



**FEANTSA**

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**Europe will not deliver for people living in extreme poverty**  
**FEANTSA's comments on the future EU 2020 strategy**

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FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless is an umbrella of not-for-profit organisations which participate in or contribute to the fight against homelessness in Europe. It is the only major European network that focuses on homelessness at the European level. FEANTSA currently has more than 100 member organisations, working in close to 30 European countries, including 25 EU Member States. Most of FEANTSA's members are national or regional umbrella organisations of service providers that support homeless people with a wide range of services, including housing, health, employment and social support. They often work in close co-operation with public authorities, social housing providers and other relevant actors.

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## **Preliminary remarks**

FEANTSA believes that the Commission's consultation document fails to provide an adequate framework for a meaningful input from civil society organisations such as FEANTSA on the future of the EU. A proper consultation on the EU2020 vision would require an in-depth and factual analysis of the challenges lying ahead of the European Union and its citizens, a clearer description of possible strategies forward, and how these relate to all relevant EU areas of competence. Like EAPN, the Social Platform and other social NGOs, FEANTSA is particularly concerned about the lack of a clear social dimension in the future strategy for the EU. People living in poverty, including extreme forms of poverty such as homelessness, are being completely ignored by the European Commission. This is worrying because European citizens are very concerned about social problems. The latest Eurobarometer survey showed that 9 out of 10 Europeans want to see urgent action against poverty.<sup>1</sup> But on the basis of the proposed strategy, the European Union will fail to deliver for people living in poverty.

The lack of ambition of the European Commission is all the more surprising as the EU has taken several important initiatives during the last decade to promote better social policies in the different Member States. The political context for a more elaborated EU social inclusion agenda is probably better than ever since the launch of the Lisbon Strategy. The Charter of Fundamental Rights became legally binding with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, and 2010 has been designated the EU Year against Poverty. One of the expected outcomes of the Year is a renewed and strong EU commitment on poverty. Also on the more specific issue of homelessness there is potential for progress at EU level. The OMC on Social Protection and Social Inclusion focused on homelessness and housing exclusion as a thematic priority in 2009. Policy recommendations on homelessness will be included in the 2010 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion which could be used as the political basis for an ambitious EU strategy on homelessness. Such a strategy would be the right answer to the Written Declaration of the European Parliament calling for a holistic approach to homelessness and an end to street homelessness by 2015. The consultation document of the European Commission does not provide sufficient space and backing for these small but important initiatives to happen as part of the overall strategy of the European Union.

The document remains very vague in relation to the governance structure of the strategy, which makes it difficult to comment on it. While the document states that there is interdependence between different levels of government and different policy areas, the link with the policies that directly affect people's lives is missing. While respecting the principle of subsidiarity, it would be important to deepen the reflection on multi-level governance to include policy areas such as health, housing and access to services.

FEANTSA is also concerned about the timing of the consultation which takes place in the middle of a transition period to the newly elected Commission. We believe that the new Commission would have been in a better position and have a stronger political mandate to launch such an important consultation. It would also have the time to prepare a document for a proper and deeper reflection. While we understand the need for urgent action to counter the effects of the economic crisis, this should not restrict the time to allow for proper involvement of all relevant stakeholders, including NGOs working with people experiencing poverty.

## **FEANTSA's comments on the discussion document**

FEANTSA agrees that the crisis is having a major impact on many households and individuals in Europe. However, the discussion document forgets that a significant proportion of people living in the European Union were already in a situation of crisis before the current economic downturn. There is an alarming tendency to prioritise policy interventions for people who recently lost their job over interventions for the most vulnerable people. While such an approach might make economic sense, it must not happen to the detriment of people who are multiply disadvantaged and require the highest support levels. During hard economic times it is all the more important that Member States and the EU keep and further develop their policies for the most marginalised people. The reality, however, shows

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<sup>1</sup> Press release from the European Commission, 27 October 2009 : <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/09/1585&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

that public funding cuts are being made in many countries on the back of these people from whom only little resistance is expected.

### **A market economy must go along with human rights**

FEANTSA is worried about the actual meaning of “sustainable social market economy”. Some major challenges ahead of us do not easily fit into this concept. A sustainable and social market economy can only exist if the society as such is based on principles of human dignity, human rights and solidarity. The market will not automatically generate more social cohesion. Instead a strong political commitment is necessary to ensure that the human rights, including social rights, of people are being respected and their actual implementation is being promoted through effective policies.

### **Social challenges for the European Union**

The list of social challenges is indeed long and includes demographic changes, migration, social exclusion and child poverty. However, the reality is more complex than the picture described in the consultation paper. Concerns about demographic change for instance cannot be reduced to the ageing of society. There are also a growing number of single parents; a challenge which is closely linked to increasing levels of poverty and social exclusion. It is disappointing that the Commission does not make any concrete proposals concerning these challenges that go beyond boosting employment and modernising social protection systems. After a decade of EU social protection and social inclusion policies, this is the opportunity for the Commission to develop an ambitious social strategy together with its partners.

### **Empowerment is more than just skills development**

FEANTSA is concerned about the narrow understanding of empowerment and the promotion of inclusive societies under the second priority proposed for the EU 2020 strategy. Empowerment is more than just skills development, securing a job or promoting self-employment. Empowerment is a holistic process that aims to enhance the capacity of people to be informed, make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. It implies questioning existing power imbalances and a redistribution of resources to the weakest people in society.

### **A job is not a sufficient safeguard against poverty and social exclusion**

A job is not necessarily a safeguard against poverty and social exclusion. It is well known that a significant proportion of poor people, including homeless people, are working in precarious and poor quality jobs which do not generate sufficient income to lead a decent life and secure adequate accommodation.<sup>2</sup> A job will also not be an immediate priority for people who are confronted with multiple difficulties in relation to their health and housing situation as is often the case for homeless people. Limiting the debate on poverty and social exclusion to employment fails to acknowledge the fact that these are multidimensional realities requiring integrated policy approaches and structural changes.

The economic crisis must not be used as an excuse for not investing any longer into high quality jobs and good social protection systems. FEANTSA is particularly concerned about the tendency in many Member States to combine the “modernisation” of social protection systems with increasing sanctions for people who are unemployed or economically inactive. Multiply disadvantaged people are most likely to be the first victims of such “modernisation”. In the current economic climate, it seems cynical to blame people for not finding a job. In particular for the most vulnerable people, such as homeless people, abundant evidence shows that sanctions are not an effective policy measure.

### **Promoting employability instead of self-employment**

Many small and medium sized enterprises are currently facing serious difficulties and are struggling for their survival. In this economic context, only a minority of people will be able to become self-employed and secure an adequate standard of living. There is evidence that people are forced into precarious and often illegal self-employment because of lack of valid alternatives. For people experiencing homelessness, self-employment is only rarely a solution. What is needed for homeless people are

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<sup>2</sup> FEANTSA European Report 2007: Multiple barriers, multiple solutions: Inclusion into and through employment for people who are homeless.

[http://www.feantsa.org/files/Employment\\_annual\\_theme/Annual\\_theme\\_documents/European\\_Report/European\\_Report\\_FEANTSA\\_employment07\\_EN\\_final.pdf](http://www.feantsa.org/files/Employment_annual_theme/Annual_theme_documents/European_Report/European_Report_FEANTSA_employment07_EN_final.pdf)

holistic and individualised approaches that promote the employability<sup>3</sup> of the person and offer multiple entry points into the labour market. These entry points should range from low threshold services such as life skills training, to supported and/or subsidised employment in the open labour market.

### **Skills development for the most disadvantaged people and professionals of social services**

FEANTSA agrees that skills development is very important. However, many initiatives promoted by the European Union still target people who are already in work or who have high levels of education. To reach out to the people who are the furthest away from the labour market, basic education also at later stages in life has to be part of life-long learning strategies. For some people experiencing homelessness, for example, adequate training in numeracy and literacy is as important as training in basic computer applications. Skills development for homeless and other vulnerable people will only be possible if certain preconditions are ensured, such as access to information about training and education, a quiet space to study, individualised support etc.

What is more, there is great potential for the investment into life long learning strategies for professionals of social services, including homelessness services. A recent CEDEFOP project helped to identify the professional skills gaps in social services and FEANTSA hopes that these findings will be followed up by an ambitious EU action plan in this area.

### **Ensure adequate social protection for EU workers**

Promoting labour mobility can be an effective way to ensure that people take up the jobs in areas of labour shortage. However, a policy on labour mobility should not be developed in isolation from other relevant policy areas such as housing. Too often people move to places where jobs are available but housing options are scarce. In extreme cases labour mobility can lead to homelessness.

There is evidence that in particular workers from the Eastern European Member States who migrated to the old EU-15 Member States for work reasons and who lost their jobs due to the crisis are in a difficult situation. This concerns mainly workers who have been precariously employed and lost their workers status. A small but significant proportion of this group has become homeless and destitute and does not always get the support they need. The response of some Member States has been to send people home to their country of origin; a solution that many migrant workers refuse for multiple reasons. FEANTSA believes that the European Union has an important role to play in ensuring a minimum safety net for all EU citizens, independent of their workers status, in all Member States. This safety net could be coordinated at European level.

### **Invest into social research to promote evidence based policies**

FEANTSA welcomes the emphasis on research as an important tool for future EU action. We would like to stress that investment into social research should not be forgotten. There is an urgent need for more social research to provide the necessary evidence for public policy intervention on a number of social challenges, including extreme poverty and homelessness.

### **Conclusion**

The consultation document on the EU 2020 strategy is a missed opportunity of the European Commission to develop an ambitious plan to tackle the many challenges, including social challenges such as extreme poverty and homelessness, EU Member States are facing today. This is surprising as the key concerns of European social NGOs have been outlined at various occasions and are abundantly known to EU decision makers. To make the EU 2020 strategy a success and encourage the active support of civil society stakeholders for it, FEANTSA calls on the European Commission to revise the strategy and include a clear and ambitious social dimension that takes into account the concerns of organisations working for and representing the voices of many people in Europe, including people experiencing extreme forms of poverty and social exclusion.

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<sup>3</sup> By employability we mean the capacity of an individual to progress towards employment, stay in employment or change employment. This capacity is determined by a combination of factors, including external factors (e.g. availability of work or training) as well as individual factors (e.g. skills levels and aspirations of a person).