

CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS

On 22 and 23 April 2009, the Czech Presidency of the European Union has held a conference on social services as a tool for mobilising workforce and strengthening social cohesion. The organisation of the conference, in which the European Commission was also closely involved, was supported by the European Community budget. The conference analysed recent developments in the social services sector in the European Union and discussed the role that such services could play, in the current financial and economic crisis and demographic situation, to facilitate an economic and employment recovery and supporting those experiencing hardship. Following a fruitful debate, which benefitted of the participation of representatives of Member States' governments, European institutions, social partners, academy and NGOs, the Presidency has drawn the following conclusions on the social services sector in the European Union.

Social services: an essential instrument for social policies

- Social services play a vital preventive and socially cohesive role in our societies. Due to population ageing, changes in the household's composition and increased participation of women in the labour market, the demand for these services is growing and becoming more sophisticated. Moreover, the need for social services is increased by the current financial and economic crisis, as these services help cushion the impact of the crisis and will act as a springboard for people affected by the crisis to start up again.

The integration of services, adequate response to the needs of citizens

- In order to tackle multiple disadvantages, social services must be comprehensive and personalised, conceived and delivered in an integrated manner. Social services are often rooted in (local) cultural traditions: hence the need for a greater coordination with all other services of general interest provided at local level, such as transport, education, culture or sport activities.

The role of public authorities: guaranteeing quality, access and sustainability of social services

- The responsibility for the organisation and provision of social services rest with public authorities, often at regional or local level. Moreover, social services are generally driven by the principle of solidarity and are highly dependent on public financing, so as to ensure equality of access, independent of wealth or income. In order to support sustainable social services, special (local and regional) strategies should be developed to tackle the tension between equal access, quality and financial sustainability; a suitable framework should be created and adequate financial resources provided. To ensure quality and efficiency of services, quality standards should be determined at the appropriate level in accordance with European quality framework.

Integrated social services as tool for active inclusion

- Adequate access to quality social services forms a basic precondition for socially excluded people to actively participate in mainstream society and in the labour market. Social prevention and support services enable people, through personalised support, to overcome their adverse social situation, to reintegrate into society and to enhance their employability.

Creating new job opportunities in the social services sector

- The social services sector represents already a large field of employment in the European Union which has already contributed significantly to job creation, especially among women and old workers, and which combines high and low qualified workers. It will become more and more important in offering new job opportunities and enabling possibilities of employment and social integration.

Investing in the social services sector

- Investing in social services during the present crisis can therefore make an important contribution to strengthening the growth potential and the cohesion of our economies and societies. It will help the sector to better respond to a demand for services which is already increasing and will further increase due to the new needs created by the economic crisis. It will improve the quality of the services delivered, thus allowing them to better play their preventive and socially cohesive role. It will further develop the job creation potential of the sector, increasing notably women and elderly people participation in the labour market.

Importance of informal care, preference for a model of shared care

- It is recognised that the majority of long-term care is provided within informal settings. The conditions for quality informal care should therefore be created, through adequate training, guidance, care support and financial support provided to informal carers, who are mostly family members.
- A combination of both formal and informal care (so-called „shared care“) seems to be most effective, giving carers possibilities for reconciliation of their work and family life and offering new job opportunities.

Promotion of a system of life-long training and capacity building for ensuring the quality of services

- In order to ensure the quality of services and also the quality of informal care, a system of life-long training and capacity building for social service workers should be created. It is necessary to find the right balance between high-quality services, the resulting skill requirements and the level of service supply.

Protection of rights, dignity and special needs of social services users

- When assessing the quality of social services, it is necessary to take into account the special needs of social services users and protect their rights, interests and dignity.

