



The European Commission unveils the Renewed Social Agenda

An important new set of proposals was adopted by the European Commission on 2nd July 2008 reaffirming the importance of the social dimension as an integral part of the Lisbon Strategy.

The Renewed Social Agenda¹ builds on the results achieved by the EU in promoting growth and jobs, gender equality and, better working conditions as well as in tackling discrimination and improving social cohesion generally. It is motivated by the recognition that globalisation combined with technological, demographic and environmental changes makes it important to review the means of pursuing the fundamental social objective of an harmonious, cohesive and inclusive society. It also recognises the need to adopt an holistic approach encompassing different policies and instruments.

The agenda is based on three basic principles:

- generating **opportunities** for more and better jobs and increased welfare;
- improving **access** to good quality education, social protection, health care and social services;
- promoting **solidarity** between individuals, social groups, different generations, regions and Member States.

The agenda takes account of the results of a broad public consultation carried out by the Commission in 2007 on *Europe's Social Reality*² in identifying seven priority areas:

- Children and youth – tomorrow's Europe
- Investing in people: more and better jobs, new skills
- Mobility
- Longer and healthier lives
- Combating poverty and social exclusion and reinforcing social services
- Fighting discrimination and promoting gender equality
- Opportunities, access and solidarity on the global scene.

In order to achieve these objectives, the agenda proposes a mix of measures in six broad policy areas:

- **EU legislation:** e.g. new laws and regulations to combat discrimination based on religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation discrimination beyond the workplace, enhancing patients' rights in cross-border health care, improving the functioning of European Works Councils.
- **Social dialogue:** encouraging social partners to make full use of the possibilities offered by Dialogue at the European level.

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¹ Renewed social agenda: Opportunities, access and solidarity in 21st century Europe (COM(2008) 412 final), for further information [please click here](#).

² For more information please click on [Europe's Social Reality](#).





- **Open Method of Coordination:** strengthening and utilising the full potential of the Social OMC by applying some of the procedures and working methods used under the Lisbon strategy, with a view to improving the political commitment and visibility (i.e. by setting quantitative targets), strengthening the positive interaction with other EU policies, enhancing analytical tools and the evidence base, and stimulating ownership, monitoring, mutual learning and peer review by Member States.
- **EU funding:** ensuring effective use of the EU's Structural Funds, the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund and the PROGRESS Programme on employment and social solidarity.
- **Partnership, dialogue and communication:** encouraging the involvement of people businesses, NGOs, regional and local authorities and other stakeholders and consultation with these.
- **Ensuring that all EU policies promote equal opportunities, access and solidarity:** by assessing the social and employment impact of all new major initiatives before they are introduced.

"Europe's social dimension has never been more relevant. It is inseparable from the EU's strategy to stimulate growth and provide better jobs for Europeans."

José Manuel Barroso,
President of the European Commission

Vulnerable groups access to employment

With only two years to go to 2010, the employment rate in the EU is still below the 70% target set in Lisbon in 2000. Low employment among older workers, young people, those with disabilities and those who have suffered an injury or illness at work is a major part of the reason. Over much of the EU, less than half those aged 55 or over are in work and 20% of those under 25 have never had a job.

A Peer Review in Vienna in April described how initiatives taken by the social partners in Austria have succeeded in helping people in these groups find jobs or stay in work. Three websites were created under these focusing in turn on work and older-workers, work and disability and health and safety at work. Through these websites, people looking for a job can find details of vacancies and employers can find examples of good practice, links to advice services and information on the benefits of employing the people concerned and having a healthy workplace as well as on the incentives available.

Two further, more traditional, initiatives were designed to provide direct assistance to young people – aged 15-25 – and to those with an occupational injury or illness.

Since 2005, the *Give youth a chance* scheme has helped more than 1400 young long-term unemployed find work through the support of a personal coach over a nine-month period. The *Health Foundations* project helps those who have suffered an occupational illness return to work and over the past year has achieved a 65% success rate.

Lessons learnt

The Austrian experience demonstrates the importance of intermediate labour markets in helping the vulnerable make the transition to full-time permanent employment. It also shows the need to provide a mix of support and advice, sometimes backed up by financial incentives, while emphasising the importance of personal responsibility and of avoiding excessive costs. It equally indicates the particular importance of providing support to migrant workers as well as working within established and reliable structures, namely those provided by the social partners and NGOs, rather than inventing new ones.

Although the peer reviewers recognised that some aspects of the Austrian experience are difficult to transfer because





of the close involvement of the social partners, others elements are clearly transferable and have aspects in common with developments elsewhere. There are already, for example, similar internet platforms in Spain and Norway, developed occupational health and safety schemes in

Finland, a *Back to Education Allowance* for young people in Ireland and a *New Deal for disabled people* in the UK.

For more information and all documents [please click here](#).

Building a stronger Social Inclusion Process

As part of the Revised Social Agenda package (see above), the Commission adopted a Communication on Reinforcing the 'Social OMC' on 2nd July 2008.

In order to assist the Commission in the preparation of this Communication and to inform the subsequent debate, the EU Network of Independent experts on Social Inclusion examined the impact of the social inclusion strand of the OMC and, in particular, the extent of public awareness of the OMC and what it involves, the place of the OMC in the political discourse as well as its effectiveness in tackling and preventing poverty and social exclusion.

The experts' analysis suggests that awareness of the social inclusion strand of the OMC in most Member States is limited mainly to a narrow band of senior officials, decision-makers and politicians and to the NGOs which are directly involved in the process. There is very little media or public awareness of the OMC and quite limited political debate about the process. In only a few countries does there appear to be much interest amongst the academic community or significant social partner engagement.

The impact of the OMC on policies, as well as the perception of its effectiveness in this regard, varies widely across countries. The process is perceived as being really effective and as an important part of the policy-making process in only a small number of Member States, these being in most cases those where there is significant political leadership on issues of poverty and social exclusion in general and the Social OMC in particular.

Despite often being criticised for its low political status and importance, its low visibility and failure to spark public debate,

and in spite of the failure of most countries to integrate it into their national policy-making processes, the Social OMC is frequently perceived as having had an indirect and gradual impact on policy development – in particular through promoting the circulation of ideas and concepts and helping countries to identify and agree on key social priorities. It is also credited with helping to keep poverty and social exclusion on the EU agenda during a difficult period. It has also helped highlight the importance of ensuring that economic, employment and social policies are made mutually reinforcing.

According to the experts' report, if the process is to be significantly strengthened, action is needed in five key areas:

- raising the political status and importance of the Social OMC;
- increasing the awareness of the process at both EU and (sub-)national levels;
- making the process more rigorous, challenging and comparative;
- strengthening governance in relation to social inclusion issues;
- increasing the exchange of learning and good practices.

Suggestions for action

The national experts' analysis and the Network Core team's assessment of the Social OMC identify 12 main actions to address these challenges. If implemented as an integrated package, these could be the basis for a roadmap to achieve a substantial strengthening of the process:

- Instituting a political dialogue involving Member States and the EU institutions





to ensure that the objective of social cohesion is put at the core of the EU's post-2010 strategy and with the same status as the growth and jobs objectives.

- Ensuring a better integration of the process into national policy making, for instance by reassessing the timing and structure of the social OMC cycle (e.g. by extending it to four years after 2010, with progress reports in the intervening years).
- Promoting more high-level political debates and discussions of the EU Social OMC objectives and activities.
- Developing a proactive communication strategy at EU, national and sub-national levels targeting the media, which would highlight countries' progress in achieving their social objectives.
- Agreeing and setting appropriate national (and, when relevant, sub-national) targets based on robust analysis which would represent individual countries' commitments and which would be strictly monitored.
- Introducing a much more rigorous approach to monitoring and evaluation with an increased focus on results and more independent analysis of progress made in achieving objectives.
- Building on the experience of the focus on child poverty and well-being in 2007, deepening the analysis of (thematic) issues and EU policy learning while ensuring a broad approach to poverty and social exclusion.
- Making clear recommendations to

Member States on actions needed to achieve their agreed national targets.

- Developing an agreed guidance note on effective mainstreaming of social inclusion objectives in all relevant (sub)national policies highlighting the key role of social impact assessment.
- Agreeing a guidance note on preparing effective and coordinated regional and local action plans on social inclusion.
- Agreeing minimum standards for countries on the effective involvement of stakeholders in all phases of the preparation, implementation, evaluation and monitoring of social inclusion policies in general and of the Social Inclusion Process in particular.
- Enhancing exchange and learning as an integral element in the EU Social Inclusion Process by resourcing an increased range of opportunities for exchange and learning under the 2007-2013 *Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (PROGRESS)* and improving dissemination of results.

The report concludes that, while all these measures are important, unless efforts to raise the political status of the Social OMC are successful then the other actions will either not happen or will only have a limited impact.

For accessing the report on the main findings of the EU Network's analysis and their suggestions for building a stronger Social Inclusion Process [please click here](#).

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For more information see: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/progress/index_en.html

Further information on the Peer Reviews and the Policy Assessment as well as all relevant documents are available at: www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net

More information on policies and activities on Social Protection and Social Inclusion in the EU can be found at: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi

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