

Social Agenda for 2005-2010 focuses on jobs and equal opportunities

The European Commission has set out far-reaching guidelines on how to modernise European social policy to make it better equipped for a world of increasing international competition, technological advances and changing population patterns.

The new Social Agenda, which was published in February, forms an integral part of the revised Lisbon strategy (see page 10) and will ensure that the benefits of the EU's economic growth and jobs drive reach everyone in society.

The programme, which covers the period up to 2010, comes amid slowing economic growth and stagnating job creation. Only about 63% of Europeans between 15 and 64 years old are working. More than 9% of the EU's labour force is without a job – and unemployment is twice as high among the young.

Ageing, diversity and globalisation

Economic and societal changes are driving the ever increasing need for reform. EU citizens value – and want to maintain – the high social standards that make up the European model of society. But the Commission stresses that "we need to adapt our social model in line with changing circumstances to ensure that it is sustainable."

Europe's populations are ageing. Today, there are four people of working age for

every person over 65 – by 2050 this will have dropped to two to one. European societies are also becoming more diverse – because of demographic ageing as well as immigration – and policies need to be adapted to these changes (see page 7).



Europeans want to know that they can rely on decent healthcare.

Globalisation and technological advances are among the strongest driving forces transforming European societies. Opening up markets brings economic growth, raises living standards and promises a whole range of new opportunities. But a more global economy also brings risks. For instance, when a company moves part of its business to a cheaper location it means lower prices for consumers. But it can also mean job losses at the company's home base.

Gaining confidence

The Social agenda is intended to help all European citizens thrive in a changing EU. Its aim is to give people the confidence they need to manage the challenges facing society – confidence that they won't be discriminated against, that

there is a welfare system they can rely on and that they have the opportunity to renew their skills to move with the times.

The Social Agenda has two key priorities. Employment is one, and the agenda focuses in particular on the need to increase the quality and productivity of work, anticipate and deal with change and ensure that work is an option for everyone (see page 16). The other priority is the fight against poverty and the need to promote equal opportunities and create a fair society in Europe (see page 18).

The agenda hopes to facilitate labour mobility, for example by allowing workers to take pension or social security entitlements with them when they move within the EU. It aims to update labour law to address new work patterns. And it will step up efforts to tackle poverty, with particular emphasis on the eradication of child poverty.

Still, the new Social Agenda has been met with some criticism. The Platform of European Social NGOs (Social Platform) said that it "reflects the new stark reality for social policy: it has been marginalised and weakened in the face of the growth-first approach."

But the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) welcomed the new agenda, saying it "develops measures we support, such as gender equality, anti-discrimination, solidarity between

generations, and above all the European Initiative for Youth."

Working together

The Commission emphasises that it cannot achieve its objectives alone. And Member States acting on their own will also have limited success. So the new agenda stresses the importance of working together – through what it calls a 'partnership for change.' This partnership will involve different levels of Member State authorities, social partners and civil society, and will meet annually to evaluate the progress of the Social Agenda.

The idea of partnership is extended to demographic issues too. Our ageing populations will increasingly span four generations, so the Commission is calling for an 'intergenerational partnership' – one that recognises the diverse needs of different generations, while placing particular emphasis on opportunities for young

people. This intergenerational approach has been further explored in a recent Green Paper, which analyses the demographic changes of European populations and their consequences.

Through the European Pact for Youth the Commission hopes to improve opportunities for the young. As stressed by EU leaders at their summit in March, European employment and social inclusion strategies need to place particular emphasis on measures to ensure the inclusion of young people.

Thinking globally

The Social Agenda emphasises the importance of approaching European social policy from a global perspective. This means addressing both the impact of globalisation on the European social model and Europe's role as a driving force strengthening the social dimension worldwide.

The agenda points out the benefits of an exchange of experiences between the EU and its partners throughout the world: the candidate and other neighbouring countries, industrialised countries like Japan and the US, emerging economies such as China, Brazil, India and South Africa, and developing countries.

This exchange extends to international organisations too: the ILO, OECD and the UN and with organisations involved in economic governance, like the IMF, WTO and the World Bank. A case in point is the EU's contribution to the United Nations' review of its Copenhagen Plan on social development, which focuses on the alleviation of poverty, employment and social integration.

Further information:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/social_policy_agenda/social_pol_ag_en.html

Mapping the route for EU labour market reforms



Childcare facilities make it easier for people to combine work and family life.

One of the EU's biggest challenges is getting more people working. Europe's ultimate goal is full employment. But with more than 9% out of work and only 63% of the working-age population in employment this seems a far-off dream. Despite improvements, an even greater participation of women in the labour market is still needed. And the employment rate of older people, at just over 40%, is a long way from the target of 50%.

Back to work

Employment is one of the two main priorities highlighted by the European Commission in its new Social Agenda. The EU is refocusing the European Employment Strategy (EES), which provides guidance to national employment policies. The new EES is geared towards



A greater participation of women in the labour market is still needed.

increasing the adaptability of workers and enterprises, attracting more people to the workforce (and keeping them there), investing more in workers and ensuring the real implementation of reforms through better governance. European guidelines designed to spur growth and job creation for the next three years were proposed by the Commission on 12 April (see box page 5).

In order to attract more people to the jobs market, and keep them there longer, the agenda stresses the need to provide good jobs with decent working conditions. But what is meant by 'good' jobs? Salaries are of course a good indicator. But good jobs are also ones that, for example, provide flexible working patterns that allow people to balance work and home life. They might offer facilities like crèches, to help employees with young children. Or they may provide training to allow workers to adapt to changes – for instance in technology – by acquiring new skills.

Backing up the European Employment Strategy is the European Social Fund (ESF), which helps Member States put employment policies into practice. With

a budget of 62.5 bn EUR for the period 2000-2006, it invests in particular in training people and modernising working patterns.

A European labour market

In the move towards full employment, the remaining barriers to labour mobility that still hinder the development of a European labour market need to be removed as soon as possible. The Commission is, for example, looking at the transition periods which apply to eight of the new Member States and place temporary limits on the free movement of their workers. A high level group will be set up this year to assess the impact of enlargement on mobility and of the transitional rules.

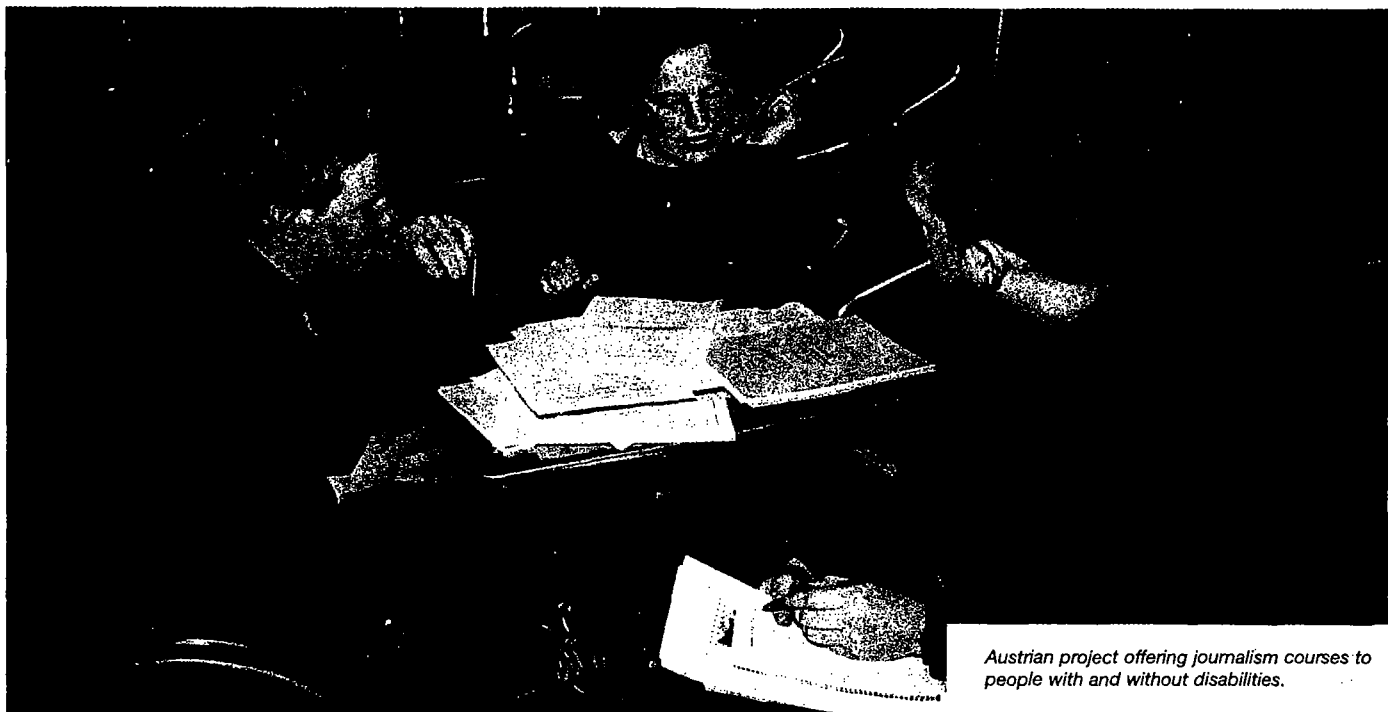
To highlight the question of mobility, 2006 has been earmarked as a European year of workers' mobility. Previous 'European Years' have proved useful in raising the profile of such issues. For example, the European Year of People with Disabilities in 2003 helped increase people's awareness of disability issues and prompted decision makers to take these issues into consideration.

Improving industrial relations

The input of employers and trade unions is more important than ever as restructuring becomes increasingly widespread in the global economy. The Commission has consulted the social partners on this issue and highlights the positive contribution that employee involvement can make in the face of industrial restructuring.

The emergence of new work patterns means that labour law will need to evolve. Short-term contracts and new types of risks in the workplace are some of the issues the Commission will be analysing in a Green Paper in 2006, with a view to assessing how labour law can be adapted.

The agenda also looks at the possibility of providing a purely voluntary framework for transnational collective bargaining. This would allow negotiations between employers and workers' representatives to be carried out across borders, rather than having to go through the same process several times in different countries.



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Austrian project offering journalism courses to people with and without disabilities.

Promoting a fair chance for all

The EU needs more and better jobs – but it needs those jobs to be available to everyone. Along with its strong focus on employment, the Social Agenda is placing a particular emphasis on promoting equal opportunities and fighting poverty.

More than 68 million people are living on the edge of poverty. Children are especially vulnerable, and poverty is frequently passed down from one generation to another.

Fighting poverty and social exclusion

So how will poverty be tackled under the new agenda? The Commission steers the process by which Member States coordinate policies to combat poverty under the open method of coordination. This process, which allows Member States to pool their experience and learn from each other's successes and failures, will be streamlined under the new agenda to improve its implementation. A European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion is planned for 2010.

Pensions and healthcare are also being addressed through the open method of coordination. These are issues that have been at the centre of fierce debate in recent months. Many people worry that demographic ageing will mean they reach old age only to be faced with insufficient pensions and overtaxed healthcare systems. All Member States have introduced long-term reforms of their social protection systems and are adjusting them to make them financially sustainable and guarantee they provide an adequate income.

Striving for equality

Fighting discrimination is one of the EU's main challenges in the drive to ensure equal opportunities. The Commission launched a consultation last year on "Equality and Non-Discrimination in an Enlarged Europe" which highlighted issues that need to be tackled through anti-discrimination activities.

This year the Commission is expected to set out its plans for combating discrimination and assess the need for – and feasibility of – supplementing existing

legislation. Particular attention would be given to EU efforts to promote the social and labour market integration of minorities, especially the Roma. The Commission also plans to organise a European Year of Equal Opportunities for All in 2007.

Gender equality is one of the areas that have seen the most progress in recent years. The Commission plans to issue a communication on future policy developments after the current framework strategy for 2000-2005 expires. It will tackle issues such as the gender pay gap, the glass ceiling, balancing work and family life and participation in decision-making. The Commission has also proposed the establishment of a European gender institute to promote equality between women and men (see page 22).

Social services of general interest, such as healthcare, play an increasingly important role in today's economy and society. But there is a need to clarify the way they operate and can be modernised within the EU legal framework. So over the course of 2005, the Commission will be examining the particular features of social and health services of general interest, and looking at the effects of Community policies on their provision.

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Mobility Information Campaign



Free movement

The EURES job mobility portal is one of the many achievements of the previous Social Policy Agenda

The Social Policy Agenda adopted by EU leaders at Nice in 2000 was the first social policy programme fully committed to the positive interaction of economic, employment and social policies. It came against the backdrop of not only demographic ageing, technological change and globalisation, but also the imminent enlargement of the European Union. Its goal was to turn Europe into a more competitive and productive economy, while preserving its traditions of social justice. It has made considerable progress on a number of fronts.

Despite slow overall employment growth, the European employment strategy (EES) has delivered some encouraging results. The female employment rate rose by 3.2 percentage points between 1999 and 2003, to 56.1% in EU15 – close to the so-called Lisbon target of 57% by 2005. Progress has been made also on the rate for older workers. More active and preventive national employment policies – promoting training and creating more and better jobs – have resulted in relatively fewer job losses in the recent economic slowdown than in earlier downturns.

Backing up the employment strategy, the European Social Fund (ESF) has a budget of 62.5 bn EUR over the period 2000-2006. It helps to implement active employment policies, particularly by investing in training people and modernising working patterns. It also helps to integrate socially vulnerable groups, such as the Roma.

Legislation and social dialogue have contributed to the modernisation of work organisation. An EU law set minimum standards for informing and consulting workers about changes which affect them. EU employers and trade unions expanded agreements addressing new working patterns, for example in the areas of telework and flexible work schedules. And new standards have been set for heavy work, which is exposed to optical radiation, noise or vibrations at work.

The European Job Mobility Portal was launched, offering an easy way for job-seekers to find information on jobs and learning opportunities across Europe. A major overhaul of 30-year-old legislation made social security rules more user-friendly for people travelling to or working in another country. The European health insurance card was introduced, simplifying procedures for those in need of healthcare abroad.

New EU legislation, adopted in 2000, gives EU citizens a common minimum level of protection against discrimination. One directive bans discrimination on grounds of race and ethnic origin in most areas of daily life. A second one addresses employment equality on grounds of religion or belief, disability, age and sexual orientation.

In 2004, for the first time, legislation prohibiting sex discrimination outside the workplace was adopted. This EU law bans discrimination of both women and men in the access to goods and services, for example when opening a bank account or accessing social housing.

European countries agreed a common framework for tackling social exclusion and key policy priorities have been defined (see page 20). Progress has been made in a number of areas of social inclusion. For example, many more people have access to the information society today than five years ago.

The EU supports ongoing reforms in national pension systems. Most Member States have made significant progress to ensure the sustainability of future public pension expenditures. But further efforts are needed, for example encouraging people to retire later and making supplementary pension provision more accessible.