



Social Services Europe

Social Service Providers and MEPs: “Let’s cooperate on an Action Plan for Job Creation”

Event Highlights

Social service providers and policy makers convened at the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels on 26 March to work together on how to put social investment back on the European Commission’s agenda. The breakfast session was organised by Social Services Europe, which brings together eight Europe-wide networks of not-for-profit social service providers. Through its membership, Social Services Europe represents over 100,000 organisations active in promoting social inclusion and cohesion across Europe.

In a context where unemployment and poverty levels are so high, the Commission’s 2015 Workplan is failing to adequately consider the crucial need for social investment. Guest speakers discussed solutions to tackle this agenda change, as well as the additional challenges faced across the social and health care sector.

The meeting was hosted by **Ariane Rodert**, Vice-President of Group 3 in the European Economic and Social Committee, who underlined the timeliness of acting now and collaborating more closely to improve the conditions for non-profit service providers. “*We need to have a joint action plan and ownership*”, she said, observing the fragmented nature of the new Commission when it comes to social issues. “*We need strong social policies also to support Europe, and the social and economic dimensions must be in harmony*”, she added.

In this regard, **Heinz Becker MEP** (EPP/AT) expressed his disappointment with Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker for his apparent failure to adhere to his pledge of becoming a ‘Guardian of Social Europe’, adding that the Commission must be the first point of target for social investment advocates, given the current lack of awareness of the sector’s added value.

Jutta Steinruck MEP (S&D/DE) seconded this concern. “*We as parliament have to do our homework. We have to be very strong to support the social services sector as one of the key sectors for our societies*”, she observed. One vital aspect for Ms Steinruck is to harness the sector’s great job creation potential – but importantly, to ensure that these jobs provide workers with a promising career path.

Building on the issue of working conditions in the sector, **Jean Lambert MEP** (Greens/UK) spoke about the risk of zero-hour contracts and temporary agencies, which in the UK leads to the poor employment conditions that are strongly associated with the sector. Finally, Ms Lambert commended the UK Public Services (Social Value) Act as a potential case of best practice to be emulated by other Member States in their handling of public procurement procedures as commissioning authorities have a duty to look at the additional social value

when they are tendering contracts.

Concetta Cultrera, European Commission DG Employment, responded to the claims that the Commission is doing nothing for social service providers. She stated for instance that progress has been made in the new public procurement and state aid rules. In relation to the Social Investment Package, she advocated the importance of promoting investment in social services as a *“smart investment, because of the societal-inclusive effect of social services, and because of the job-creation potential.”*

Moderator of the proceedings, Board Member of Social Services Europe and Secretary General of Caritas Europa, **Jorge Nuño Mayer** welcomed Ms Cultrera’s contributions, adding that relations between social service providers and the European Commission are sometimes strained due to the latter’s “dual personality,” which sees the institution working under two paradigms – *“the economic paradigm or the paradigm of the people.”*

Laura Jones, Senior Policy and Membership Development Officer at Eurodiaconia, picked up Ms Cultrera’s perspective on public procurement, stating that the European Commission should *“give clear guidance on how public authorities can contract quality services and ensure good staff working conditions. Service providers”*, she added, *“would welcome cooperation with the European Parliament to exchange good practice in public contracts, in particular for quality social and health services”*.

Luk Zelderloo, Board Member of Social Services Europe and Secretary General of the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) called for an action plan that takes into account all of the sector’s many challenges and complexities – from the supply and demand mismatch, to the issues of working conditions, from gender issues, to the brain drain of skilled professionals from central and Eastern Europe.

Leon Prop, President of Social Services Europe and Director of the Red Cross EU Office, reiterated the important role that not-for-profit service providers play in supporting vulnerable people in local communities, highlighting the shared experience of growing demands for social services across Europe. *“Service providers wish to join forces with policy makers for getting social investment back on the EU agenda, social investment should not be seen as a cost but investment that will produce social outputs, reduce future costs and have a return of investment”*, he said.

In conclusion, Board Member of Social Services Europe and Director of the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), **Freek Spinnewijn** remarked that Juncker’s Triple A statement provides social investment advocates with an un-ignorable opportunity to place pressure on Europe’s policy makers. *“I can’t help but believe that Juncker regrets talking about a Triple A social rating, but he has said it, and we should exploit it to the max.”*

For more information, please contact us at info@socialserviceseurope.eu

Social Services Europe brings together eight Europe-wide networks of not-for-profit providers of social and health care services who each have a track record in providing value-driven services for the most vulnerable in our societies. The network aims to strengthen the profile and position of social services, and promote the role of not-for-profit social service providers in Europe.