

Statement
on behalf of the European Union
by

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on Agenda Item 3 (a): Priority Theme: Social Integration

at the General Discussion of the 47th Session
of the United Nations Commission for Social Development

New York, February 4, 2009

Distinguished Chairperson,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union.

The Candidate Countries Turkey, Croatia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia¹, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, as well as Armenia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine align themselves with this statement.

Social integration and social cohesion are overarching objectives of social and economic development and play a vital role in long-term sustainable development, stability and prosperity of every society. Each country undoubtedly has the primary responsibility for her economic and social development.

Regretfully, in the light of financial crisis the forecast is that the European economy and many other countries in the world will face diminished growth rates in the medium term and will experience significant cuts in long-term growth. Who will be the most affected by the economic downturn? It will be the people in most vulnerable situations in our societies such as the unemployed, people living in poorer neighbourhoods, single parents, elderly people, youth and children who are likely to be among those most affected.

Appropriate measures should be taken to mitigate the impact of the current financial and economic crisis on vulnerable groups of the population in both developed and developing countries. However, it is important that the actions, when dealing with this situation, should be in line with our long-term commitments. The EU has already set in motion its recovery plan that will simultaneously support the goals of mitigating adverse social impact on people in the most vulnerable situations and of containing the impact of the crisis on the economy overall.

In order to respond to the new challenges, more specifically defined in the EU Declaration on globalisation, Europe, together with other international institutions, has made full employment and promotion of decent work for all its main objectives at all levels. An enhanced focus on international development, growth and enterprise promotion is fundamental for job creation and decent work.

The promotion of enterprise and entrepreneurship is key not only to the encouragement of economic growth investment and wealth creation but also to creating job opportunities, keeping sufficient employment and tackling inequality in society. This, together with the consistent provision of minimum standards, access to social protection and social dialogue, is the basis for achieving decent work for all, thus reducing poverty, and ensuring sustainable development and social inclusion.

As for social policies, the emphasis needs to be given to the fact that social protection systems must be universal, adequate, adaptable, efficient and accessible but also motivating and financially sustainable.

Moreover, financial incentives to access to employment encouraging the motivation of women and men, and young people in particular to actively seek employment need, also, to be taken into account. The income of those who are working or actively seeking employment should be higher than those who only prefer to live on social benefits. Steps taken in the employment and social policies should be coordinated with monetary, fiscal and structural policies in order to mutually reinforce each other.

Furthermore, it is crucial to focus on the provision of training and acquiring new skills to increase the employability of the workforce to facilitate transitions over the life-cycle and its adaptability to changing labour markets. Comprehensive policies should be designed to provide access to education, vocational and technical training, capacity-building, upgrading skills and acquisition of new knowledge as well as lifelong learning. They should be also aimed at raising the quality of education

¹Croatia and The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

and individual adaptability – it is unusual, nowadays, for a person to retire from the same profession in which he/she started his/her professional career.

Investment in human resources is necessary to minimise negative effects of the financial crisis and to provide new stimulus for economic and employment growth. In this respect, initiatives aimed at forecasting of the future workforce demands of the labour market, implementation of comprehensive lifelong learning strategies and better cooperation between employers and educational institutions are crucial.

Children and youth are the future of human potential. Creating favourable conditions for them to develop their skills, to fulfill their potential, to participate actively in society and for young women and men to become established in the labour market is essential for sustainable growth and development, as well as for social cohesion of our societies. It is necessary to combat child poverty and break the intergenerational transmission of poverty and to respect children's rights. One of the main aims of the EU is to create favourable conditions for improving the balance of professional, private and family life as an important measure in this regard. Family policies and programs need to be understood as a long-term, sustainable complex of mutually reinforcing measures in different areas, e.g. financial support for families (taxes, benefits), health care, quality programmes to promote and enhancement of parental competences etc., which need to be evaluated.

Increased focus on social inclusion of people in the most vulnerable situations must be sustained to ensure they gain the opportunities and resources to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life. Special measures must be taken to tackle homelessness as an extremely serious form of exclusion and to prevent over-indebtedness, which can contribute to financial and social exclusion and poverty. The efforts to eliminate obstacles to full participation of persons with disabilities in the society deserve more attention. It is necessary to ensure universal and flexible social security schemes with adequate and sustainable pension provisions.

The European Union and its Member States are strongly committed to tackling poverty and social exclusion. These issues are addressed in accordance with the European Union own commitments, also as a part of the UN Millennium Development Goals.

As stated by the European Union in Lisbon in 2000, when Member States were invited to take steps to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty by 2010, the extent of poverty and social exclusion remains unacceptable. In the context of poverty eradication, the EU aims to prevent social exclusion and to combat discrimination against all groups, focusing in particular on the gender inequality, situation of children and people with disabilities.

The EU Social Agenda for 2005 - 2010 complements and supports the Lisbon Strategy. It focuses on providing jobs and equal opportunities for all and ensuring that the benefits of the EU growth and jobs reach everybody in society. By increasing flexibility of labour markets and modernising social protection systems, the EU aims to help people seize opportunities created by international competition, technological advances and changing population patterns and protect the most vulnerable members of society.

The European Union also puts forward 2010 as the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion to reaffirm and strengthen the initial EU political commitment, at the start of the Lisbon strategy, to make "a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty" by supporting active inclusion policies as a means of preventing poverty and social exclusion and helping to improve the coordination between existing programmes and initiatives for fighting against poverty and social exclusion at the European level.

The main objectives of the European Year are as follows:

- * Recognition of rights – recognising the fundamental rights of people in the situation of poverty and social exclusion to live in dignity and to play a full part in society;
- * Shared responsibility and participation – increasing public ownership of social inclusion policies and actions, emphasising both collective and individual responsibility in the fight against poverty and

social exclusion as well as promoting involvement of public and private actors through proactive partnerships;

* Cohesion – promoting a more cohesive society by raising public awareness of the benefits for all of a society where social integration is primary and poverty is eradicated;

* Commitment and concrete action – reiterating the strong political commitment of the EU and the Member States to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion and promoting this commitment and actions at all levels of governance.

We strongly believe that those objectives will be successfully achieved and will help to prevent and reduce poverty and increase social integration.

Chairperson,

The European Union fully supports activities of the Commission for Social Development, which has an essential role in supporting social development including social integration and social cohesion worldwide.

In conclusion, the EU is committed to mainstream and to promote social integration and social cohesion policies throughout the multilateral system. The EU further recognizes that this can be achieved only through involvement of all relevant stakeholders, including social partners, civil society and NGOs.

Thank you for your attention.