Social protection and social inclusion. Report

2005/2097(INI) - 15/03/2006 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drawn up by Edit **BAUER** (EPP-ED, SK) on social protection and social inclusion. (Please see the document dated 25/01 /2006.) Parliament reaffirmed that social protection based on universality, equity and solidarity is an essential component of the European social model.

General points: Parliament welcomed the Commission's report which indicates that the income-based figures relating to poverty and social exclusion across the Union are very significant, with more than 68 million, or 15% of the EU population living at risk of poverty in 2002. Despite significant structural improvements in the EU labour markets over the last decade, EU employment and participation levels remain insufficient and unemployment remains high in a number of Member States, especially amongst certain categories of people, such as the young, older workers, women, and people with specific disadvantages.

Social inclusion : those people most at risk of poverty and exclusion, are those in casual employment, the unemployed, single parent households (usually headed by women), older people living alone, women, families with several dependants, disadvantaged children, as well as ethnic minorities, sick or disabled people, the homeless, victims of trafficking and victims of drug and alcohol dependency. Parliament called on the Member States to support the integration of people at a disadvantage in order to prevent and combat social exclusion, as well as to promote education, encourage job creation, professional training and career development, the reconciliation of professional and family life and the right to equal access to health care and decent accommodation and ensure the sustainability of social protection systems. Member States were urged to carry through a series of measures, including :

- exchanging best practice to prevent early departure from education, raising the level of education, especially in languages and new technologies, and increasing access to education and training for disadvantaged groups;

- developing access to lifelong learning;

- making greater use of not-for-profit public service work;

- fighting child poverty. Parliament stressed that in fourteen out of the seventeen Member States for which data are available, child poverty rose during the 1990s. Persistent child poverty mainly concentrates on single-parent families, large families with three or more dependent children, immigrants and people from ethnic minorities, and families with unemployed or under-employed parents. Parliament asked the Commission to put forward a Green Paper on child poverty, setting out clear targets and appropriate measures to eliminate child poverty as steps towards the social inclusion of poor children;

- introducing a "Children's Charter" that seeks to achieve progress in upholding the rights of the child as part of the EU's internal and external policies;

- addressing youth unemployment specifically, as a priority in its own right, through specific policy measures and training, inter alia, to encourage the taking of initiative and the development of entrepreneurial spirit;

- increasing the participation of women in employment by eliminating obstacles that prevent women from entering it, and particularly by encouraging older women to remain longer in the labour market;

- fighting against the high levels of exclusion faced by ethnic minorities and immigrants ;

- eradicating discrimination against people with disabilities, by promoting equal opportunities and the full participation of such people in work, society and politics ;

- improve housing conditions, especially accessibility, for those less-favoured groups which are particularly affected by poverty ;

Parliament reasserted the need for an improvement in harmonised data collection and the development of common indicators that take account of age and sex differences, as indicators of this kind play a major role in the monitoring and evaluation of policies on poverty and social exclusion.

Social protection: Parliament stated that the rapid changes arising from globalisation and the wide use of information and communication technologies increase vulnerability to social risk and generate a need for more efficient social protection measures with a view to ensuring the right of all to social protection. The current demographic trends - an ageing workforce and the decline of the working-age population - constitute a challenge in the medium and longer term for the financial sustainability of social protection systems. There needs to be developed comprehensive ageing strategies aimed at empowering workers to stay active longer and encouraging employers to hire and retain older workers.

Parliament welcomed the Council's decision regarding the application of the open method of coordination in the field of health and long-term care. It pointed out that the organisation and delivery of services and medical care is and should remain an area of Member State competence. Particular attention should be paid to persons requiring long-term or expensive care, and to those facing particular difficulties in accessing care. Health systems must be based not only on the insurance principle but also on the solidarity principle. Parliament advocated, furthermore, the increase of all those social services necessary with regard to the care of dependent persons, i.e. those unable to perform basic everyday actions by themselves. With regard to pensions, although public pension schemes should remain an important source of pensioners' income, private provision through occupational or personal schemes can play a complementary role in obtaining additional pension entitlements.

Parliament called on the European Council, in the interest of streamlining and simplifying the open method of coordination, to adopt at its summit in Spring 2006 an integrated framework in the fields of social protection and integration and to agree on a uniform list of common objectives in the field of social integration, pensions, health and long-term care. The Member States and the Commission were urged, when applying the open method of coordination to social protection and integration, to pay greater attention in the future to the issues of reconciling work and family life, with particular access on childcare, family income situations and the employment rate of mothers.