

EAPN Conference:

“Is Europe 2020 delivering on Poverty? How can we use the National Reform Programmes and National Social Reports to make concrete progress on participation and poverty”

Brussels, 28.9.2012

**Opening Address of the Permanent Secretary of the
Cyprus Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance,
Mr. Georgios Papageorgiou**

First of all I would like to congratulate the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) for organising this Conference on a topic that fully reflects the concerns and priorities of the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The overarching priority of the Cyprus Presidency is to work towards a “**Better Europe**”, giving emphasis to promoting growth and job creation, in parallel with solidarity and social cohesion. These aims are particularly relevant in view of the economic crisis. Without placing emphasis on *both* growth *and* combatting poverty, we will not achieve the goal of a competitive Europe of innovation, a Europe of solidarity and cohesion, a Europe for all.

Nevertheless, one of the key messages of the 2012 NRP/NSR assessments indicated that little focus was given to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and the EU 2020 targets, particularly the poverty target, despite increasing poverty. At the same time, the social impact of the financial and economic crisis means that more people are in need of social protection and social services.

In times of economic recession and the imposition of austerity measures, it is particularly important to develop an adaptable, dynamic and modern social flank of the EU, which will moderate changes in our societies and economies and enhance social cohesion.

Social cohesion and inclusion are fundamental determinants of whether countries and the people within them will be protected from the risks associated with the crisis and social changes in general. Social protection and social services must be regarded as useful economic stabilizers and their efficiency and effectiveness must be strengthened.

Employment policies are an integral part of the social flank of the EU and access to employment is not only a key route out of poverty and social exclusion but also a means of prevention, economic growth and productivity. Failure to ensure access to adequate minimum income, social protection and affordable, quality services becomes a major weakness to delivering effective anti-poverty strategies, particularly in a time of rising unemployment. Therefore, we must underline the importance of a balanced approach, which will focus not only on financial stability and fiscal consolidation but also on strengthening employment and social cohesion.

I would like to mention at this point that, within the framework of its priority for strengthening social cohesion, the Cyprus Presidency is focusing on continuing the work on combating child poverty, with emphasis on promoting children's well-being. We are organising a Conference on the 18th and 19th of October, in Nicosia, which will be attended by a wide range of stakeholders. The Conference aims at the exchange of practices and knowledge for the promotion of a balanced and holistic approach, placing children's well-being as a priority, based on their rights, and as an investment in future growth and economic recovery.

We are also working on Council Conclusions on “Preventing and tackling child poverty and social exclusion and promoting children’s well-being”, which we hope will be adopted at the October meeting of the EPSCO Council.

The Cyprus Presidency welcomes the Commission’s intention to issue a Recommendation on Child Poverty and calls on the Commission to take into account the relevant work completed by the Social Protection Committee and to promote the adoption of the Recommendation as soon as possible.

The fact that Social NGO inputs into the NRP/NSR 2012 were confined to the narrow poverty chapter, rather than an opportunity to comment on all policies, together with Social Ministries, is unfortunate. It is our conviction that civil society must work in partnership with governments – even with constructive criticism – in order to conceptualize and implement successful reforms that deal effectively with the social consequences of the crisis.

We strongly believe that the success of the Europe 2020 Strategy depends on the active involvement of all sections of society. This is why a key priority of the Cyprus Presidency is the strengthening of the participatory processes and the involvement of NGOs, local authorities and the social partners in the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy, especially as regards the employment and poverty targets.

This priority was the subject of the Informal EPSCO meeting we organised in Cyprus this July. I believe we had a constructive exchange of views on this topic and I am happy that our discussions demonstrated a convergence of views on the crucial role of social dialogue in the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

I would like to mention, in particular, the outcome of our discussions on the European Semester.

- It was generally acknowledged that the European Semester needs to be re-evaluated. It should be transformed into a process enabling real dialogue, not only with governments, but also with civil society.
- The need to re-gain citizens' trust in the European Union and to cultivate a sense of ownership of the Europe 2020 Strategy was also highlighted.
- It was stressed that the participation of the social partners and non-governmental organisations should not be limited to a simple exchange of views. Their participation should entail in-depth cooperation and active involvement, not only at the European level but also at the national level for the formulation and implementation of employment policies and policies for the reduction of poverty and social exclusion.

These issues will be reflected in the discussions that will take place at the October meeting of the EPSCO Council on the Europe 2020 Strategy and the evaluation of the 2nd European Semester.

EAPN is to be commended for carrying out an analysis of the 2012 National Reform Programmes (NRPs) and National Social Reports (NSRs). One of the key recommendations endorses the position of the Cyprus Presidency about the importance of developing meaningful civil dialogue and stakeholder engagement in the NRPs and NSRs.

As an aside, I will mention that I am happy to note the Report's findings on Cyprus. The evaluation showed that the Cyprus network was one of the few that made inputs to both the NRP and the NSR and felt that the engagement was meaningful.

In closing, I would like to wish all participants of this Conference fruitful deliberations and look forward to receiving information about the outcome. Due to prior commitments, I regret that I am unable to stay until the end.