

The European Social Model... A Service Providers' View

On February 14th 2007, nine EU member states have signed a declaration to include more 'Social Europe' in the Constitution, nearly two years after French and Dutch voters rejected the text in a referendum. The document underlines the need to "strengthen the European social model" and "strengthen economic and social convergence within the EU" in order to promote employment, equal opportunities in the labour market, life-long learning and the modernising of the social protection system.

EASPD fully underwrites the call for a more social Europe. Shared European values should be put at the heart of social model debates. EASPD believes social justice is one of the main answers to the different economic and social challenges faced by the EU. Therefore the organization commits to contribute to the debate by presenting its views as a European network of social service providers, operating at the heart of the European society.

INTRODUCTION

A shift in paradigm

In the last decade major political, economic, social and technological changes took place in Europe and all over the globe. These changes also had their impact on policymaking regarding people with disabilities and on the sector as a whole. A fundamental shift took place from the medical model that stresses disability to a social and human rights model that aims at full citizenship; a paradigm shift from patient to citizen, from segregation to inclusion. People with disabilities today constitute close to 15 % of the EU population and are thus important actors in society and in social Europe.

A common vision of society

The European social model represents a common vision of society shared by all EU Member States, enshrined in the existing EU Treaties and reaffirmed in the Constitutional Treaty. While each EU country has its own arrangement of social and economic policies, serving to help implement this common vision, all 27 countries have affirmed their commitment to the same key values and objectives based on fundamental rights for all. The future of the European social model depends on a collective will to implement the same principles, values and objectives within each of the national systems.

The role of the European Union should be to act as a positive force for dealing with change and putting common values and objectives into practice within the various national systems, through exchanging experience and setting common goals and targets.

New challenges and demands

European societies are facing new challenges which are creating new needs and demands. Social protection systems are situated at the heart of the European social model, alongside other elements, providing a base for the creation of prosperity and a guarantee against social exclusion, poverty, insecurity, discrimination and inequality. The primary aim of social protection policies must be to guarantee social justice, social cohesion and fundamental rights within the shifting social and economic context. Central to the European social model is the understanding that there is no contradiction between economic and social progress, and that strong social policies are a necessary precondition to sustainable economic and social development.

Social economy and social service provision

The importance to the European economy and society of social service provision and the social economy is nowadays receiving greater recognition at Member State and European levels. Not only are they significant economic actors, they also play a key role in involving their members and European citizens more fully in Society. Social Economy enterprises are helping to meet the demands of a changing Europe. They are important sources of entrepreneurship and jobs in areas where traditional "investor driven" enterprise structures may not always be viable.

NGO social service providers' activities constitute a major contribution to social inclusion in Europe. Moreover, NGO social service providers also contribute to social cohesion. They manage to reach both people at the grass root level and marginalized or excluded groups in society. They prevent societal breakdown, encourage people to engage in volunteer activities and create and mobilize social capital. Since not-for-profit social service providers are deeply rooted in society, they often detect gaps in society as well as ideas and opinions among the general public. They are laboratories for social renewal and innovation and therefore, they can be seen as bridge builder in an inclusive society.

THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL MODEL: A SERVICE PROVIDERS' VIEW

It must be clear that the aim of this paper is not to apply for a specific European Social Model for people with disabilities. Disability should be mainstreamed in the Model, at the same time taking into account the different specificities of the sector and of other disadvantaged groups in society.

All over Europe, governments, politicians and citizens agree that people with disabilities should have the same chances in society as everybody else. However, people with disabilities have less chances to participate in a world that is only driven by money, profit or economic growth. It is important to bear in mind the traditional values of the EU (being amongst others mutual respect and social protection) to offer people with disabilities equal opportunities in society.

According to EASPD, the European Social Model should be based on:

- **Fundamental Rights** (as enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights) of people with disabilities are violated when they are unable to live in dignity due to discrimination, social exclusion, inequality or poverty. The fundamental rights of every person need to be guaranteed, irrespective of the legal status of that person.
- **Equality and Solidarity**: Social protection systems must cover everyone equally, and those who are able to contribute less must not be penalised.
- **Subsidiarity**: The European Social Model must take into account the various traditions and needs across Europe and thus apply the principle of subsidiarity at European and at national level.
- **Mainstreaming**: Disability issues need to be mainstreamed in all relevant policies and initiatives. However, a two-pronged approach is needed: disability mainstreaming as well as disability specific measures, aimed at full citizenship and equal chances.
- **Stakeholder Approach and Citizenship**: To come to effective and efficient policy making with regard to social policies, a meaningful and correctly implemented stakeholder approach is a must. It is crucial to involve all actors in the decision making process. Of course, long term commitment and a high degree of shared responsibility is needed when working towards a real stakeholder approach.
 - **User involvement** is crucial and representatives of people with disabilities and their families and friends are important consultation partners for European institutions, but the contributions of professional, service providing associations are equally needed when implementing new approaches and/or service systems. Social service providers play an important role in raising awareness and as a bridge builder in an inclusive society.

- **Civil dialogue:** To be successful, authorities must be proactive in ensuring the participation of civil society in planning, implementing and evaluating policies, including through social and civil dialogue.

Other basic elements of the Social Model as seen by EASPD:

- **Availability, affordability and adaptability of services and accessibility of society:** All people have the right to access quality, effective and affordable health and care services tailored to the needs and consent of each individual. As a network of social service providers, EASPD encompasses a commitment to certain characteristics which are linked to the provision of high quality services. Access for all to high quality services should be guaranteed. Social and health services need to adapt to the changing needs of their users. Modernisation of social services must have quality and effectiveness as its primary aim. Too often modernization is seen by authorities as “cutting costs” only.
- **Social Cohesion and Inclusion:** Authorities need to take into account that through the provision of services, NGO social service providers create social inclusion. Through what they produce, through how they work and through who they are, they create social cohesion!
- **Quality of Services leads to Quality of Life:** High quality services should facilitate full participation, inclusion in society and full citizenship of people with disabilities. This means that the outcome of a service must be evaluated and measured by verifying the impact the service has on the person with a disability and the extent to which the service really addresses the needs expressed by the people with disabilities. This “Quality of life” approach sets the scene for the evaluation of the quality of a service and for the establishment of good quality assurance systems. EASPD believes the best way for the EU to ensure high quality service provision in Europe is to establish consensus on European quality principles instead of quality standards. Therefore, EASPD launched in December 2006 its European Quality Principles Framework (EQPF) as the basis for service delivery in Europe.
- **Equal access to quality jobs:** Extra measures are needed to increase the employment opportunities of persons with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups in society. Social protection arrangements must support access to employment for all in a context of changing work-life patterns, including through non-financial measures such as training opportunities and lifelong learning.
- **Decent income for all:** Social protection must be improved to be effective in securing a decent income for all, so all are able to live in dignity, including through adequate minimum income and pensions. State aid subsidies for employment of people with disabilities should aim at real salaries/wages and not allowances, as it is the case in most European countries.
- **Education for all:** Knowledge is the basis for all development. At this stage across the EU, children with disabilities (with severe and complex needs) have very limited access to education and are sometimes even excluded from schooling. Every child/person has the right to (inclusive) education, and this right must consequently include all disabled children/people.
- **De-institutionalization:** Services should start from the individual needs and desires of the involved person and his/her environment and they should be developed and evaluated in close cooperation with the ‘user’. Person-centred and community-based services and access of people with disabilities to mainstream services are fundamental rights and should therefore be safeguarded by legal provisions at national/regional/local level in each Member State.

CONCLUSION

There is a clear need for a flexible European Social Model respecting the subsidiarity principles and safeguarding fundamental rights, equal opportunities and solidarity. Central to the European social model is the understanding that there is no contradiction between economic and social progress, and that strong social policies are a necessary precondition to sustainable economic and social development.