer and healthier lives, in gender equality, in social inclusion and non-discrimination, in mobility and successful integration, in civic participation) required as identified.

SOLIDAR generally welcomes balanced flexicurity concepts. When implementing them, not least along the flexicurity principles agreed upon in December 2007 by the EPSCO Council, the policies and measures devised within Member States should, however, be respectful of a set of orientations and requirements in order not to benefit only or principally those in stable employment or with jobs needing high professional skills. For SOLIDAR, labour law is about protecting efficiently individual and collective rights and promoting fundamental values and therefore needs to be inclusive and not create further disaggregated labour markets. A set of measures actively addressing inequalities in the labour market, eliminating discrimination in recruitment procedures, ensuring access to promotion and training, is needed, not least in the framework of flexicurity. In coordination with social protection systems, labour law in our view should support active policies bringing the people in precarious situations and far from the labour market back into employment. SOLIDAR supports EU's role as promotor of exchange of experiences on successful policies and related institutional framework conditions, building on common principles or guidelines insofar they take due account of the requirements set out above.

As network of NGOs providing (personal) social services SOLIDAR would like to underline the importance of measures aiming at the empowerment of persons. This element and objective of quality social service provision, already mentioned in the sub-section dealing with investments in social inclusion and non-discrimination measures, indeed should become a priority for policy makers also at European level when it comes to promoting equality and the reduction or eradication of discriminatory measures.

In the fields of migration and integration SOLIDAR supports the conclusions made that "*new forward-looking approaches are needed to promote integration of migrants, encouraging mutual respect in a two-way process of exercising rights and meeting obligations*" (p. 8f). Europe could and should be instrumental in supporting the respect of fundamental rights of all workers, including migrants, regardless of their status or nationality, a guarantee which must include undocumented migrants.

The renewed and modern Social Agenda, as announced by the European Commission for summer 2008, will need to include concrete initiatives, measures and programmes to address problems like poverty, precarious work, inequality, discrimination and gender equality in a joint and co-ordinated way across Europe. SOLIDAR will support all efforts to setting out a "strategy for upward social convergence".

In designing and implementing the Social Agenda, policy makers at European level should, however, bear in mind the important role of comprehensive social protection schemes (including an effective management of interfaces) for an inclusive social, health, employment, education and housing policy. The same holds for the social infrastructure, implying the need to organise and finance quality services of general interest which are available, accessible and affordable, in particular in the fields of social, health, employment, education and housing. SOLIDAR claims and would like to recall that they are key factors in maintaining or increasing opportunities for life changes of European citizens and an indispensable precondition to advance social justice in today's societies.

SOLIDAR in general supports an active role of the EU in the development of policies, non-legislative and legislative initiatives according to the competencies and responsibilities defined in the Lisbon Treaty, to catalyse change and to support and accompany structural reforms within Member States in the array of fields covered by the social reality stocktaking exercise. Three aspects will be commented to some more detail:

### **3.1 Effective implementation of existing legislation and of other forms of governance**

- The EU has an active, even pro-active role to play in ensuring the effective implementation of fundamental (social) rights as stipulated in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, referred to by the Lisbon Treaty. In fields such as (gender) equality, non-discrimination, workers' protection, social services or integration of migrants the potential of these Treaty rules should be exploited.
- SOLIDAR considers appropriate and urgent to allow the adoption of the key directives in the social field which are currently blocked (temporary agency, working time, portability of pension rights).
- In the field of social services of general interest, SOLIDAR is supportive of developing common principles and guidelines for service quality at European level and open to fixing requirements to be fulfilled to achieve defined service qualities.
- The definition of an appropriate balance between the demarcation and complementarity of competences between the EU and Member States and the use of European legislative actions on the one hand and the Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC) on the other hand It is often not easy and subject to changes across time. The OMC on social inclusion in particular was instrumental in raising awareness and devising joint policy objectives and processes for problems such as the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the last years. Although principally supportive of processes organised according to an "OMC-logic", SOLIDAR, however, has to put some question marks with regard to the efficiency of the OMC or OMC-like processes, already today and for the near future. This not only due to a lack of real commitment by many stakeholders, amongst them national governments. It is more importantly linked to an albeit still diffuse perception which

nevertheless seems to suggest that one soon might end up with an increased number of OMC or OMC-like processes, as already existing are further continued, others extended or reoriented, again others newly being set up. SOLIDAR fears that this might lead to mixing up policy processes and consequently also priorities, to an overload for stakeholders as to their capacities to effectively contribute to and participate in these processes and to an overload to steer OMC-processes and to co-ordinate them with other processes, e.g. the reporting on the implementation of National Reform Plans as element of the revised Lisbon Strategy. To conclude, SOLIDAR considers a restricted number of OMCs should become stronger and more visible processes, better integrated with the Lisbon Strategy (feeding in and feeding out) and with more leeway for learning and exchange on good practice and questions of transferability to other institutional contexts and for policy dissemination.

### **3.2 Rebalancing of economic and social objectives**

- According to SOLIDAR's analysis, the initial rather good balance between the objectives of economic and employment growth, environmental protection and social cohesion of the Lisbon Strategy had been lost at the time of the mid-term evaluation and report. Since the revision, a slightly more balanced approach seems to prevail.
- As already underlined in the SOLIDAR position on the Lisbon Strategy social dimension, if there (and rightfully so) seems to be a strong focus on investment and research, there is not enough mention of the need to equally financed education, professional training and lifelong learning. SOLIDAR calls to re-emphasise the financial basis of these fields in the forthcoming Social Agenda 2008-2010.
- SOLIDAR proposes to give a more important place to the concept of "Decent Work", which includes quality social protection and public services, equality for women and men, equal opportunities for all and a highly developed social and civil dialogue, in the Lisbon Strategy and accordingly in the Social Agenda.
- In our view, impact assessments should always take into account social consequences and priority should be given to the defence of the general interest (in spite of economic and internal market policy requirements)

### **3.3 Promoting the role of civil society and of civil dialogue at European level**

- SOLIDAR calls European decision makers to actively make use of consultations and other forms of civil dialogue at European level, as laid down in the Lisbon Treaty, when analysing social changes and related problems and challenges. They should also listen to the voice of civil society and their broad range of experiences from the ground (in a rule since years and decades) in order to take actions closer to economic and social realities when designing policies and when evaluating strategies, programmes and measures. The civil dialogue is likely to allow European institutions and NGOs to reinforce mutual understanding, to identify common interests and to develop cooperation. By creating model roles it will also pave the

way for better interactions through less formal channels which could e.g. be used to support awareness raising and possible EU action at local or regional level.

- The organised civil society, bringing together millions of European citizens who are also involved in the advancement of general interest objectives and acting as a relay of information and opinion between the citizens and the authorities, can help European institutions to counteract a trend where many citizens experience an increasing distance from European policies and often have questions about EU's concrete role in improving the social realities they live in, not least by emphasising the beneficial effects of Community law and EU policies and programmes. A strong and continuous involvement of NGOs in the civil dialogue at European level might insofar contribute to developing a higher level of trust of European citizens in European institutions and policies. It is also a valuable tool to make policy processes more transparent and their outcome better understandable to a wider public. This is in particular true for organisations such as SOLIDAR members which combine in their array of activities the three functions of service provision, advocacy work and membership. Via their members and their volunteers they are able to reach out to a large number of European citizens.

Brussels

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