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'Social Europe' still missing in EU 2020 draft, say activists

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Social and employment experts believe the EU's 2020 plans still do not go far enough in pushing for a Europe of solidarity and sustainability, though some felt there were slight improvements on previous drafts.

BACKGROUND

In 2000, the EU launched its ambitious 'Lisbon Strategy' to become "the world's most dynamic knowledge-based economy by 2010".

After five years of limited results, EU leaders re-launched the strategy in March 2005, placing greater emphasis on growth and jobs and transferring more ownership to member states via national action plans (see EurActiv <http://www.euractiv.com/en/innovation/growth-jobs-relaunch-lisbon-strate...> LinksDossier">LinksDossier).

A new plan, dubbed 'EU 2020', was launched for consultation by the European Commission in November last year, placing the emphasis on green growth and jobs through innovation ([EurActiv 19/11/09](#)). The resulting 1,500 submissions highlighted widespread concern about the jobs crisis, which made the need for a comprehensive roadmap to recovery even more pressing.

Social NGOs, trade unions and many centre-left MEPs were critical of the draft plans, arguing that it lacked a social dimension to deal with the crisis and repeated many mistakes from its predecessor, the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs.

Indeed, the Brussels 'social lobby' reacted angrily when the Commission described its various constituents as being broadly in favour of the EU 2020 plans ([EurActiv 04/02/10](#)).

French MEP Pervenche Berès, head of the European Parliament's employment committee, told EurActiv that the current plans ignore the weaknesses of the Lisbon Strategy and will not build a sustainable Europe.

In particular, she argued that the draft wrongly focuses on exit strategies in terms of fiscal consolidation, while paying nothing more than minimal lip service to the fight against poverty and social exclusion – notionally a key priority for the EU in 2010.

"The Commission's approach to poverty reduction is closer to charity than to a real commitment to fighting social inequalities," she claimed, adding that "this shows a complete lack of understanding for the causes that lead to the current crisis: i.e. social inequalities, growing divergences within the EU and global imbalances".

Draft strategy letting women and young people down?

Further criticism came from gender equality campaigners, who believe the draft plans represent a step backwards in the EU's drive for full parity.

Describing themselves as "alarmed" by the Commission's lack of vision, the European Women's Lobby (EWL) told EurActiv that the plans do not sufficiently address equality between women and men, even though women have accounted for a quarter of economic growth every year since 1995.

As a result, the EWL is calling for equality targets to be put at the heart of the 2020 strategy, for a firm commitment to closing the gender pay gap by 2020, for the development of a care sector that offers its employees better working conditions and those employing them more options, and for "real lessons to be drawn from the financial crisis".

The European Youth Forum, too, described aspects of the draft as "incomplete". In particular, it believes that 'Youth on the Move' – the strategy's flagship initiative for education – will assist the job prospects of the highly educated at the expense of those who have the least educational opportunities.

With only 30% of Europe's young people today completing higher education, the draft must "dare to set an ambitious benchmark for youth participation mobility," said forum president Tine Radinja.

New draft is better, say social NGOs

There were minor whispers of encouragement from some quarters, however. Conny Reuter, president of the Social Platform of European NGOs, argued that the Commission has improved the social dimension in its latest draft.

"It's very encouraging that the Commission has agreed to propose a more social EU 2020 agenda and to make the fight against poverty one of the priorities of the strategy," he told EurActiv.

He nonetheless cautioned that "you can't score without knowing where the goalposts are – the strategy needs a poverty reduction target with the delivery mechanisms and financial resources to reach it".

POSITIONS

French MEP Pervenche Berès, head of the European Parliament's employment committee, told EurActiv that "the draft Commission communication on the EU 2020 strategy ignores the weak outcome of the Lisbon strategy and focuses on exit strategies in terms of fiscal consolidation instead of working towards a Europe of solidarity and sustainability after the crash".

She added that "the ill-named 'new jobs agenda' should focus on job creation, not on flexicurity and mobility. As regards the fight against poverty and social exclusion, the Commission is paying a minimum service tribute to the European Year 2010. Its approach to poverty reduction is closer to charity than to a real commitment to fighting social inequalities. This shows a complete lack of understanding for the causes that lead to the current crisis: i.e. social inequalities, growing divergences within the EU and global imbalances".

On a more positive note, **Conny Reuter**, president of the **Social Platform** of European NGOs, argued that "it's very encouraging that the Commission has agreed to propose a more social EU 2020 agenda and to make the fight against poverty one of the priorities of the strategy. But you can't score without knowing where the goalposts are – the strategy needs a poverty reduction target with the delivery mechanisms and financial resources to reach it".

He went on to note that "the EU 2020 agenda should also include what can be the only logical response to the social crisis people are currently living through: a strong anti-discrimination dimension and a commitment to reinforce universal protection systems and policies, to give all people in the EU quality jobs and a decent quality of life".

In a statement to EurActiv, the **European Women's Lobby (EWL)** said that "the 2020 strategy is designed as Europe's vision of where the EU wants to be - economically and socially - ten years from now, and frankly, we are alarmed by the vision, or lack of vision, the Commission has presented: the current draft overemphasises short-term economic recovery rather than long-term strategies for real socioeconomic growth and well-being".

"The Commission's 'crisis-approach' operates under the false assumption that the global financial meltdown was somehow an external, unforeseeable event. In contrast, we believe that unregulated financial markets, putting capital before people, growing inequalities and the absence of women in financial decision-making were not unrelated symptoms but root causes of the current recession," it said.

The lobby went on to say "we are even more concerned that this vision does not sufficiently address equality between women and men, even as women have accounted for a quarter of economic growth every year since 1995. Despite this, women still face a persistent gender pay gap, glass ceilings in corporations, high levels of part-time work and insufficient care options for children and other dependants".

"EWL therefore calls for equality targets to be put at the heart of the 2020 strategy, for a firm commitment to close the gender pay gap by 2020, for the development of a care sector that offers its employees better working conditions and those employing them more options, and for real lessons to be drawn from the financial crisis," it said.