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Social Cohesion

A core value of the Council of Europe

For the Council of Europe, social cohesion is the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation, manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all. A cohesive society is a mutually supportive community of free individuals pursuing these common goals by democratic means. It goes without saying that young people play a crucial role in this framework, both as active promoters of social cohesion and as a target group.

There is, consequently, a strong relationship between democracy and social cohesion. Social cohesion is an essential condition for democratic security and sustainable development, since divided and unequal societies are not only unjust, but also cannot guarantee stability in the long term. Equally, social cohesion and the respect for human rights and the rule of law are inextricably linked, since equality before the law and reliable human rights protection are both a necessary basis for and reinforced by social cohesion.

All societies face actual and potential divisions caused by ethnic and cultural diversity, disparity of wealth, or environmental conditions. A cohesive society is one that develops satisfactory ways of dealing with stress and potential conflict in an open and democratic manner. It takes action to reduce inequalities and to restore equity so that these various divisions remain manageable and do not threaten stability.

Social cohesion is an objective rather than a state, which, once achieved, would not require any further efforts. No society is fully cohesive. Any level of cohesion, once achieved, is subject to change and needs to react to political, social and economic developments. Technological progress and the relations between generations have an impact, as does the environment and ecological considerations. While social cohesion aims at creating solidarity in society with a view to minimising exclusion and disparity, specific measures to support vulnerable members of society are necessary at the same time. Even if

not all young people can be considered to be vulnerable, children and youth are nevertheless a specific group that needs specific attention, both in terms of protection and of being committed to a socially cohesive society.

Since the Heads of States and Governments of the Council of Europe member States recognised social cohesion as “one of the foremost needs of the wider Europe and (...) an essential component to the promotion of human rights and dignity” (Final Declaration of the 1997 Summit), the Council of Europe has developed numerous concepts and activities for promoting social cohesion both within member States and in Europe as a whole.

A first Social Cohesion Strategy was adopted in 2000, defining the objectives and parameters of the organisation’s work in this context. The strategy was up-dated in 2004 and gained a new impetus from the High Level Task Force Report on Social Cohesion in the 21st Century “Towards an active, fair and socially cohesive Europe”, which had been requested by the Warsaw Summit of Heads of States and Government of Council of Europe Member States in 2005. Reacting to the global economic and financial crisis and its social consequences, Ministers responsible for Social Cohesion decided at their first Council of Europe conference in Moscow, February 2009, to revise the Social Cohesion Strategy in order to take into account the High Level Task Force report and recent social developments, and to use it as a basis for a Council of

Europe Action Plan for Social Cohesion, which will set the guidelines for the organisation's work in the years to come. With regard to youth policy in the Council of Europe, social cohesion is one of three major priorities identified in the "Agenda 2020", the political key document on the future of the organization's youth policy: human rights and democracy; living together in diverse societies; and *social inclusion of young people*. The integration of excluded young people; young people's access to education, training and working life; their access also to cultural, sporting and creative activities; steps to support their autonomy, well-being and their transition from education to the labour market; and intergenerational dialogue and solidarity are the operational aims specified in the "Agenda 2020" and in a subsequent resolution adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (Resolution CM/Res(2008)23).

► Reinvesting in social rights and in a cohesive society

The European Social Charter sums up and expresses the Council of Europe's commitment to social rights, in particular with regard to employment, social protection, health, education, and housing.

Social rights must be accessible to all, including, in particular, potentially vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as children, young people, migrants, workers without full social rights, people with disabilities, minorities, recipients of long-term care, people living in poverty, low-income and single and/or young parents, and the homeless. In particular, governments and authorities at all levels must make sure, that these already vulnerable people are not further weakened by the social consequences of the global economic and financial crisis.

Education and health care are important factors of social cohesion. Education, including non-formal learning in the youth field, must contribute to social cohesion rather than promote exclusion and segregation. People must be enabled to cope with multicultural and multilingual societies, with change, ambiguity and with social mobility. They should be made aware of their history, as well as of their cultural and environmental heritage in order to better understand and successfully act in the societies they live in. All members of society should have access to health care based on equity, solidarity, justice, non-discrimination and non-stigmatisation, with special sensitivity towards vulnerable groups.

One of the consequences of the global economic and financial crisis is the increasing number of people living in unsatisfactory and undignified conditions, because they cannot afford decent housing and young people are particularly concerned since they can not leave their families at appropriate times

and become autonomous. Many new models of housing spring up throughout Europe. Their impact and potential should be evaluated in order to develop guidelines for public authorities.

► Building a Europe of responsibilities that are both shared and social

The essential responsibilities of states and governments for social policy are undisputed. The state is the guarantor of human rights, including social rights, and participatory democracy. However, throughout Europe, new concepts of governance through partnership emerge at all levels. In order to engender a widely-held sense of social responsibility, all stakeholders, not only governments and public authorities at all levels, but also the social partners, civil society, as well as corporate partners and the media, need to develop an awareness and practical application of shared responsibilities. The Council of Europe has developed a "multi-partite social model contract", which sets up a framework for connecting the activities of public and private service providers, thus offering multiple complementary services, especially for vulnerable groups.

Citizens, especially young people are both object and actors in social policy. They need to act responsibly, in particular with regard to their consumption, investment patterns and lifestyle. They can only do this if they are given the tools to analyse and understand what is going on around them and in the world at large, in order to take informed decisions.

Social cohesion contributes also to economic development. A stable society is a more favourable environment for business. Increasingly, business declares an interest in social responsibility and instruments are being developed to put this responsibility into practice. Based on already existing experience, a comprehensive reference framework and guidelines on the contribution of business to social cohesion should be established and disseminated throughout Europe. The social sector as an integral part of the third sector is crucial for economic development, with a continually growing number of work places and ever-expanding investments.

► Strengthening representation and democratic decision making and expanding social dialogue and civic engagement

Social cohesion is closely linked to democracy, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law, since it facilitates participation and improves governance. Individuals participate in many networks and institutions that help to knit society together. Political parties, trade unions and religious bodies continue

to engage many people in broad social networks. Charitable, sports and cultural associations, together with children and youth organisations, play a particularly important part in building social cohesion and engage many people in socially useful voluntary activities. Through their involvement with non-governmental organisations, people learn to participate and act responsibly in society as well. Governments should create a favourable environment for encouraging such bodies and activities. They should also ensure that appropriate and sufficient representation structures exist in order to encourage all members of society, including vulnerable or marginalised groups, to actively participate.

In this respect the youth field in the Council of Europe has established the unique “co-management” system that allows for joint decision-making between governmental representatives and those coming from youth NGO’s; it is potentially a model for other policy fields and copied by various member states in the field of youth.

Keeping this in mind, representation deficits in all fields should be identified and remedied. Vulnerable groups should be actively encouraged, by providing assistance and training, to make use of their participation possibilities. Civic dialogue would thus be reinforced and could be further institutionalised through the creation of dialogue fora at the local level.

► Building a secure future for all

The global economic and financial crisis has further destabilised peoples’ confidence in the future. This is particularly true for young people, independent of their educational background. Immediate and sustained action to renew people’s confidence in their future is imperative for overcoming the social and demographic challenges. This concerns not only opportunities open to individuals for pursuing their family and professional aspirations with a sense of optimism and serenity, but also more global objectives, such as peace, security, justice, and a healthy environment.

Social mobility must become a credible concept again. Guidelines for improving social mobility, which are currently developed by the Council of Europe, should be taken seriously and applied by member States.

Our societies are getting older and the dangers looming over pension schemes are much discussed. Not only for this reason is it necessary to develop policy models for family-work reconciliation, which allow people to choose their preferred form of family life, and combine it with the needs of business in a globalised effort. It is also crucial to enhance models of intergenerational dialogue and solidarity.

If despite their possibility to choose their own lifestyle some plans fail, there must be a possibility for a second chance. Social protection and social networks must be strong enough for

people to make their life plan in the knowledge that if they fail, they will not be totally destroyed and can start again. And this is particularly true for young people.

► The specific role of the youth sector in the Council of Europe

It goes without saying that the youth sector in the Council of Europe has a very specific role to play when it comes to the realisation of social cohesion, for the benefit of young people and for society at large. Consequently, the programme of the Council of Europe Youth Sector focuses in the period 2010–2012 on the problems of social precariousness and the exclusion of young people and children on the one side and on human rights education and participation of young people on the other. Current work priorities include the promotion of young people’s access to social rights, the development of non-formal education and learning to ease the social inclusion of young people and children, the support for young people’s autonomy, health and well-being and their access to decent living conditions. The Council of Europe also continues supporting the role of youth work and youth policy in promoting intergenerational dialogue and solidarity.

Finally, in the context of their partnership in the field of youth the European Commission and the Council of Europe regard the strengthening of social cohesion as a key priority in their joint work programme, particularly by making young people, youth workers and youth leaders aware of the social dimension and its values in our European societies. ■

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