Europe must reach out to people in need

Europe faces a significant threat to social stability and further integration because of the huge numbers of people who are being excluded from participating in society. Social exclusion is caused by homelessness, poverty, unemployment and other factors, and is often worsened by uncoordinated and conflicting social policies.

"The practical elimination of all barriers – and of any form of discrimination – to the full participation of all citizens in economic and social life must be a central priority objective for us all."

Pádraig Flynn, Commissioner for Employment, Industrial Relations and Social Affairs

A major European Union-funded project has drawn together the experiences of social workers working across the European states and concluded that their special skills have a significant role to play in preventing and counter-acting exclusion.

The project, coordinated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), revolved around a series of seminars where social workers shared and discussed their experiences of working with marginalised people.

Having combined this feedback with research findings, the project is calling on governments to consult communities and individuals in planning projects which promote social inclusion. It also wants social workers to be involved in planning and delivering action programmes because of their experience and understanding of strategies to promote inclusion.

And it calls for the basic EU treaty to be amended in order to give a firm foundation to the social dimension. A treaty on social rights should be concluded, to complement the economic and employment policies of the EU, it recommends.

The treaty should include rights to family life, housing, education and health care. It should also specify the right of people to have their personal wishes taken into account, and the right of children and young people to be treated as citizens.

Full recommendations are on page 5.

What is social exclusion?

Social exclusion is the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live.

Social exclusion: what does it mean?

European policies have tended to see exclusion as the result of unemployment. Social workers say it is far wider than that. Exclusion has to be defined in terms of inactivity and non-participation, and not necessarily in terms of traditional employment.

Some groups, such as people with certain disabilities, will never be able to hold "gainful employment" as currently defined.

Other groups that social workers work with, such as homeless or long-term unemployed people, may not be able to follow general rules or expectations. This makes it extremely difficult for them to compete on the labour market. One expert suggested that young women are particularly excluded. Young single mothers cannot find employment if there are no child care facilities available.

Exclusion because of social policies

Social exclusion also means a lack of proper housing, a lack of access to health services or just bad communication with the general population. Many people have been excluded by public agencies, like housing or health services. Exclusion is often the unintended outcome of uncoordinated and conflicting social policies.

Categories of exclusion

The following groups are suggested, but are not exclusive:
- Children and young people
- Disadvantaged families
- Elderly people
- Homeless people
- Migrants and refugees
- Minority ethnic communities
- People living in poverty
- People who abuse drugs, alcohol and other substances
- People with mental health problems
- People with physical or mental disabilities
- People without paid employment
- Women

The social work contribution 1

Helping disadvantaged families in Ireland

Many families receive help in times of crisis, but in the long-term they can be excluded from employment, education and participation because of factors such as poor housing, drug use and drug dealing, crime and isolation.

The Community After School Project in Dublin, Ireland, aims to provide local parents and other adults with access to resources, premises and support so that they can provide educational support and leisure activities for themselves and their children.

Morning classes provide personal development for parents, as well as education on the content of their children's homework.

In the afternoons children have a safe place to play and can get help from their parents for their formal education.

Other parents may rely on the after-school childcare to give them the chance to return to work, education or training.

All the measures are aimed at improving the living situation and chances of the entire family.

In addition, the parents' added self-confidence enables them to deal directly with local politicians and officials, so that they can challenge their decisions and argue for better local play facilities.

What does the Commission have rejected?

Stephen Hughes, Cha
Social exclusion: barriers to assistance

Social Workers – absorbing the crisis?
The growing social crisis is having an impact on social workers themselves. Increasing demand, declining resources, changing structures and the changing nature of problems all add to the pressure they are under, and create significant stress.

Social workers run the risk of assault and violence from disturbed or angry service users. Constantly overworked, they are prone to ill-health, absenteeism and burn-out, which in turn prevent them from working effectively. This leaves both clients and social workers frustrated, and can contribute to social disintegration.

Structural problems
In many countries the social benefit system is functioning well for crisis situations, but is not designed for long-term structural unemployment. The free market should be responsible for meeting the social costs of its activities.

Social segregation through short-term employment is growing. People on short-term contracts or minimum income projects cannot get loans or mortgages, or they sign rental contracts because their short-term employment does not provide enough security for lenders. Despite having employment, they are still excluded from other aspects of everyday life.

Change in client groups
Few services are available to people who have not been clients of social work before. Previously, because they had an income, these people had access to housing and loans. But the social consequences of unemployment or a failed business are devastating. They cannot cope alone but are unaccustomed to turning to social services for help. Assistance is usually not available to them until their crisis deepens and their problems have become severe.

Impact of EU policies on exclusion
The EU can unwittingly damage social programmes. For example, new building regulations, intended to improve residential facilities, have so added to costs that resources have been taken away from other aspects of the service. This has reduced the service quality and the number of people benefiting.

A requirement to evaluate the social impact of new policies would help reduce this problem.

Impact of funding cuts
Social workers see the effects of current policies to reduce or fail to increase funding for social projects, even though there are new problems to address which affect increasing numbers of people. They are also concerned about the impact of direct cuts in social services and the impact on individuals and families of cumulative cuts in several agencies. Governments should consider the long-term cost of not providing an appropriate service alongside the cost of its provision.

A Spanish programme works from the assumption that a combination of reasons usually leads people gradually into poverty.

Some clients are at risk of losing their homes if they do not get help. Some maintain social standards and seek work but sometimes sleep in the streets if they do not have the money to pay for cheap accommodation. Others have lost all social skills, sleep in the streets and suffer from mental illness or alcoholism.

The agency, in cooperation with other charitable organisations, tries to assist clients by:
- improving their basic life quality;
- providing social assistance;
- initiating treatment of psychiatric, drug or alcohol problems;
- normalising relationships with families and the community;
- offering job training and assisting with job search;
- resolving problems with the justice system.

A primary attention centre, an economic emergency assistance service, a day centre and other units all collaborate. The participating organisations have a similar approach and offer a range of support services, from full accommodation, to supported flats and help with independent living.

Opportunities are provided for clients to regain basic skills. For example, time management workshops advise on contracts and how to look for a job.

One project, providing access to a decent home to people who are homeless or only have a precarious home, results from cooperation between many governmental and non-governmental agencies. It helps people work towards personal autonomy by putting together individual plans to help them gain employment, establish social relations and participate in the community.
Fighting exclusion: social work in action

Prevention
Social workers have an in-depth knowledge of the factors which push people into situations where they need re-socialisation, re-integration and rehabilitation. They are equipped with the expertise to offer preventive services and preventive interventions.

Active outreach
Many marginalised or socially excluded people feel so rejected that it is not easy for them to find their way to the services available. Social workers do not always rely on such clients coming to them. They can identify those who need their services and actively seek them out.

A policy of inclusion must also respect differences. There will always be some people who do not wish to be included. But they still have a right to services and a basic living standard.

User participation
The needs of the clients have to be the shaping factor behind setting up a service. Social workers, as far as possible, encourage service users to participate in the planning, implementation and improvement of a service. This also brings them closer to citizenship.

The holistic approach
Social workers have an integrated view of problems, and can draw on the expertise of other specialised professions where necessary. It is characteristic for social workers to combine counselling with practical assistance. Their knowledge of organisations and agencies means they can coordinate a range of service agencies and professions. Networking is a special skill of social workers.

Individual care plans
Central to the success of many projects is the drawing up of an individual care plan, preferably leading to a contract made with the client. This is like setting a process of development in motion. Social work support allows clients the space for them to be able to make their own choices and express themselves. Social workers’ guiding principle is the integrity of each individuals’ goals and ambitions.

There can be no social progress without economic progress; but, conversely, economic wealth cannot be built in a social desert.
Jacques Santer, President of the European Commission

The social work contribution 3

Providing housing for refugees

A project in Vienna, Austria, offers temporary housing for refugees. It is the only refugee accommodation in the country which provides social workers on the premises. Clients come mainly from Bosnia, Kurdistan, Zaire, Ethiopia and Iran. They have to accept the rules and cooperate with the social workers in drawing up a plan to further their independence and integration. The project has been very successful. After one year, 10% of the residents have found their own flat. Job training is almost 100% successful, with at least one member of each family working.

A partner project on the same premises offers psychotherapy, specialising in the treatment of traumatic events. There are plans to open a follow-up club for clients who have found accommodation outside, and to create a communication centre which is open to the general public.
**Recommendations**

**For the public**
- It is a truism that exclusion requires "excluders". In parallel with work with those who are marginalised or stigmatised, there may be benefit in raising awareness among the wider population about the reality and dangers of exclusion. The object has to be to turn "excluders" into "includers". This is likely to increase solidarity and open up possibilities for citizens to become involved.

**For professional associations**
- Advocate for National Councils for Quality in social care, involving professionals and users.
- Promote the active involvement of service users in service design, delivery and review.
- Translate the project's final report and/or its summary into several languages.
- Publish articles in journals and newsletters.
- Educate and inform politicians and media representatives about the dangers of social exclusion.
- Organise a European Social Work Action Day sponsored by IFSW Europe.
- Propose lectures and curriculum changes at Schools of Social Work.
- Arrange meetings and links with ministers, MPs and MEPs.
- Ensure a constant information flow to the EU office in each country as well as to political parties.
- Build stronger links with other organisations and business.
- Develop a logo to be used for all future actions against social exclusion, nationally and internationally.

**For European and national bodies**
- Recognise the threat from social exclusion, which is a reality in Europe and likely to be a growing threat to social stability and plans for further integration of European economies and societies. There must be policies and action at European Union, national government and regional and local levels to promote social inclusion and counter social disintegration.
- Consult and involve individuals and communities in planning and delivering projects which promote inclusion and social cohesion.
- Acknowledge and take into account the special position of children, young people and other vulnerable groups.
- Amend the basic EU treaty in order to give a firm foundation to the social dimension.
- Conclude a treaty on social rights to complement the economic and employment policies of the European Union.
- Define European-wide standards for social care.
- Promote national policies and action on social inclusion, supporting a range of micro-projects at individual citizen and local community levels.
- Engage local government, community, voluntary and private groups in local action projects supported by EU, national and other funding.
- Involve social workers in planning and delivering action programmes, because of their experience and understanding of social exclusion and strategies to promote inclusion.
- Europe-wide education and training for social workers would benefit the development of services within the EU, and enable them to respond more effectively to the problems that will inevitably come with open borders. Emphasis should be given to training on civil and human rights issues, as well as on practical skills in promoting inclusion.

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**A treaty on social rights**

Social workers propose a treaty on social rights which should be subject to judicial review, and has to include:
- the right to family life and relationships of choice;
- the right to be integrated or not according to personal choice;
- the right to housing;
- the right to education;
- the right to health care;
- the right of children and young people to be treated as citizens and for their wishes to be heard and taken into account.

The treaty should extend these rights to all people living within the EU, regardless of citizenship or nationality.

In developing this work, the EU must act to implement existing international treaties and conventions, including the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Human Rights Declaration.

The 10 commitments adopted by the World Summit on Social Development (Copenhagen 1994) should be made explicit EU policy, with an implementation strategy approved by the Council of Ministers. These international treaties and conventions provide a sufficient framework of principles for EU policy.

The Commission should produce an annual social cohesion impact statement, as recommended by the Comité des Sages, taking an overview of the social impact of all policies in the previous year.
"Social workers are in the vanguard of developing innovative, flexible and practical approaches to tackling the many forms of social exclusion. They are in the frontline between politics and people in need, and have a wealth of experience they can offer to help develop policies to eradicate exclusion."

Eilis Walsh, IFSW Vice President/Europe

Project participants

Representations were made to the project from the following organisations:

**Austria**
Austrian Association of Social Workers

**Denmark**
Danish Co-ordinating Body for Membership of IFSW

**Finland**
Union of Professional Social Workers

**France**
Association National des Assistants Sociaux

**Germany**
German Association of Social Workers

**Ireland**
Irish Association of Social Workers

**The Netherlands**
Dutch Association of Social Workers

**Portugal**
Portuguese Association of Professional Social Workers

**Spain**
Consejo General

**Sweden**
Swedish Co-ordinating Body for Membership of IFSW

**United Kingdom**
British Association of Social Workers

**Iceland**
Iceland Association of Social Workers

**Norway**
Norwegian Association of Social Workers

**Russia**
Russian Association of Social Pedagogues and Social Workers

**Israel**
Israel Association of Social Workers

**Switzerland**
Swiss Association of Social Workers

Link with European Commission

The project developed from a long tradition of co-operation between the European Commission DG V and the IFSW EU Liaison Committee. Throughout its history, IFSW has contributed to the development of greater understanding of the social situation in the EC/EU, and has examined a number of issues through meetings and seminars, often including Commission staff. This project consolidates and continues that tradition.

"Whether helping people with learning disabilities move out of hospital and into the labour market in Iceland, or supporting isolated families to take control of their lives in Dublin or Stockholm, or working with refugees in Malmo and Vienna, or working with unemployed people in Madrid, the project has shown how social workers make a real difference in the struggle against social exclusion and poverty."

Eila Malmström, IFSW EU Liaison Committee President