

Renewed social agenda

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PURPOSE: to present a Commission Communication for a renewed social agenda for 21st century Europe.

CONTENT: the communications begins by noting that technological advances, globalisation and an ageing population are changing European societies. In recent years the pace of change has accelerated. Europeans are living longer, healthier lives in new family configurations and working patterns. At the same time, too many people are inactive or unemployed and too many young people leave school early. As a result, there are still too many people living in poverty (especially children and older people) and in social isolation. The Commission describes the new issues that have emerged –globalisation and rapid technological change, demographic change, immigration and climate change as well as societal changes, with increased competition for scarce resources, including food and energy and continuing turbulence in the financial markets.

Actions in the social field are primarily the responsibility of the Member States and have to be taken closest to the citizen at national and sub-national level. The EU's powers and responsibilities in the social field are limited. However, the EU, with its blend of shared values, common rules and solidarity mechanisms, is uniquely placed to work in partnership with the Member States and stakeholders and foster cooperation to manage socio-economic change, particularly the change driven by globalisation and technology. The challenge is to build on that strong base by pursuing a **renewed social agenda**. The focus needs to be on **empowering and enabling** individuals to realise their potential while at the same time helping those who are unable to do so. This agenda cannot be confined to traditional social domains; it must be **cross cutting** and multidimensional, covering a wide range of areas from labour market policies to education, health, immigration and intercultural dialogue.

The renewed social agenda set out in the Communication is built around **opportunities, access and solidarity**.

Generating opportunities requires a continued effort to creating more and better jobs and increasing welfare. It means dismantling barriers, facilitating mobility, fighting discrimination, fostering gender equality, supporting families and tackling new forms of social exclusion.

To exploit **opportunities**, individuals need access – to education, health care, social services of general interest. They should be able to actively participate and integrate in the societies in which they live. Those individuals and regions that cannot cope and are left behind by the rapid pace of change need support. Therefore, the renewed social agenda is also one of **solidarity** – stepping up efforts to fight poverty and social exclusion and explore new ways to help individuals adjust to globalisation and technological change. To do so, the EU has to innovate in the way it sets policy frameworks, in its legislation, in bringing people together in the exchange of best practice and in catalysing new approaches.

Actions to move towards these goals are primarily the responsibility of the Member States at national, regional and local levels. The scope for action is wide and calls for priority setting. Hence, the agenda focuses on **key areas – youth, human capital, longer healthier lives, mobility, social inclusion, anti-discrimination and equal opportunities as well as participation and civic dialogue** - where EU action demonstrates clear added value and full respect for the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. Actions in each of these areas contribute to the three goals of opportunities, access and solidarity.

The paper discusses further action under each of the following topics: children and youth; investing in people, more and better jobs, new skills; mobility; longer and healthier lives; combating poverty and social exclusion; fighting discrimination; and opportunities, access and solidarity on the global scene.

Amongst several measures, the Commission intends to introduce a Directive to improve the functioning of European Works Councils to ensure effective social dialogue on restructuring operations; and a Directive on the application of patients' rights in cross-border health care. This will establish a Community framework for cross-border healthcare on the basis of the case-law of the European Court of Justice.

The paper also discusses the instruments that the Commission will use. These include legislation, social dialogue, the Open Method of Coordination, EU funding, and the involvement of Civil Society. The Commission intends to exploit the scope for synergies between them in a comprehensive approach and a "smarter mix" of policy tools. The coordination and surveillance of economic and budgetary policies also play an important role in this respect.