



Speech by Commissioner Marianne Thyssen at Roundtable with Civil Society organisations: Forging common action to achieve the Social Triple A for Europe

Brussels, 1 October 2015

European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to welcome you here today – and indeed to join in our first roundtable discussion.

Let me start by saying that I see today's event as a clear expression of our mutual commitment to a deepened and meaningful cooperation – and also as the beginning of what I hope will become a tradition.

Indeed, the current political momentum and the social situation in our Member States provide the right time and setting to deepen our dialogue with civil society.

Our cooperation, of course, is not new: the Commission has a long history of working with many of your organisations. Together we have achieved much, and we are continuing to deliver real benefits for people in Europe.

Take for example the Recommendation 'Investing in Children': the Commission was able thanks to your help to put children's rights on the political agenda of our Member States and helped gear Social Fund investments towards our children.

Or the progress we have made on the promotion of integrated social services; I believe our recent proposal on getting the long-term unemployed back into the labour market will be the crucial next step in promoting integrated employment and social services.

Or our common efforts to foster social innovation and facilitate mutual learning, with projects like 'Housing First Europe' that supported Member States to forge efficient national housing strategies.

Examples like these show that there is room for our partnership to yield even more results; they show that our joint efforts can have a concrete impact on the everyday lives of people in Europe.

From our very first day in office, this Commission set out to work for a European Union worthy of a Triple A social rating. However, this is not just OUR mission - it is not just the mission of Member States; and it is not the mission of social partners or civil society alone either. Social Europe is a collective responsibility and the mission of each and every one of us.

As this November marks the first year in office of this Commission, I would like to share with you what I consider the most important milestones, so far, from a social policy perspective. I would also like to share with you the way forward.

Let me start with the 315 billion euro investment plan – among the first projects that have been signed are projects that invest in people - such as the financing of healthcare. Also the advanced payments worth a billion euro to help Europe's young people get a foothold on the jobs ladder; and a proposal last month to help the 12 million people who are long-term unemployed back into work.

We also reacted rapidly to the ongoing refugee crisis with a comprehensive and balanced migration agenda, which sets social integration at the core of a successful migration management.

This first year we also took decisive steps to rebalance the Union's economic governance so that social considerations are equal to economic ones. This work will continue, in order to strengthen the social dimension of the Semester and to promote investment in people.

Ensuring that social considerations are appropriately taken into account was also at the heart of the "Social Impact Assessment" we prepared for the new support and reform programme for Greece. This was a delivery on President Juncker's commitment that from now on any support and reform programme will go not only through a fiscal sustainability assessment, but also through a social impact assessment.

All these are important building blocks of the inclusive and cohesive European Union we all stand and strive for- however the challenges that lay ahead of us make it clear that a lot more needs to be done.

While EU economies are finally set to grow again this year, economic recovery has not come easy, and it is still not strong enough. Inequality has risen and nearly a quarter of the population are at risk of poverty and social exclusion. And as we speak, hundreds of thousands of migrants are seeking refuge at our shores.

The economic situation – but particularly the social one – differs greatly across and within Member States. This divergence is a major cause for concern as it threatens one of the fundamental principles of the European Union – to improve the lives of its people.

Growing economic divergences put the cohesion of the Union at risk. A race to the bottom to gain competitiveness – at the cost of social cohesion – undermines the European project.

That is why this Commission has set as a priority for the coming period, to recreate a process of convergence, both between Member States and within societies.

In this regard, we need to focus on the creation of the framework conditions for productivity, job creation and social fairness in the European Union. The priority remains not leaving anyone behind and creating jobs to be filled by qualified people.

The Europe 2020 Strategy and the development of a social pillar will be two of our main vehicles to restore convergence. This is where all of us here must work together: and where we, - the Commission - rely on the expertise of civil society. Allow me to elaborate further on this aspect.

We are already past the half-way mark in implementing the Europe 2020 strategy. Its objectives for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth remain more relevant than ever today. We may have been thrown off track by the crisis, but that makes the strategy's overall direction only more valid.

Indeed, because of the crisis, the target which is most off course is the one on reducing poverty. But issues concerning poverty, inequality, and the weakening of the middle class have come to the forefront of the policy debate. It is now recognised that excessive inequality in a society reduces its growth potential. So if anything, broader attention should be given to the achievement of the poverty target.

Therefore, I believe that our focus should be on the delivery of the strategy. To make solid progress, we need to act in close cooperation with all stakeholders, including social partners and NGOs. Your sense of ownership and commitment to the Union's medium-term objectives is crucial to their achievement. Your experience on what works and what not, the expanse network that you have created over these years throughout the EU, your direct interaction with national and local administration, and people in need of support - all these represent a wealth of knowledge that we must tap into, supporting and sharing it across the EU.

In his State of the Union Speech, President Juncker set as a clear priority for the coming months to work on restoring social convergence in the EU. This will be at the core of the discussions on how to advance a social agenda for Europe with my fellow Commissioners on the 6th of October.

Restoring convergence – or as my ambition is, achieving upward social convergence - is not an abstract concept. It matters in our everyday lives:

- When more than 40% of children in some of our Member States live in households at risk of poverty;
- When migrants or Roma face chronic disadvantage in societal participation;
- When youth unemployment or long-term unemployment reach the unacceptable levels that we see now in many Member States - and at the same time 2 million vacancies remain unfilled because of a lack of the right skills;
- When there aren't good quality social services to enable people to live independently and to participate in society;

All of these have long term negative effects on growth and growth potential. They have a direct impact on inequality and create effects that go beyond generations, beyond borders - spilling over the effects into other Member States.

We have to be able to react to make sure that we are growing closer together rather than further apart. And that this convergence takes us all upwards, improving and respecting our social and economic standards. This is why we must work hard to strengthen the social dimension of the EU. And so we will. Our aim is that through this work people will see tangible improvement on the ground. And at the heart of that is a need to define common labour and social standards.

In my view, the development of a social pillar has two components:

1. A legal one: that is modernising existing legislation, including by bringing in new laws, if necessary, and

2. An economic one, by developing employment and social benchmarks.

Indeed, the world of work is radically changing and our legislative framework must be adapted so that new dynamics are properly captured and embraced. The guiding principle should be that more flexibility must be combined with adequate security. At the same time, the definition of benchmarks is necessary to foster upwards convergence and to limit possible negative spill-overs in the field of employment and social protection. The development of such benchmarks echoes calls by many of you in your submissions to the Europe 2020 mid-term review consultation.

In this respect, we need to explore different areas, such as minimum income, care services, unemployment benefits, healthcare, or skills. Indeed such benchmarks can strengthen the social dimension of Europe 2020 and the European Semester and allow us to monitor progress on key targets.

I am well aware of the fact that achieving common social standards and benchmarks in Europe will not be easy, and reforms will need to be closely coordinated at European level. However, I am confident that building on your input and your support, it will be possible to have these benchmarks introduced already in 2016.

Ladies and gentlemen, I cannot stress enough the importance of working together – with collective responsibility - to achieve a Europe that is truly worthy of a Triple A Social Rating. Our ambitions can only become reality if we forge common action.

You are at the forefront of Europe's main challenges today. Whether you are tirelessly working to help us reach our 2020 poverty target – including among our children; or you are working for the integrity and civic participation of people with a disability; or you battle homelessness, or promote equal opportunities, or fight racism, anti-gypsyism and xenophobia, or give a voice to victims of abuse and violence: your knowledge and experience is invaluable to our efforts.

An enhanced dialogue with civil society on shaping Europe's social agenda is therefore vital. I am aware of the rich contributions of your organisations that can provide a concrete and pragmatic input to our policy-making. We want policies that respond to society's real needs and this is exactly why the voices of the people you represent need to be heard.

As I said earlier, my ambition is that today will mark the beginning of a meaningful reconnection of our policy making with the expertise and work of civil society. This includes organising an annual 'Social Platform on Inclusive Growth'. We must discuss in depth what should be the core elements of the social pillar - and most importantly, exchange views on how that can be done in practice. We need to discuss how the European Union can better support Member States, and stakeholders, such as civil society and social partners, in getting back on track to achieve our Europe 2020 poverty target.

But I also want to go a step further. Social considerations extend beyond the strictly defined scope of social policies, touching upon issues like migration management for instance.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This meeting sets us on a new journey of strengthened civil dialogue. We will inevitably come to turns in the road and we will have to decide the best route to take. We should be structured and pragmatic, but also flexible so as to react to changing needs.

This is not about creating extra policy architectures - but rather, adopting a pragmatic approach to delivering Europe 2020 and to creating more convergence. We can do this together through the full and proper implementation of good existing projects on the ground.

I am looking forward to this journey and to listening to your ideas and suggestions on how the EU can meaningfully support you so that we maximise impact on the ground. And on how to better proceed together in forging common action for a truly social Europe.

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