Active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market

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The European Parliament adopted by 256 votes to 19, with 129 abstentions, a resolution on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market.

The resolution welcomes the fact that the Commission based its Recommendation 2008/867/EC on Recommendation 92/441/EEC which **recognises the individual's fundamental right to sufficient resources and assistance to live in human dignity** and defines common principles for implementing that right. Overall, the Parliament endorses the common principles and practical guidelines presented in Recommendation 2008/867/EC based on three pillars, namely: (i) adequate income support; (ii) inclusive labour markets; (iii) access to quality services.

The Parliament points out, however, that any active inclusion strategy has to be built on the following principles:

- individual rights, respect for human dignity and the principles of non-discrimination, equality of opportunities and gender equality;
- the promotion of labour market integration combined with full participation in society;
- the realisation of the principles of quality, adequacy and accessibility across all three pillars.

The Parliament agrees with the Council that the implementation of Recommendation 92/441/EEC needs to be improved. Therefore, it considers that **social assistance should provide an adequate minimum income for a dignified life**, at least at a level which is above the "at risk of poverty" level.

In relation to the other main points of the resolution, the Parliament makes the following remarks:

Ensuring adequate income support: the Parliament calls on the Member States to implement adequate income support so as to fight poverty and social exclusion based on Recommendations 92/441/EEC and 2008/867/EC which must be adequate, transparent, accessible to all, and sustainable over time. It requests the Council to agree an **EU target for minimum income schemes and contributory replacement income schemes** of providing income support of at least 60% of national median equalised income and, furthermore, to agree a timetable for achieving this target in all Member States.

Recognising that the interaction of social assistance and labour market activity is complex, the Parliament urges the development of systems, which effectively support individuals in a period of transition rather than penalising or discouraging them or removing assistance too rapidly when an individual takes up work. The Parliament points to the importance of laying down welfare benefits for vulnerable persons in a position to work.

Minimum wage policy: the Parliament suggests that the Member States actively consider a minimum wage policy in order to tackle the growing number of "working poor" and make work a viable prospect for those distant from the labour market. It also calls on the Member States to take action to fight clandestine or "submerged" employment.

Active inclusion policies (tailor-made measures): according to the Parliament, active inclusion policies should: (i) be consistent with a lifecycle approach to education, life-long learning, social and employment policies; (ii) be tailor made, targeted and needs-oriented; (iii) be based on an integrated and participative

approach; (iv) respect pre-conditions which are essential to allow participation without creating conditions that endanger a minimum living income.

In this context, the Parliament invites Commission to consider whole-cost accounting in the field of active and social inclusion. It considers that the Member States should provide **targeted additional benefits for disadvantaged groups** (such as people with disabilities or chronic diseases, single parents, or households with many children) which cover extra costs in connection, inter alia, with personal support, the use of specific facilities and medical and social care, establishing inter alia affordable price levels for medicines for less advantaged social groups.

Decent retirement pensions: the Parliament stresses the need to ensure decent invalidity and retirement pension levels. It believes strongly that the retention of a mandatory retirement age acts as a barrier to active inclusion and forces many people, who may want to choose to continue to work, out of the labour market unnecessarily.

Lack of schooling - promoting prevention: the Parliament considers that, because problems associated with exclusion are in many cases present from the earliest years of life, preventive action is essential to identify from an early age those children and young people most at risk, well before they drop out of education and training. It considers that a broad stakeholder dialogue and support for preventive action and social services to improve the opportunities for vulnerable children and young adults are critical to the success of inclusion policies.

Accessible social services: the Parliament calls on the Member States to do more to address issues faced by carers, including the right to choose freely whether they want to be a carer and the extent of the care that they provide, the possibility of combining caring with paid work and employment as well as access to social security schemes and pensions, in order to avoid impoverishment as a consequence of caring. It welcomes the recognition of the need for **universal access to affordable and high-quality social services** as a fundamental right and as an essential element of the European Social Model. It considers that such social services include stable, affordable housing, accessible public transport, basic vocational training, and healthcare provision as well as access to affordable energy and other network services. It notes that progress must be made on guaranteeing universal service obligations in services of general interest. It also notes that progress remains inadequate in reaching the Barcelona targets set for affordable, high-quality childcare provision and the care needs for other dependants. The Parliament encourages Member States to consider social default tariffs for vulnerable groups, for example in the fields of energy and public transport and also facilities for obtaining microcredits, so as to promote active inclusion, as well as free healthcare and education for people with difficulties of a material nature. Furthermore, the Parliament calls on the Member States to provide people with disabilities with the additional support necessary both in order to access the labour market and while working. Overall, the Parliament calls on the Commission to examine without delay all possible means of clarifying the legal context in which social services general interest operate and providing them with a **legal framework** to serve as a point of reference.

Services adapted to the needs of persons with disabilities: the Parliament calls on the Member States to provide people with disabilities with the additional support necessary both in order to access the labour market and while working. It calls on those Member States that have not yet done so to sign and ratify both the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol.

Promoting education and training: the Parliament calls on the Commission and the Member States to provide adequate resources to facilitate access to life-long learning programmes. According to the Parliament, high-quality education is a vital prerequisite for successful future employment and integration. Member States are asked to extend legislation on public education with a view to eliminating any and all barriers to education, ensuring integrated education and access for all. The Parliament believes that those who have been excluded from the labour market for a long time must have greater entitlements to funding for lifelong learning, especially where ‘key competences’ are concerned.

Other actions of active inclusion include tackling domestic violence and the abuse of children and older people, gender mainstreaming and combating discrimination.

The Parliament notes that there is a risk that more imaginative approaches to prepare those furthest from the labour market for eventual access to it may be deprived of funding in favour of a more narrow approach based on easily quantifiable outcomes. The Commission is called upon to improve the **funding** for bottom-up approaches under Structural Funds.

Creating a more favourable labour market: the Parliament points to the necessity of creating an inclusive labour market as the core of any active inclusion strategy, a labour market with decent working conditions and job diversity for all workers. It notes that as a result of changing demographics, it is estimated that by 2030 the ratio of active to inactive people will be 2:1 and calls on the Commission and the Member States to develop active inclusion policies to ensure that carers (many of whom will be obliged to withdraw from the labour market due to caring responsibilities) are **not adversely affected** in later years. It also calls on the Member States to promote a competitive labour market favouring the development of public and private social protection systems at reasonable cost. Moreover, it calls on the Member States to use tools and instruments so as to improve the participation of those farthest from the labour market (financial incentives, tax benefits, etc.).

The Parliament also points out that the role of local and regional authorities in promoting active inclusion is threefold: as employers, promoters of economic development and employment, and as providers of public services. They should therefore advise and refer people on where they can receive help in accessing the labour market.

Promoting the insertion of asylum-seekers: the Parliament strongly believes that more should be done to tackle the barriers to inclusion faced by asylum seekers. Therefore, it calls on the Member States to work to end asylum seekers' dependence on benefits by allowing them to work and consider the development of more legal immigration routes. All Member States are urged to safeguard human rights-based asylum policies in accordance with the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and other relevant human rights legislation. The Parliament urges the Commission and the Member States to reject the **misleading blurring of economic migration with asylum-seeking**, and of economic migration and asylum-seeking with illegal immigration.

Poverty reduction: the Parliament reiterates its request for setting an EU target to **reduce child poverty by 50% by 2012** and to end street homelessness of children, youth and adults alike by 2015. It also calls for a minimum level of income provided through pensions and for access to health care and for its quality (reducing infant mortality, improving health and increasing life expectancy, etc.).

Road map: lastly, the Parliament calls for a concrete roadmap for the implementation of active inclusion strategies based on the participation of civil society and other stakeholders. The roadmap should specify time lines and realistic qualitative and quantitative targets based on specific indicators and on detailed dialogue between the interested parties. The roadmap should set out how active inclusion is to be implemented and monitored through the Open Method of Coordination for social protection and social inclusion.

Note that a proposal for an alternative resolution tabled by the EPP-ED group was rejected in plenary.