

Questions to the Commissioner-designate for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
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Introduction:

This paper sets out to propose questions to the European Commissioners-designate who will seek to be confirmed by the European Parliament after they have been scrutinized by the relative committees of the European Parliament on 5 September 2014.

The European Anti-Poverty Network has prepared hereunder a set of questions which probe the Commissioner-designates' commitment to a more social Europe placing people at the centre of policy making. The questions take their departure from the current social situation.

EAPN addresses different committees, in particular EMPL, and REGI.

Rationale:

In 2010, the European Commission launched the Europe 2020 strategy to replace the Lisbon Strategy and for the first time an explicit poverty target was set to reduce poverty by at least 20 million by 2020, alongside other key social targets (achieving a 75% employment rate and reducing early school leaving to 10%) and 7 flagship initiatives including the Flagship European Platform Against Poverty (EPAP). The Strategy also seemingly embraced the need for democratic governance with parliaments and increasing stakeholder engagement to achieve ownership and visibility. But instead of progress towards the target of a 20 million reduction, poverty and social exclusion have risen to affect 1 in 4 within the EU: 124,2 million (2012), an increase of over 6.6 million since 2010. Instead of progress towards the employment target (75% in employment), employment has also steadily declined, from 68.9% in 2009 to 68.4% in 2012 with an increase in unemployment from 7.1% in 2008 to 10.9% in 2013. Equally worryingly, employment has become an increasingly insecure route out of poverty, with an increase from 8.6% to 9.1% of households classified as working poor. Austerity policies promoted in the NRPs, following the Commission's guidelines, resulted in an unequal distribution of the burden of the crisis, and generate more poverty and social exclusion, contributing to the growing inequality gap. In Jean-Claude Juncker's "Political Guidelines for the next European Commission", he acknowledged that mistakes were made and that "there was a lack of social fairness". He also added that democratic legitimacy suffered in the process.

Questions to the Commissioner-designate for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion:

- 1. In light of this, would you consider giving urgent priority to the development of an effective, integrated and multidimensional EU strategy to fight poverty and social exclusion, built around agreed core elements, and requiring Member States to develop integrated strategies along the same lines?***
- 2. What measures will you propose to rebalance economic and social policies, the current imbalance having severely aggravated the social situation in Europe threatening social cohesion?***

3. How will you ensure that the poverty target is put at the heart of the Europe 2020 mid-term review, and that Member States commit themselves to ambitious targets using all 3 indicators and that Country specific Recommendations on Poverty are established for all Member States not making progress?

4. Will you ensure that the EU invest in a new poverty programme: a well-resourced local action programme to fight poverty which could support new models of social delivery and cross-national learning?

5. Do you believe that progress should be made in the development of EU wide social standards? And would you support and initiate a Framework Directive on minimum income under TFEU Art175 to ensure decent living standards to keep people close to the labour market and ensure a dignified life?

6. President Juncker put much emphasis on innovation. Will you promote social innovation that prioritizes 'more effective services and methods' without undermining existing effective public services, and that gives priority to supporting local initiatives that respond to community needs?

On Democratic Governance and Stakeholder Consultation:

Rationale:

There is a lack of debate at EU and national level on Europe 2020, particularly on the need for an integrated strategy to fight poverty, beyond employment. This debate is particularly lacking at national level where all stakeholders need to be engaged, including anti-poverty NGOs, people with direct experience of poverty and national parliaments. The Europe 2020 strategy has not progressed on getting ownership from stakeholders or national parliaments. A clearer and more transparent process must be put in place, with adequate resources – staffing and financial - at EU and national level.

None of these instruments will make a difference without political will and recognition of the added value brought by such engagement for better policy solutions, as well as increased credibility and accountability.

Questions to the Commissioner Designate for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion:

1. For these reasons, what will you propose to redress this democratic deficit and require from Member States to install adequate consultation processes?

2. Will you implement the commitment to develop guidelines for effective stakeholder engagement in Europe 2020 and in the European Platform against Poverty as originally promised in the EPAP communication when Europe 2020 was launched and ensure this is monitored and implemented?

Questions to the Commissioners-designate for Regional Development, and Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Rationale:

20% of the ESF are now earmarked for social inclusion and poverty reduction including a better mainstreaming of social inclusion and community-led local approaches in the different Structural Funds. In addition, a strengthened partnership approach, including the European Code of Conduct on Partnership, sets out minimum requirements for Managing Authorities on how to involve relevant stakeholders in a meaningful manner, including NGOs, at all stages. However, using the potential of the Structural Funds to combat poverty requires a strong commitment from the Member States and active monitoring by the European Commission.

1. What do you intend to do to encourage Member States to prioritize the delivery on the commitment of 20% earmarked for poverty reduction in their Operational Programmes and support the coordinated use of ESF and ERDF, including actively promoting CLLD (Community Led Local Development). And how do you propose to monitor that, and the effectiveness of the actions taken?

Rationale:

When the Commission released its legislative proposal for the Structural Funds' Regulations 2014-2020, Europeans welcomed the strengthening of the Partnership Principle through article 5 of the Common Provisions Regulations as well as the elaboration of a European Code of Conduct. However the document does not have a binding character nor is the Partnership Principle being applied retroactively.

1. What do you intend to do to ensure that the Partnership Principle and the Code of Guidance will be properly enforced to ensure access to Structural Funds for NGOs, and their engagement in the design, delivery and evaluation of the Funds, including for organizations representing people experiencing poverty and for other relevant partners?

2. How will you ensure a good management of Structural Funds at regional level as part of the commitment to increasing transparency and accountability? Will you support the putting in place of a centralized mechanism to collect and deal with information, questions and complaints sent by NGOs and other relevant actors?