

Brussels, 28 February 2008

ANSWER TO THE CONSULTATION ON
**“MODERNISING SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR GREATER SOCIAL JUSTICE AND
ECONOMIC COHESION: TAKING FORWARD THE ACTIVE INCLUSION OF PEOPLE
FURTHEST FROM THE LABOUR MARKET”**
(COM(2007)620 final)

CARITAS - A Key Stakeholder in Inclusion

Caritas Europa welcomes the opportunity to submit its comment on this important communication on active inclusion. As social service providers, our member organisations are in daily touch and interaction with millions of people throughout Europe who have either no job or find themselves in otherwise precarious situations. Based on this vast grass-root experience, we would like to put forward some considerations concerning the inclusion concept outlined in this communication.

The “Active Inclusion” Concept – General Remarks

We welcome the concept of “active inclusion” as it shows indeed an important step forward in European social policy as compared to the traditional active labour market policies (ALMP). “Active inclusion” is a more holistic approach and appears to better deal with the complex issues linked to employment, social inclusion and social cohesion.

- Moreover, it appears indeed that most principles mentioned in the document not only apply to people furthest from the labour market, but may equally apply for all services and users. Active inclusion is a process, but social cohesion always remains the ultimate objective. We would therefore like to see this important element (social cohesion) also reflected in the title of this communication.
- Despite this new concept, it remains that the Lisbon strategy is built around the core assumption that jobs will solve the problems of poverty and social exclusion. But the overarching value of dignity, full participation and involvement in society, still have to apply, even in circumstances where standard employment is not an option.
- In this context, Caritas Europa welcomes the idea of launching an open method of coordination on active inclusion, but insists that a priority still should be to better feed the social inclusion/social protection process into the Lisbon strategy and its mainstreaming across all relevant policy areas.

Target Group "People furthest from the Labour Market"

Caritas Europa welcomes the focus on people furthest from the labour market, as bottom-up approaches generally prove to be more efficient than focussing first on the better-off and dealing with the worst-off only in a second stage.

- However, such a focus should not generate stigmatizing or discriminatory policies for the poor, but rather help in designing universal measures that also meet the needs of the poorest.
- Yet when talking about "people furthest from the labour market" we certainly have to consider the situation of migrants which is often in many ways restricted in terms of access to the labour market by their legal status. This is particularly true for asylum seekers, migrants coming in the context of family reunification and undocumented migrants. In the same line, EU anti-discrimination legislation should include nationality as a basis for discrimination.

Inclusive Labour Markets

Access to employment is rightly seen as the preferred option when dealing with poverty and social exclusion.

- Caritas Europa stresses that all people should have access to employment without discrimination and be fully recognised for their qualifications and skills. Work is a value as it belongs to the person and is necessary in order to provide for the conditions for a decent life, and is, in principle, an effective instrument against poverty.
- As regards income poverty where people in spite of working full-time are not able to earn enough to lead a dignified life, we want to stress that income support in this respect is certainly only a second-best solution. Therefore we are calling first for decent job opportunities (including decent wages) giving people the opportunity to lead a dignified life through employment.
- In more general terms, Caritas Europa with reference to its experience strongly recommends public support not only for social economy enterprises but for the social function of the enterprise in itself. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives should therefore be included in the present approach. However, the definition of what comes under the heading of CSR should be commonly agreed upon.
- Caritas wants to stress that public compensation to enterprises which employ disadvantaged people on a permanent basis may often be seen as an investment in human resources which includes in training and knowledge. It may also have the preventive function of avoiding permanent exclusion from the labour market, in line with the notion of general interest.

Minimum Income

Caritas Europa welcomes the insertion of minimum income in the active inclusion concept.

- However, minimum income should be seen within a framework of inclusion and participation. Decisions on eligibility and conditions should be taken on a level closest to the person in question, thus ensuring the principle of subsidiarity while at the same time not putting at risk the principle of solidarity.
- Furthermore, minimum income should always be seen together with services. The receipt of it should be embedded in an appropriate set of social services which should be deeply rooted in the community itself (see paragraph on services).

Access to Quality Services

Access to quality services is a very important element in the active inclusion concept and the way how it is implemented is crucial for the success of such a strategy.

- Caritas Europa especially welcomes the communication's focus on services and on their accessibility and quality. In this respect, we consider this approach more appropriate than the one developed in the recent communication on services of general interest (SGI)¹ - including social services of general interests (SSGI) - released in the framework of the internal market review. However, there is no reason to focus on social services of general interest only, as all services may have implications on the well-being of a given population.
- In order to prove successful and in line with the respect for human's dignity, people without a job should be offered an individually adapted integration path: professional guidance, vocational training and life long learning, as well as employment opportunities including intermediate work, social economy enterprises and other forms of supported/protected employment. These services should be embedded in the community itself so as to ensure both subsidiarity and solidarity. At the same time, self-determination, self-help, sovereignty, personal responsibility, and the citizen's right to information have to be guaranteed as much as possible and this right should be consistently promoted and supported. In our vision, this pedagogic approach empowers all the actors and helps to overcome the difficulties that a mere contractual scheme, as the incentive/sanction system could be, imposes on the poorest and weakest.
- In view of the success of those strategies, a strong and full acknowledgement of the political and strategic value of social work should be promoted at all levels in society. This would include allocating appropriate financial funds to social work considering this as an investment in society rather than an expense.
- In the context of services, the concept of microcredits should be included in the strategy as yet another possibility to empower beneficiaries. Microcredits could be valuable tools for the self organisation of the community surrounding the disadvantaged person. Thus he or she could become a real leading character in both his/her personal development and in the common development of the community.
- Caritas Europa welcomes the mention of social economy but wants to stress that it has a wider scope than only insertion on the labour market. Social economy also aims at providing high-quality goods and services according to higher standards and/or in a more inclusive way than purely profit-driven enterprises would do. Also, the activities of the "third sector" as activities of civil society provide for the most appropriate ways to develop the social dimension of a person as he or she can express him-/herself fully in these activities.

¹ COM (2007) 725 final - 20 November 2007