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Informal Meeting of  
Ministers of Employment and Social Affairs  
Guimarães, 5-7 July 2007

Contribution of the Social Platform

*The Social Platform would like to thank the Portuguese Presidency for inviting Social NGOs to the Troika meeting preceding the Informal Meeting of Ministers of Employment and Social Affairs in Guimaraes on 5-6 June 2007.*

*This paper is the response of European Social NGOs to the questions raised in the background paper on "Improving policies, improving results – A new impulse for employment and social policies coordination", prepared by the Portuguese Presidency for the meeting. It is submitted as a contribution to the debate among Ministers.*

Our key messages:

- Social objectives are crucial to reinforce the legitimacy of the EU. Complex processes and a multiplicity of objectives diminish the visibility of the “social role” of the EU and discourage people and civil society actors from engaging in European policy making.
- The lack of social objectives in the Lisbon guidelines means in practice that policies at the European level are coordinated to pursue “narrow” employment, macro and micro economic objectives to the detriment of more ambitious objectives.
- A change in narrative is not sufficient to bring about social changes. The Lisbon integrated guidelines have to be revised by adding a clear reference to social objectives, including to the one on micro and macro-economics.
- Building a cohesive society, achieving equality for all and ensuring the provision of quality care should be part of the key priorities of the EU. These challenges require political leadership and go against the call for a moratorium on social legislation or a restrictive macro-economic approach.
- The European Employment Strategy (EES) and the open method of coordination (OMC) on social protection and social inclusion - even if they are good in generating debate on good practices – lack visibility and are not sufficiently delivering on the agreed objectives.
- The strength of EES and OMC objectives would be reinforced if they were part of a clear political project aiming at securing for all people across of Europe a set of social rights. This set of social standards could be based on the revised Social Charter, the EU Charter of fundamental rights and the revised version of the Recommendation 92/441/EEC of 24th June 1992 on common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social assistance in social protection systems.

## INTRODUCTION

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The Social Platform welcomes a debate among Ministers on the coordination of employment and social policies. This topic is indeed particularly relevant in the context of the revision of the Lisbon integrated guidelines and the mid-term review of the Social Agenda. Before answering the questions raised in the background paper, the Social Platform would like to make the following preliminary points.

### **Social objectives are crucial to reinforce the legitimacy of the EU**

Part of the EU's legitimacy comes from its capacity to improve people's well being. The more the EU is seen as an actor that contributes to the achievement of European and national social objectives the more likely it is to enjoy public support. Complex processes and a multiplicity of objectives risk diminish the visibility of the "social role" of the EU and to discourage people and civil society actors to engage in European policy making. What is needed is a clear political commitment for a more social Europe.

The Social Platform therefore believes that it is crucial for the EU to maintain a highly visible field of work in the social field with clear objectives understandable by all. This means, for example, more emphasis on the fight against poverty and social exclusion, equality between women and men and equality for all, promotion of high level of social protection, quality services of general interest accessible to all.

### **Employment and economic policies have to serve social objectives**

At present a lot of coordination work is taking place in the Commission to serve the "growth and jobs" Lisbon objectives. However, the interpretation given to these objectives varies among EU institutions and Member States and the message sent to people across Europe is not clear. The European Council, for example, has repeatedly reaffirmed that "*growth and jobs is at the service of social cohesion*" and that the "*common social objectives of Member States should be better taken into account within the Lisbon agenda*".

However, the fact that these social commitments are not reflected in the Lisbon integrated guidelines means in practice that policies at the European level are coordinated to pursue "narrow" employment, macro and micro economic objectives, to the detriment of more ambitious objectives. Social NGOs have expressed on many occasions their concerns that this limited focus:

- Creates confusion between means and objectives. Do we want growth for the sake of growth or to create more inclusive and cohesive societies? If it is the latter how do we assess that? (the so called “feeding-out” process);
- Tends to oversimplify what is required to achieve social objectives. More growth does not automatically mean less inequality. Increase in employment but with poor working conditions and pay does not deliver social inclusion, but can even lead to an increase of poverty;
- Means that employment and economic issues are becoming more and more dominant in social policies while social issues are still not sufficiently taken on board in employment and economic policies;
- Diverts funds allocated to broad social objectives to employment objectives;
- Is not likely to promote support for the EU among people.

The Social Platform therefore thanks the Portuguese Presidency for re-opening the debate on the objectives that should guide policy coordination at the European level.

## **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS**

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### **1. In your view, which areas and dimensions of social and employment policies should be strategic long-term priorities for Europe and the Member States?**

For the Social NGOs the following objectives should be included in the strategic long-term priorities for Europe and its Member States:

- Supporting a “society that cares”: demographic and social change is creating new challenges for our societies. One of them is about our individual and collective capacity to care for dependent people in society which may need specific support for a period of their life or for all their life i.e. children, persons with disabilities, people with illnesses or older persons. Women have, and are still, largely taking the responsibility of caring for others. This has a serious impact on their professional, social, financial and political participation in society. It is also striking that in many countries families that care for children or elderly people are more likely to be at risk of poverty. The EU and Member States need to reflect more precisely on the economic value of care and the need to develop high quality care, aimed at ensuring full social inclusion and participation of all people in the community.

- Making equality for all a reality: the awareness of the need to acknowledge and respect the diversity of human beings is growing throughout Europe (with some regrettable exceptions). The presidency's background paper makes reference to disadvantaged groups (in the text box on 'Adequate social standards and active inclusion'). However it is becoming increasingly essential that those groups are identified specifically. We need "desegregated categories" including for instance women, young, elderly and disabled people, individuals from ethnic and religious minorities, and immigrants. The issues of gender and multiple discrimination also requires a particular attention and needs to be build-in the various categories. Many Member States do develop specific policies for different groups, why are European policies, not taking this sufficiently into account? In addition, specific measures must be complementary to mainstreaming policies, in order to ensure that society is, in itself, inclusive for all these groups.
  
- Promoting cohesive society and people's trust in the future: the growing social inequalities and the constant emphasis on "security" are undermining the foundations of Europe's prosperity i.e. policies based on solidarity, high level of social protection, services of general interest, decent jobs and commitment to eradicate poverty. The efforts and the resources allocated to empower every single person to participate in society and to live in dignity have to be reinforced. This will include the need to develop and/or maintain high quality services of general interest, to ensure quality employment and high levels of social protection, including minimum income schemes sufficient for a dignified life. The fight against poverty and social exclusion must not be seen in isolation from the fight to maintain high level social standards for the whole of society.

## **2. In which areas and dimensions of social and employment policies can Europe further enhance its coordination efforts?**

The above mentioned priorities as well as the crucial issue of services of general interest all point out to the need for Member States and the European Union to take a leadership role in managing demographic and social change.

This clearly goes against the call for a moratorium on social legislation or a restrictive macro-economic approach. However taking into account the requirements of the stability pact as well as the overall pressure to reduce taxes, Social NGOs believe that the issue of redistribution mechanisms and investment to promote a cohesive and inclusive society needs to be debated at the European level. We therefore believe that coordination efforts should first take place between economic and social policies.

This being said, the issue of care (see box below) is an example of how policy ramifications can be developed for social objectives. This also shows that the clarity of the objective to be achieved and the support it enjoys play a key role in generating synergies and cooperation among different actors. However one has to acknowledge that public authorities, at the European and national level, are not always well equipped to address issues in a transversal and holistic way.

#### **Policy coordination in the field of care**

Care is a good example of the type of synergies that should take place:

- *Between economic and social policies* to 1) ensure the financing of quality care services and 2) a decent income for people in need of care;
- *Between employment and social policies* to 1) support individual's choice to care by promoting parental and other leaves 2) flexible working hours to ensure a work-life balance and to allow people that need daily care to work 3) a limit to atypical contract detrimental to a work-life balance 4) training and good employment conditions for carers;
- *Between employment, enterprise and social policies* to 1) unlock the potential of the care sector in terms of job creation 2) Ensure that the jobs created are accompanied by good working conditions and pay;
- *Between employment, immigration and social policies* to protect the rights of migrants that are taking jobs in the care sector or to support families and individuals in need of care.

### **3. What specific measures would be useful for further improving the European Employment Strategy and the Open Method of Coordination and turn them into more effective instruments, both in terms of procedures and results?**

The European Employment Strategy (EES) and the Open Method of coordination (OMC) are useful in that they preserve national competences while encouraging Member States to identify common objectives and to share their experience in achieving these common objectives. The fact that these processes address issues that matter to people i.e. employment, social protection and social inclusion, make them even more precious in bringing the EU closer to people. However it is clear is that these processes - even if they are good in generating debate on good practices – are lacking visibility and do not sufficiently deliver on the agreed objectives.

For Social NGOs these are some of the following elements that should be taken into consideration in order to improve European processes:

- Member States have to take more seriously the political commitments they make at European level and be ready to allocate the resources necessary to achieve results. This requires more coordination between national and European objectives and instruments;

- A strong link between specific targets and recognised European social standards. We indeed believe that the strength of European objectives at the core of the EES and OMC processes would be reinforced if they were part of clear political project aiming at securing for all people across of Europe a set of social rights. This set of social standards could be based on the revised Social Charter, the EU Charter of fundamental rights and the Recommendation 92/441/EEC of 24th June 1992 on common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social assistance in social protection systems.
- Good governance and mobilisation of actors at all levels is absolutely essential to ensure that these processes are not just producing 'cut and paste' reports but generating a dynamic that delivers on the agreed objectives. The experience of the inclusion OMC has shown that the new relations and alliances created through the mobilisation of actors has been one of the important 'value-added' elements of this process. Measures to mobilise actors include: active participation of people directly affected by policies, continuous dialogue with NGOs and increased efforts to simplify the language use in relations to the OMC;
- The driving role of the European level also has to be emphasised. The European Parliament should, for instance, play a much more active role in raising Member States' accountability in achieving European objectives. European NGOs have also proved how important is their role when it comes to assess the various national action plans and in mobilising and connecting civil society actors across Europe. However considering the differences that exist among Member States it is important that general analysis develop at the European level reflect more closely the regional specificity;
- Support the addition of a system of benchmarking specific to the various disadvantaged groups. This would be useful in assessing the impact of policies on these groups as well as in monitoring progress comparatively overtime and between Member States. Social NGOs support the work of the Portuguese Presidency to stimulate a debate on the need of EU indicators in the area of social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

**Benchmarking the integration of ethnic minorities in the labour market**

Member States should in this context make use of the report of the High level Advisory group on the integration of ethnic minorities in the labour market in setting a framework for benchmarking. The integrated Employment guidelines 17 to 24 are particularly relevant to ethnic and religious minorities and third country nationals and more visibility needs to be given to identifying and benchmarking the needs of these groups.

#### **4. How can the OMC's coherence and articulation be enhanced, both internally (role of EPSSCO, committees and other instruments) and externally (political and public visibility, interconnections with other policy areas)?**

One of the objectives of the streamlined OMC on social protection and social inclusion was to create a strong social pillar at the European level that could stimulate stronger interaction between social objectives and other policies i.e. the EES and the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines. However, as we have mentioned in our preliminary points, the narrow focus on "growth and jobs" has not stimulated this increased interaction. The process that was meant to be a two-way process (*feeding-in and out*) has transformed into a unilateral set of priorities.

For the Social Platform, the key requirement to improve OMC's coherence and articulation is to reaffirm at the highest political level the importance of OMC objectives and the need for all the other EU policies to support these objectives. This has been done at several occasions by the European Council but it has never been properly implemented by the European Commission. This confirms that a change in narrative is not sufficient to bring about real changes in policy making. We therefore believe that the Lisbon integrated guidelines have to be revised to ensure that agreed European and national social objectives are no longer overshadowed by a "narrow" employment and economic approach. This can be done by adding to the integrated guidelines, including the one on micro and macro-economics, a clear reference to social objectives.

## **CONCLUSION**

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The Social Platform would like to thank again the Portuguese Presidency for the topic chosen for the informal meeting in Guimaraes and the quality of the background document. We hope that the debate that will take place among ministers on long term priorities, will contribute to reinforce the social dimension of the European political project. This is indeed of particular importance in the context of the negotiation, adoption and ratification of the new EU treaty. EU leaders, more than ever, have to demonstrate how Europe can contribute to the respect of social rights. The Social Platform therefore invites the EU institutions to start explaining how the Charter of fundamental rights, participatory democracy and the social transversal clauses can strengthen the social dimension of the EU.

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