By Pierre Mairesse,
Director of Youth and Sport,
DG Education and Culture,
European Commission

Social Cohesion
at the Heart
of EU Policy

"These are exceptional times: we need a new, much stronger focus on the social dimension in Europe, at all levels of government. Immediate action will be required to fight unemployment today, but also to look ahead to those facing long-term structural barriers to employment, such as the young and low skilled. At the same time, we need to remember the needs of our ageing population and the most vulnerable in our society. This is the only way for us to ensure strong social cohesion as the hallmark of the European model of society."[1]

These opening words belong to Jose Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission. They were part of his Political Guidelines for the new Commission, where he outlined his vision of the European Union's challenges and opportunities in the coming years before his reappointment for a second mandate as Commission President in autumn 2009.

Complementary to finding a response to social needs, President Barroso also underlined the need to strengthen a "Europe of values": "I believe in a Europe that gives every man and woman the freedom and security to develop their potential to the full, free of discrimination. A Europe that celebrates diversity as a major asset and ensures that every human being is treated with the same dignity. A Europe that is proud of its cultural and linguistic heritage, that protects and promotes its diversity as the essence of our identity, the foundation of the values we stand for and the basis on which we engage with the rest of the world."

▶ At the Heart of the Europe 2020 Strategy

In line with these statements, the promotion of social cohesion is at the heart of the Europe 2020 Strategy. Released by the Commission in March 2010 at the start of its five-year mandate, the Europe 2020 Strategy sets clear priorities and benchmarks for how the European Union can excel in economic growth and development in the coming decade.

The Europe 2020 puts forward three mutually reinforcing priorities:
- smart growth: developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation;
- sustainable growth: promoting a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy;
- inclusive growth: fostering a high-employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion.

In other words, social cohesion should not be seen as a stand alone policy objective, but needs to be placed in a setting where it reinforces and is also itself reinforced by other priorities.

Five overall targets are outlined in the Strategy to be achieved by 2020 as a result of an overall effort by both the European Commission and the EU Member States. While two of these benchmarks relate to increased investment in research & development and a reduction in carbon emissions, the other three targets are directly linked to social cohesion, thereby showing the strong commitment of the European Commission in this field:
- The employment rate of the population aged 20-64 should increase from the current 69 % to at least 75 %, including through the greater involvement of women, older workers and better integration of migrants in the work force;

[1] Political Guidelines for the new Commission, delivered on 3 September 2009, Jose Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, p. 15

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- The number of early school leavers should be reduced to 10 % from the current 15 %, while increasing the share of the population with higher education from today's 31 % to at least 40 % by 2020;
- The number of people living below the national poverty lines inside EU Member States should be reduced by 25 %, lifting over 20 million people out of poverty. The national poverty line is defined as 60 % of the median disposable income in each Member State.

These targets are interrelated. For instance, better educational levels and a reduction in the share of early school leavers increase employability, and progress in increasing the employment rate helps lift people out of poverty. This calls for comprehensive and transversal policies in the field of social cohesion and inclusion.

▶ A precarious situation for young people

Since the beginning of the financial and economic crisis in the first half of 2008, there has been much attention given to how the crisis affects young people. The youth unemployment rate (for youth aged below 25) increased by almost 38 % between spring 2008 and January 2010. The share of unemployed young people stood at 21 % in early 2010 and was still increasing. In Latvia and Spain, more than 40 % of young people who are outside the education system are without a job. At the same time, the risk of poverty rates both for children and young people were before the financial crisis several percentage points higher (19 % and 20 %, respectively) than for the overall population (at 16 %). The concern is that the current crisis will increase these numbers.

Poverty transmits between generations. Children raised in families experiencing long-term poverty are less likely to complete higher education and more prone to take on lower paid jobs or experience unemployment. It is therefore particularly important to develop comprehensive and transversal policy responses for young people that connect the different policy fields of education and employment, social inclusion, health, participation and young people's well-being. The European Union is responding to this challenge and in the last decade the youth dimension of EU's policies and actions have become more clearly articulated.

▶ A strengthened youth dimension in EU policy

The White Paper on Youth, released in 2001, marked the first time that the European Commission issued a comprehensive policy strategy targeting young people. This was followed up with the inclusion of the European Youth Pact in the Lisbon Strategy in 2005 and the focus on children and youth in the Renewed Social Agenda in 2008. Finally, a new nine-year EU Youth Strategy was adopted in 2009, and integrated into the Europe 2020 Strategy in the spring of 2010.

One of the significances of the White Paper on Youth was its strong focus on the active involvement of young people in society. It stressed that the issue of youth participation in civic and political life – a key component of social cohesion policy – must be addressed at all levels of government, and that it must extend to different fields of policy that have an impact on young people. This had a strong effect on many countries in Europe at a time when twelve countries – most of which were from Central and Eastern Europe and with a limited tradition of youth participation – were applying for EU membership and were very receptive to impulses and guidance in the policy field of social cohesion and young people.

▶ The Open Method of Coordination

In order to strengthen the mechanisms of implementation of the White Paper, the Council of Ministers for Youth agreed in 2002 to apply the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the youth field. The OMC is used in several policy areas where the European Commission has limited competencies, meaning that Member States set their own national policies rather than having an EU-wide policy laid down in law. The way the OMC works is that the European Commission and the Member States first agree on overall priorities and some common objectives for how to reach those goals. The Member States are then responsible for implementing the common objectives, and report back to the Commission at regular intervals on their progress. On the basis of these reports, the Commission prepares progress analyses and proposals to the Council of Youth Ministers for how further progress can be made. In this way, the Open Method of Coordination becomes a dynamic instrument for change in the field of youth policy at the national level, and encourages learning from sharing experiences of good practice.

Since 2001, three cycles of the Open Method of Coordination have been implemented. Based on these experiences, a renewed and improved version of the OMC was introduced together with the new EU Youth Strategy which was launched in 2009.

▶ The New EU Youth Strategy

After a year-long consultation process with governments of Member States and stakeholders and young people from across Europe, the new EU Youth Strategy was introduced in 2009. The Commission first proposed the strategy in its Communication called "A New EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering" in spring, which was then followed up by a Council Resolution, based in large part on the same text, in the end of November.

While the new EU Youth Strategy addresses all young people, it stresses that special attention should be given to youth with fewer opportunities. The Strategy operates with eight 'fields of action', which are all important elements of social cohesion policy: Employment & Entrepreneurship, Education & Training,

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Social Inclusion, Health & Well-being, Participation, Culture & Creativity, Volunteering and Youth & the World. One particular achievement of the new EU Youth Strategy, adopted for the period 2010 to 2018, is its strong emphasis on the transversal and cross-sectoral nature of youth policy.

Another strength of the Strategy is how it proposes concrete instruments for the participation of young people in decision-making at all levels. Through the so-called "structured dialogue", Member States are invited to set up national committees to oversee the implementation of the Strategy at the national levels. These committees should consist of government representatives, youth researchers and youth workers and, of course, of young people themselves. Even more, the Strategy mentions that the committees shall preferably be chaired by young people themselves (meaning in most cases the national youth council or young people's own organisations). The Spanish Presidency of the EU during the first half of 2010 made it a priority to focus on the establishment of these national committees. Supplementing these national committees, a European committee for the structured dialogue, chaired by the European Youth Forum and with the involvement of both the Commission and the EU Presidency, was set up in the early weeks of 2010.

▶ Youth in Action - an instrument for social cohesion

The European Commission's *Youth in Action programme* for the years 2007 – 2013 is an important instrument for supporting the EU Youth Strategy and for promoting social cohesion in Europe. The programme offers opportunities for young people to take part in youth initiatives and cross-border exchanges as well as voluntary projects outside the formal education system. With its focus on non-formal learning, and reaching out to young people with fewer opportunities as one of its permanent priorities, the Youth in Action programme reaches out to young people who may have quit school early or come from a family background with limited resources. In this way, it is an important Commission instrument to empower all young people, in particular those with fewer opportunities.

In 2008 alone, which is the latest year for which there is complete data, the programme involved more than 130 000 young people and youth workers through approximately 7000 projects. Around 2 100 of these projects had a focus on social inclusion. In addition to having 'young people with fewer opportunities' as a permanent priority target group and theme, the programme operates with rolling annual priorities corresponding to the EU agenda. For 2010, one such priority is combating poverty and social exclusion, in line with the theme of the European Year 2010. This priority has led to an increase in the number of projects on social inclusion being granted by this Commission programme in 2010.

Research confirms that the Youth in Action programme is an important tool for social cohesion among young people.

A study finalised in 2010 documents that the employability of young people who had taken part in the programme was indeed increased, and that experiences they gained made them more competitive on the employment market.

▶ Concrete action in 2010

The European Union has designated 2010 as the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. This elevates social cohesion policy to the top of the European political agenda. It highlights the social responsibility we all have - not only government authorities at all levels, but also every individual citizen – to work together to ensure inclusive societies that provide strong social policies and equal opportunities for all. A large number of initiatives and activities are held throughout Europe as part of the European year, and it is likely to have a long-term or lasting effect on social policy in the European Union.

The EU Council Trio Presidency of Spain, Belgium and Hungary has a strong social dimension in its work programme in the youth field for 2010 and the first half of 2011. The overall priority of the trio programme is promoting better opportunities for youth employment, emphasising close links to social inclusion, youth work and youth participation. The EU Presidency Youth Event and the Meeting of General Directors for Youth (both organised in Spain in April 2010) will have a focus on social cohesion and inclusion of young people. The Spanish Presidency has taken the lead in proposing a Council resolution on the active inclusion of youth, to be adopted by the Council of Youth Ministers in May. Furthermore, the European Commission and the Spanish EU Presidency are co-organising a high-level peer learning activity in June 2010 on implementation of transversal national youth strategies. These activities, all taking place during the first half of 2010, will be followed up by an active youth agenda of the Commission and the upcoming Belgian and Hungarian Presidencies of the EU.

To conclude, it should be said that promoting social cohesion, being among the core values of the European Union, has never been more relevant than today. Europe is currently recovering from its worst economic and financial crisis since World War II, and ensuing social strains and high unemployment rates require resolute and comprehensive social cohesion policies. The European Commission is responding to this challenge through the Europe 2020 Strategy, with ambitious targets set for the coming decade. Young people are placed at the top of this agenda. ■

Contact:

eac-unite-d1@ec.europa.eu

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