Social reality stocktaking

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The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs adopted the initiative report by Liz **LYNNE** (ALDE, UK) which supports the general approach of the Commission's communication on social reality stocktaking. The report notes that social inclusion and social protection are a basic value of the European Union and a fundamental right for all individuals, regardless of ethnic origin, age, gender, disability, sexual preference and religion. Europe today is a multi-ethnic, multi-faith society and Member States must ensure that their laws reflect that diversity, protecting all individuals from violence, discrimination and harassment.

The report emphasises that employment must be viewed as one of the most effective safeguards against poverty and social exclusion and therefore calls on the Commission and Member States to effectively implement the Employment Directive 78/2000/EC which provides a legal framework for equal treatment in employment.

The report takes into account previous reports of the Parliament, which stress the importance of social policy having an equal status and fully interacting within the Community policy triangle (economic, employment, social policies). In this regard the Commission should reinforce and clarify the original Lisbon target of eradicating poverty by the adoption of a clear headline target for the EU to reduce the levels of poverty measured against GDP by 2010 and to develop a set of social inclusion standards against which to judge the results of the social inclusion strategy.

In particular, the committee calls on the Member States to make optimal use of the potential offered by the Open Method of Coordination. It stresses that strengthening social cohesion, the eradication of poverty, and social exclusion must become a political priority for the European Union and welcomes in this regard the forthcoming proposal from the Commission to make 2010 the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

The resolution also concentrates on two major areas of social policy: social inclusion and social protection, which are also basic values of the European Union.

Social inclusion: the committee firmly believes that a **decent living minimum wage** should be established at Member State level in cooperation with the social partners where applicable, in order to make work financially viable. It recognises that in many Member States the minimum wage is set very low or at below subsistence level; at the same time, rejects the argument that setting a minimum wage discourages employers from creating jobs.

The report considers that efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion must be sustained and extended to improve the situation of those people most at risk of poverty and exclusion. The Commission is called upon to incorporate equality and disability issues more closely in all relevant policy areas. **Special attention should be paid to single parents and single older women**, who are a particularly vulnerable group and are often the first to fall into poverty when there is an economic downturn. The report calls on all Member States to ensure full gender equality in all state pension schemes. They should also aim to adapt their social security systems to help provide a transition between periods of paid work or training and unemployment, in order to **avoid the so-called 'poverty trap'** but also to reflect the changing nature of employment. Provisions should be made to help people back into work by ensuring that they receive personalised, targeted assistance and support to help them build confidence and learn new skills.

The report calls on Member States to tackle multiple discrimination, which has a serious and often overlooked impact on social inclusion. MEPs note that there is a strong and complex link between poverty and crime and that extreme poverty and social exclusion may lead to criminal activities and that imprisonment without adequate rehabilitation and education often only lead to further social exclusion and unemployment. That is why they stress for a need to provide education, training and employment within correctional institutions.

The committee believes that a lack of decent and affordable accommodation in all Member States is an important contributing factor to driving people into poverty and trapping them there and it calls on the Commission to respect the prerogative of Member States to define and finance social housing, given the vital role played by the latter in social inclusion policies.

The Commission and the Member States, in cooperation with those representing disabled persons' organisations, are urged to develop national, regional and local initiatives to promote feasible employment opportunities for **disabled persons**.

As regards the **ageing population**, the Member States are asked 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 old age pensions, in order to avoid impoverishment as a consequence of caring.

The Commission is called upon to launch a study on discrimination against trans-gendered persons in the employment market and in the area of social security. Member States should address this form of discrimination.

Member States and the Commission are called upon to provide adequate resources to facilitate access to life-long learning programmes as a means of limiting the exclusion of elderly people among others from employment and to foster their continuous participation in social, cultural and civic life. There should be a move towards the provision of high quality and affordable personal care for elderly people and people with disabilities.

The report stresses that educational institutions should show greater flexibility regarding the early abandonment of education by young people and should provide assistance for those, who, in addition to their studies, have family responsibilities. Member States are urged to ensure that its citizens are literate and have the skills and knowledge to gain useful employment and to participate fully in society.

Lastly, the committee 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.

Social Protection: MEPs believe that more action should be taken to tackle domestic violence and the abuse of children and elderly people. Gender-based violence increases women's social and political exclusion, thereby preventing them from enjoying their human rights.

Member States are called upon to:

- consider the adequacy and sustainability of their pension systems and provide clearer guidelines and advice to ensure that people receive the information they need to plan their retirement;
- provide more effective child protection systems which include early intervention services to respond to the needs of vulnerable children and the provision of therapeutic services to help maltreated children overcome the effects of abuse;
- develop a more constructive approach to drugs policy with the emphasis on prevention, education and treatment for addiction rather than criminal sanctions;

- prioritise public health measures which seek to tackle head-on the inequality that exists in health and access to health-care;
- adopt specific measures targeting the needs of ethnic minorities;
- actively pursue policies to reduce ill health caused by alcohol, tobacco and other legal as well as illegal drugs;
- agree quantifiable targets, along with the Commission, towards the goal of eradicating the complex phenomenon of child poverty and allocating adequate resources in order to meet that target in order to prevent poverty and social exclusion from being passed down from one generation to the next, giving special consideration to abandoned children, street children and children in institutions;
- pay special attention to social protection of lone parent families, which are at higher risk of poverty;
- ensure that children have access to the services and opportunities that will ensure their present and future well-being and to include basic financial education in school curricula;
- ensure the collection of data on child poverty and to analyse the situation of children at risk of poverty, in particular as regards those at high risk such as children with disabilities, Roma children, children in institutions, migrant children and street children, and to monitor and evaluate their policies in that field and ensure the systematic assessment of the impact of those policies;
- increase the profile of credit unions to help offer individuals a safe and regulated environment for people to save and borrow money and to counter increasingly problematic personal debt;
- enforce anti-trafficking and anti-discrimination legislation, reintegrate the victims of trafficking into society, enhance cross-border cooperation, and, in particular, to sign, ratify and implement the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings;
- prioritise the protection of victims of trafficking in particular child victims and the implementation of their fundamental human rights;
- bring forward legislation and better implement existing European legislation to prevent the exploitation of vulnerable workers by gang masters and to sign and ratify, if they have not yet done so, the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families;
- safeguard human rights based asylum policy in accordance with the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and other relevant human rights law, whilst working to end asylum seekers' dependence on benefits by allowing them to work and consider the development of more legal immigration routes;
- eliminate the deficiencies in the provisions made for social groups which cannot be integrated into the job market and in the services targeting them, and to ensure that those provisions and services are equitable, universally accessible and sustainable.