

EU seeks to get a clearer picture on social reality of today

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Having decided to put a more human face to the European Union's core objective – the single market – the European Commission recently updated its agenda. The European Commission dedicated its term's work programme to prosperity, solidarity and security, with the continued focus on jobs and growth. It includes a long term work on the social reality in Europe following the aim to look deeper into the direct impact of the main European initiatives on citizens' life. Firstly mentioned in the citizens' agenda [communication paper](#) of May 10th last year, the Commission did propose a so called "twin track" strategy, including a review of the internal market strategy and the "social reality check". The drive for a deeper and wider economic integration should go hand in hand with further support for one of Europe's most unifying and fundamental values: solidarity. The Commission announced to take comprehensive stock of the reality of European society, and launch an agenda for access and solidarity, a social dimension in parallel and close coordination with the single market review, next year. Being supported by the highest decision making EU-body, the European Council, actions have been moving on." We need a modern social vision to accompany our drive for open markets. Open markets and social solidarity are not, and should not be, contradictory. There is no greater instrument of social cohesion than full employment. And welfare states need to be put on a firm financial footing to be sustainable for future generations. Europe must reform and modernise its policies to preserve its values".

Stock taking should focus on problems

Commission President Barroso did argue in his speech at the "Global Europe-Social Europe debate", organised by Policy Network end of last year. It should be a debate about access and opportunity. At the same time results should allow a better insight into some key issues and provide appropriate answers to:

- Why one fifth of school children don't reach the basic standards of literacy and numeracy;
- Why one in six young people are still leaving school without any qualifications, when we know that fewer and fewer unskilled jobs will be available;
- Why there is still a strong correlation between students achieving a place at university and the educational background of their parents. In the knowledge economy we have to ensure higher educational standards for a broad majority;
- Why some Member States are so much better than others at integrating second generation migrants, enabling them to achieve more in the education system;
- Why access to childcare is so patchy when the evidence is so strong that better childcare leads to higher fertility, more job opportunities for women and greater gender equality;
- Why child poverty continues to blight the prospects of a fair start in life for a fifth of Europe's children;
- Why work is a strain and stress for too many, and decent family life and traditional support structures are put under too much pressure;
- Why so many older people drop out of the labour force too early when in an ageing society we can ill-afford to throw their talents and contributions on the scrap heap.

The newly launched consultation is about to seek for views on current social trends and on what contributes to today's 'well being'. Views are welcome on the partly dramatic changes, which are underway in European societies: "in the nature of work; modern family life; demographic trends; the position of women in society; social mobility and the incidence of poverty and inequality. Values are changing and societies are becoming increasingly multicultural. This social dynamic presents new challenges."

The Commission is aware of the existence of national and international studies and data on these changes. That is why it especially addresses its call to research on politics and society as well as think tanks. In order to guide the open debate a [background paper](#) on "Europe's Social Reality" has been prepared by the Bureau of European Policy advisers. That is an advisory body to the European Commission, whose mission is to provide timely, informed, policy and political advice to the President and Commission Services on issues relevant to the President's agenda and the future of policies in the Union.

European Commission looks into trends on social changes

The paper, written by Roger Liddle and Frédéric Lerais seeks to cover a wide range of social issues and in the same time summarizes data, analysis and thesis. The authors try to show trends about how changes on social factors and in the social system actually develop. It is especially about the trends the Commission would like to exchange views on. The paper takes a stance on the main transitions making European societies change, the transition to a post-industrial knowledge and service economy, the impact of the Welfare State as well as the mass affluence, citizen as consumer, gender equality and demographic change and the trend to individualisation.

The second part of the paper is dedicated to analyse the foundations of social quality and the situation of today with regard to access, opportunities and exclusion. It is an attempt to summarize the complex and diverse reality and its valuation and keep it workable and readable to the audience. The scope is wide and covers the main fields of daily lives, such as employment opportunity, access to educational opportunity, to good health, family life and well-being, poverty and its impact, crime, migration. Whether the increase of inequality in Europe matters is a discussion point to one of the chapters. As long as relative poverty is reduced in relation to median income, does it matter if incomes at the top race ahead? Statistics show that the most equal societies in Europe have the least number of poor: the most unequal societies have higher concentrations of poverty risk, is pointed out by Liddle and Lerais. "If one measures inequality by the ratio between the earnings of the top quintile and bottom quintile, the Member State with the highest levels of inequality in the EU15 is Portugal (with a ratio of 7.2 against an EU average of 4.4), followed by Greece, Spain, Ireland, Italy and the UK: these also happen to be the Member States with highest 'at-risk of poverty rate after social transfers'. Among the new Member States, the countries with the highest levels of poverty are also those – Estonia, Latvia and Slovakia – with above average measures of inequality.", trends of need for discussion.

Migration has long been part of European experience. The pressures that led to the great emigration to the New World also led to population movements within Europe. Think of the Irish in Britain or the highly diverse character of big cities such as Prague before the Second World War. Migration in Europe remains a complex and diverse phenomenon.

The paper should stimulate experts from all different stake holders to take part in the debate. Two main areas are put up for discussion: well-being and opportunity and access. In view of "well-being" the authors introduce the following questions:

- *In what order – by importance – would you list the key factors contributing to well-being, for example: being in work, satisfaction in the job, opportunity for a good family life, adequate housing, good health, access to educational opportunity, chances*

of social mobility, good neighbours and friends, strong local community ties, feeling secure on the streets and in one's home?

- *And what do you think are the main obstacles in Europe today: not enough money, lack of decent jobs, too much pressure on the family and leisure time, poverty and inequality, inadequate public services such as health and education, prevalence of crime, lack of respect, problems of migration and multiculturalism?*

When it comes to “opportunity and access” the authors on behalf of the European Commission would like to analyse and argue on most important factors in maintaining or increasing one's opportunities in today's society, such as education, social status, wealth, health, public services etc.

The social reality stock taking is about to highlight ‘problems’, says the paper. “European societies face major social challenges. The knowledge economy can appear to be threatening to those with low skills and low educational aspirations. Unemployment and inactivity still blights too many people's lives, as do unresolved problems of widespread poverty.

Generational disadvantage may be becoming more embedded and social mobility more problematic. The social consequences of self perceptions of failure in our unequal societies may be causing new stresses and problems in terms of family dysfunctionality, crime and anti social behaviour, mental illness and the new diseases of affluence.” The European advisers clearly favour an open and wide spread exchange in order to get the most complete picture on circumstances and framework conditions of good or bad living conditions. Additional information is available on the corresponding [homepage](#).

This exercise for sure is a crucial one in the debate about the modernisation of the European Social Model.

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