



## **FACT SHEET**

# **The Renewed European Social Agenda**

### **Background**

On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008, the European Commission proposed a renewed version of the European Social Agenda. This package of documents (composed by legislative, proposals, studies, reports, and recommendations) should address the challenges posed by various socio-economic changes taking place in Europe, mainly due to globalisation. These historical changes cover a variety of issues ranging from the nature of work, modern family life, demographic trends, the position of women in society, to immigration, social mobility and the incidence of poverty and inequality.

The package coincides with a new Eurobarometer poll showing that a large majority of Europeans expect social inequality to increase. This increase is believed to have an effect on the search for affordable housing (specifically that it will be harder to find) in addition to healthcare and employment, even with a good education. The notion that Europeans will earn less in the near future is also troubling the minds of Europeans because of competition from fast-growing economies like China and India.

To combat these challenges, the European Commission has committed to renewing the European Social Agenda (originally created in 2005) and to integrate it into the EU policies' framework. The title of the main framework "Lisbon Strategy on Growth and Jobs" (previously referred to as 'the Lisbon Agenda'), was adopted at the European Summit of Lisbon in March 2000. It aims to make the European Union "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect to the environment by 2010". The Social Agenda is an essential component to the framework's goals and future.

Following a mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy held in 2005, the European Council decided to alter the focus on the framework, if not in anything else than its wording. The new focus would concentrate its efforts on "the achievement of stronger, lasting growth and the creation of more and better jobs". The review however drew criticism from European social partners, stating that the social aspects of the original Lisbon Strategy were subordinated to economic stability, cost cutting and deficit reduction.

The pre-existing Social Agenda was launched in February 2005 with the aim of modernising Europe's social model. The focus was much the same as previously stated, counting on equal-opportunity employment to be a large incentive for Europeans to trust in the EU's market growth and their ability to provide jobs. The 2005 Social Agenda set two priorities: firstly supplying employment and as a means of fighting poverty, and secondly, promoting equal opportunities. Civil Society Organisations dealing with anti-discrimination and social inclusion, such as the Social Platform, also criticised the focus of the Agenda. They contended the European Commission had abandoned the social pillar of Lisbon and that social policy was marginalized and weakened in the face of the growth-first approach<sup>1</sup>.

*LINK:*

*Social Agenda 2005:* <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2005:0033:FIN:EN:PDF>

### **The road towards the Renewed Social Agenda**

The European Commission has outlined a strategic plan to define the priorities of the renewed Social Agenda. This plan has included:

- the development of a Eurobarometer study (whose outcomes were mentioned above);
- a European Social Reality Stocktaking, a study on the trends in social changes taking place in Europe;
- a communication of the European Commission drafting out the vision of a renewed Social Agenda as well as the key areas of intervention and a European conference to discuss the issue.

The Bureau of European Policy Advisers of the European Commission prepared a background document, "Europe's Social Reality"<sup>2</sup>. This study attempted to draft out the main trends in social changes taking place in Europe in recent years. According to this report "the knowledge economy can seem threatening to those with low skills and low educational aspirations". The report also adds that the failure to find employment is of great concern as many see the problems of widespread poverty unanswered.

In 2007, a consultation with European social partners was launched seeking views on current social trends and what constitutes today's 'well being'. The consultation focused especially on access to education and employment as well as on the implications of changing social relationships. The consultation was completed in February 2008. Here, it should be stressed that NGOs promoting social inclusion have questioned the transparency of this consultation process. The Social Platform states that "social NGOs were not given the chance to contribute to the Commission's social vision" which the European Commission relied in a communication in November. In fact, the Social Platform explains their contributions on social realities "cannot be used to justify the seven priorities the Commission has identified at that time"<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Social Platform's press release on the Social Agenda 2005 on:

<http://www.socialplatform.org/News.asp?news=11762>

<sup>2</sup> Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/citizens\\_agenda/social\\_reality\\_stocktaking/docs/background\\_document\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/citizens_agenda/social_reality_stocktaking/docs/background_document_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See Social Platform's letter of concern on this issue: <http://www.socialplatform.org/News.asp?news=17636>

This public consultation was preceded by a Communication from the European Commission adopted on 20 November 2007 on “Opportunities, access and solidarity: towards a new social vision for 21<sup>st</sup> century in Europe” (COM (2007)726<sup>4</sup>). In this Communication the vision and key intervention areas of the renewed Social Agenda were identified. The Communication underlines changing social realities in Europe: one in six older people live in poverty; gender equality remains far from reality; the incidence of child poverty remains high as one fifth of school children do not reach the basic standards of literacy and statistics state six million people leave school without any qualification.

On top of the abovementioned facts, a European Conference on the Social Agenda took place on 5-6 May 2008 at the European Commission in Brussels. Its aim was to discuss the scope and contents of the Renewed Social Agenda with representatives of national governments and social partners. The main messages of the documents previously mentioned, particularly the content of the Communication, were reaffirmed.

### **Communication of the European Commission on the Renewed Social Agenda**

In an ‘umbrella’ Communication (a political document not legally binding) covering all aspects of the Renewed Social Agenda the European Commission (EC) proposed a series of three goals and seven priorities for the modernisation of the European social model.

The goals (of equal importance and interrelated among them) are based on:

- *opportunities* – to start well in life, realise one’s own potential and make the most of the changes offered by an innovative, open and modern Europe;
- *access* – new and more effective ways to get an education, progress in the job market, obtain quality healthcare and social protection and participate in culture and society;
- *solidarity* – to transfer social cohesion and social sustainability, and to make sure no individual is left behind.

The EC stresses that EU Member States have the main responsibility for implementing the policies necessary to achieve these goals. EU action will remain conditional upon proven added value, in line with subsidiarity and proportionality requirements.

The priorities are:

- *Children and youth – tomorrow’s Europe*. Children are Europe’s future, however 19 million children and young people are at risk of poverty and six million drop out of secondary education each year. The problems of high youth unemployment, high dropout rates in primary and secondary education, and the relative job insecurity and wage inequality faced by younger people also have to be tackled. The Renewed Social Agenda includes a Communication to improve the quality of Member States school systems, following a consultation on “Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”. Targets

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<sup>4</sup> Available at: [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2007/com2007\\_0726en01.pdf](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2007/com2007_0726en01.pdf)

include school dropouts, literacy, participation in secondary education and preparing young people for lifelong learning. The Commission also launched a Green Paper (consultation document) on "Migration and Mobility: challenges for the EU's educational systems". Later in 2008/2009 the Commission will issue a Communication on developing the Open Method of Coordination on youth, with a particular focus on young people with fewer opportunities, and develop a more comprehensive approach to child poverty.

- *Investing in people: more and better jobs, new skills.* Education and investing in human capital formation is critical to ensure labour participation and social inclusion in addition to enhancing the competitiveness of the EU. People need access to opportunities at different points in their lives, throughout lifelong learning and ongoing renewal of skills adjusted to present and future labour market needs.
- *Mobility.* The mobility of workers and students has to be fostered, in respect of existing social rights.
- *Longer and healthier lives.* The Commission (amongst other actions and proposals) will issue a Communication on health inequalities during 2009, building on work under the Social Inclusion and Social Protection Open Method of Coordination.
- *Combating poverty and social exclusion.* 78 million Europeans, or 16% of the EU population, are at risk of poverty. Poverty strikes in particular the unemployed, the disabled and the elderly; women are disproportionately at risk, the same happens for the Roma minority. Even employment is not a guarantee against poverty: in-work poverty is on the increase with some 8% of employed people at risk of poverty. The EU is helping coordinate efforts to promote active inclusion, including labour market integration, making work pay and life-long learning, particularly for those who are furthest from the labour market, as part of the fight against poverty. The planned 2010 Year of Inclusion and the Fight against Poverty will provide the opportunity for a renewed political commitment on the part of the EU and its Member States to those fundamental goals. The EU will also reshape and significantly extend the food aid programme for Europe's most deprived people, an important move in a context of rising food prices. Initiatives will be undertaken to improve digital literacy.
- *Fighting discrimination and promoting gender equality.* Pursuing opportunity means systematically attacking discrimination and fighting racism and xenophobia. A key element of this renewed social agenda is a proposed directive to combat discrimination based on religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation and to put into effect the principle of equal treatment, outside the field of employment. Important is the reporting on the EU instruments and policies in favour of Europe's Roma community: the Commission has issued a report on this subject included in the Social Agenda package.
- *Opportunities, access and solidarity on the global scene.* This priority concerns mainly the external relations framework of the EU.

**LINK:**

The Renewed Social Agenda, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=547&langId=en>

Communication of the Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=453&langId=en>

## The most relevant point of the renewed Social Agenda from a Roma perspective

- **Report on Europe's Roma minority**

As a response to the request by EU leaders in December 2007 to examine the policies and instruments available at EU level to improve Roma inclusion, the EC developed the Staff Working Document "Community Instruments and Policies for Roma Inclusion" {COM(2008) 420}. According to the Document released on 02 July 2008, millions of Europeans of Roma origin are subject to persistent discrimination – both at the individual and institutional level – and widespread social exclusion. The situation according to the Document states that things could improve if the EU, Member States and civil society join forces to effectively coordinate their efforts and make full use of the already existing tools for the inclusion of Roma people into society. A recent EU-wide poll revealed 77% of Europeans believe being Roma is a disadvantage in society, almost equal to being disabled (79%).

The Staff Working Document examines the instruments: legislation, cohesion policy and non-discrimination actions (information, awareness-raising, cooperation with civil society) and the most important policy areas for Roma inclusion – employment, social inclusion, education, public health, enlargement and gender equality. The document represents an assessment of existing instruments and policies, but it also identifies a number of lessons learned which allow the given framework to be used more effectively.

The Staff Working Document concludes that despite the existence of a powerful framework of legislative, financial and policy coordination tools available, an implementation gap in Member States remains. The EU's Structural Funds, including the European Social Fund (ESF), and pre-accession instruments for candidate and neighbourhood countries are crucial to overcoming exclusion. For example, in 2000-2006, EUR 275 million of ESF funding was devoted to projects specifically targeted at Roma, while a further EUR 1 billion was spent on vulnerable groups including Roma.

The key to success, as the Document explains, is strong and effective coordination in addition to the full involvement of civil society in the design, implementation and monitoring of EU action. However, the responsibility for most central areas concerning Roma inclusion lies primarily with Member States (e.g. education, employment, social inclusion). The EU can only coordinate Member States' policies, and support their implementation through the Structural Funds.

The European Roma Information Office (ERIO) has a critical view to the Staff Working Document: The Document shows that there is no strategy towards Roma inclusion; thusly ERIO urges the creation of a European Roma Framework Strategy. The lack of a framework which is crucial for any official government document only highlights the errors evident; No complementarity is found between the various programmes and policies which could contribute to Roma inclusion. There are no effective instruments to fill the gap between EU and national policies. Information on effective EC programmes and policies as well as their impact on Roma living conditions is missing. A stronger commitment on how the EC will improve policy coordination within itself and between the national level is nowhere to be found in the document. These points only help to stress the necessity to develop a European Roma Framework Strategy which would provide the adequate structure for policy coordination and effective funding allocation. The Strategy should have the

necessary mechanisms to force Member States to allocate funds in strategic sectors for promoting Roma inclusion. ERIO believes that the EC should develop capacity building programmes for Roma organisations which would allow for them to apply for Structural Funds directly. Furthermore, a compulsory provision should be introduced for Member States to report on Roma issues in all sectors of relevance as a way to promote Roma inclusion. In terms of EC policy coordination, the Inter-Service Group on Roma should be improved by extending its mandate, transforming it from a mere group for the exchange of information into a real body for policy design and coordination.

*LINK:*

*Staff Working Paper: Community Instruments and Policies for Roma Inclusion,*  
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=481&langId=en>

- **Proposal of a horizontal directive against discrimination**

The European Commission believes that all people in the European Union should be protected from discrimination outside the labour market (i.e. in the provision of goods and services of social protection, health care, education and access to goods, services and housing). For this reason the EC is proposing a new European-level law (directive) to extend legal protection from discrimination on grounds of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. The EU already has a directive on discrimination on grounds of ethnic origin and race.

The directive also contains rules which should make it easier for victims of discrimination to challenge unfair treatment. Each member country would be obligated to set up an organisation (called an 'equality body') to promote equal treatment and give advice on equal treatment, and help victims of discrimination. First the draft directive has to be discussed by the Member States in the Council, but it is hoped that an agreement will be reached during 2009. Second, Member States would have two years to put in place the national laws transposing the directive.

Although the new Directive has been welcomed by the NGOs promoting equal treatment, there has been criticism due to gaps in the Directive. According to the European Network against Racism (ENAR) "the proposal repeats what ENAR believes to have been the mistakes of the past, including the exclusion of nationality or matters related to immigration. The current text also proposes blanket exceptions in key areas, notably education, marital and family status and certain activities of private individuals. These are sensitive but important areas, and ENAR is concerned that blanket exclusions go further than is necessary to comply with the principle of subsidiarity, leading, for some children, to the complete denial of the right to education"<sup>5</sup>.

*LINK:*

*Fight Against Discrimination - Summary:* <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=476&langId=en>  
*The Directive proposal:* <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=477&langId=en>

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<sup>5</sup> See ENAR's press release on anti-discrimination legislation on:  
[http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/pdfpress/2008-07-02%20anti-discrimination%20proposal%20final%20\\_3\\_.pdf](http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/pdfpress/2008-07-02%20anti-discrimination%20proposal%20final%20_3_.pdf)

- **Green paper on migrant children and education**

With its Green Paper (a document that gives the basis for an Europe-wide discussion among stakeholders) "Migration & Mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems" which was adopted on 3 July 2008, the Commission wants to open the debate on how education policies may better address the challenges posed by immigration and internal EU mobility flows. It raises issues such as how to prevent the creation of segregated school settings, so as to improve equality in education. Another issue covering how to accommodate the increased diversity of mother tongues and cultural perspectives and build intercultural skills within the EU; lastly how to adapt teaching skills and build bridges with migrant families and communities. This Green Paper is the first step to a public consultation on the issues at stake. Interested parties are invited to make their views known about the policy challenge, policy responses, and the possible role of the European Union in supporting Member States, before 31 December 2008. The European Commission will analyse the results of this consultation and publish its conclusions in early 2009.

*LINK:*

*Green paper "Migration and Mobility", [http://ec.europa.eu/education/school21/com423\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/school21/com423_en.pdf)*

### **ERIO's opinion on the Renewed Social Agenda**

The European Roma Information Office (ERIO) points out that this Communication is far from European social realities. It focuses on making people more productive in the labour market and does not take into account the needs of those systematically excluded from it or from accessing social benefits. The special needs of disadvantaged ethnic minorities, such as Roma, living in poverty or extreme poverty are not addressed in the Communication. ERIO demands that an Agenda for a real Social Europe should be based on a human rights approach and on the promotion of a societal framework offering conditions that will allow the full exercise of socio-economic rights by all people living in Europe.

ERIO believes that the renewed Social Agenda should focus on including the most disadvantaged in Europe. Specific targets should include: to integrate children and young Roma, who attend segregated schools, into mainstream education; to fight against the discrimination of Roma which prevents them access to adequate labour; to implement lifelong learning programmes targeting Roma specially, who are excluded from the labour market; to promote the full integration and full respect of the civil rights of Roma immigrants, both EU citizens and Third Country Nationals; to guarantee Roma have access to adequate health services; and to implement urgent measures to encounter extreme poverty among Roma, especially that affecting Roma children. These are only minimal targets for a real, inclusive Social Agenda.

*LINK*

*ERIO's Statement on the renewed Social Agenda:*

*[http://erionet.org/site/upload/advocacy/ERIO\\_Statement\\_Renewed\\_Social\\_Agenda.pdf](http://erionet.org/site/upload/advocacy/ERIO_Statement_Renewed_Social_Agenda.pdf)*

**European Roma Information Office - Avenue Edouard Lacomblé 17, Brussels 1040**  
**Tel : 0032 (0) 2733 34 62 - Fax : 0032 (0) 2733 38 75 – [office@erionet.org](mailto:office@erionet.org) - [www.erionet.org](http://www.erionet.org)**