

## *Social NGOs call for shared European values to be put at the heart of social model debates*

### ***As EU leaders shape the future of social and economic policies in Europe, the Social Platform sets out how social justice must be placed foremost in responses to the social and economic challenges facing European Union countries.***

This document has been adopted by all the member organisations of the Platform of European Social NGOs (Social Platform) on 10 October 2005, in the run-up to the Informal Meeting of EU Heads of State and Government on 27 October 2005. The Social Platform is the alliance of representative European federations and networks of NGOs active in the social sector, promoting social justice and participatory democracy by voicing the concerns of its member organisations. The Social Platform and its members are committed to the advancement of the principles of equality, solidarity, non discrimination and the promotion and respect of fundamental rights for all, within Europe and in particular the European Union. The members of the Social Platform represent thousands of organisations, associations and voluntary groups at local, regional, national and European level voicing the interests of a wide range of civil society.

#### **Introduction**

1. The European social model represents a common vision of society shared by all EU Member States, enshrined in the existing EU Treaties and reaffirmed in the Constitutional Treaty. While each EU country has its own arrangement of social and economic policies, serving to help implement this common vision, all 25 countries have affirmed their commitment to the same key values and objectives based on fundamental rights for all. The Treaties specifically commit Member States to working for '*a high level of social protection*', '*equality between women and men*', '*the raising of the standard of living and quality of life*', '*social cohesion*' and '*the combating of exclusion*', among other objectives. The future of the European social model depends on a collective will to implement these same principles, values and objectives within each of the national systems.
2. The role of the European Union should be to act as a positive force for dealing with change and putting common values and objectives into practice within the various national systems, through exchanging experience and setting common goals and targets. Specific social arrangements are a competence of national and sub-national levels of governance.
3. European societies are facing new challenges which are creating new needs and demands. Modernisation and improvement of the different components that make up a social model is needed to respond to these developments, in all EU Member States. Social protection systems are situated at the heart of the European social model, alongside other elements, providing a base for the creation of wealth and a guarantee against social exclusion, poverty, insecurity, discrimination and inequality. This statement will therefore focus especially on social protection policies, including social services of general interest.
4. The primary aim of social protection policies must be to guarantee social justice, social cohesion and fundamental rights within the shifting social and economic context. These goals must also be explicitly pursued in all social and economic policies. Central to the European social model is the understanding that there is no contradiction between economic and social progress, and that strong social policies (as well as environmental protection) are a necessary precondition to sustainable economic and social development. Equity and efficiency are compatible goals and must be pursued with equal vigour. Modernisation must not entail reform based solely or primarily on the assumption of a need to cut costs to ensure sustainability of public finances.

#### **Social policies including social protection must be based on these key principles:**

5. **Fundamental Rights.** Guaranteeing fundamental rights, as enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and other international instruments, must be at the heart of all policies. Fundamental rights are violated when people are unable to live in dignity due to poverty, social exclusion, discrimination or inequality. This means guaranteeing the fundamental rights (such as access to education, health and housing) of every person in the EU, irrespective of legal status.

6. **Solidarity and equality.** The wealth which is created in the European Union must be shared and redistributed to ensure that everyone can have a decent quality of life and participate fully in society. Social protection systems must cover everyone equally, and those who are able to contribute less must not be penalised. Access for all to high quality services of general interest should be guaranteed.
7. **Participation.** The demands of accountability, transparency and democracy require a high level of participation in decision-making by all relevant stakeholders. In particular, NGOs are pioneers in detecting new needs and providing new forms of social and health services; they are an important channel of communication between citizens and public authorities. To be successful, authorities must be proactive in ensuring the participation of civil society in planning, implementing and evaluating policies, including through social and civil dialogue.

#### **Some basic elements for socially just and sustainable social protection policies:**

8. **Guaranteeing security for all in a flexible labour market.** Modernisation is needed to ensure that people have the security they need, especially where atypical, part-time and flexible work is increasingly the norm, particularly for women. This means high levels of social protection benefits which are individualised. It also means eliminating discrimination in social protection systems (including pensions) for all vulnerable groups, and people with atypical working patterns such as those doing unremunerated work.
9. **Access for all to quality jobs.** Efforts are needed to improve the quality of jobs, as well as the quantity, into order to avoid pushing people into poor-quality, low-paid jobs; the phenomenon of the 'working poor' is unacceptable. In this regard, the European Youth Pact is a positive step and more effort is now needed from governments to implement it, and also to make similar commitments in relation to other vulnerable groups. Social protection arrangements must support access to employment for all in a context of changing work-life patterns, including through non-financial measures such as care for children and other dependants, training opportunities and life-long learning. Anti-discrimination and gender equality measures must be fully implemented. But social protection systems must not force people to work, especially where there is an absence of quality jobs. Assumptions that there is a lack of willingness to work among many are wrong, and stigmatize the people concerned. Furthermore, it must be clearly acknowledged that poverty and social exclusion cannot be addressed through employment alone.
10. **Ensuring a decent income for all.** Social protection must be improved to be effective in securing a decent income for all, so all are able to live in dignity, including through adequate minimum income and pensions. The primary aim must be to prevent poverty and social exclusion and promote equal opportunities for all. Access to benefits must not be conditional on participating in employment or training schemes, and should expressly cover those who create and maintain social capital, on an unremunerated basis, through family- and community-based activity.
11. **Access for all to high quality social services.** Social and health services need to adapt to changing needs of their users. The modernisation of social services, and of the public environment conditioning them, must have quality and effectiveness as its primary aim. Quality in social services includes participation of users and accessibility for all, among other criteria. Not-for-profit providers of social services including social economy actors encompass a commitment to certain characteristics which are linked to the provision of quality services.
12. **Financing of social protection.** Governments should not rely on employment contributions alone to finance social protection systems. Cutting back on essential benefits and services is not a viable option and will be unsustainable in the long term.

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The Social Platform will continue to develop over the coming year a more detailed analysis of the principles and requirements which should be common to all Member States for a just, equitable and sustainable social model into the future. This will necessarily go beyond the scope of this statement, as the European social model is a broader concept which encompasses a range of policy and governance issues.

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