

European Youth Forum recommendations on

# SOCIAL PROTECTION AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE

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## Background

The European Youth Forum believes that social protection is an issue of great importance for young people and has commissioned two reports on the subject. 'Taking Steps', a report on social protection provision for young people in the European Union, was published in 1998 and 'Sinking or Swimming' a study on social protection and young people in Central and Eastern European Countries was published in spring 2000. The issue of social protection is particularly relevant for young people because their access to social welfare is more restricted than it is for older people who have already participated in the labour market. Moreover, as unemployment among young people is particularly high, this makes them more vulnerable and can lead to social exclusion.

There is a widespread consensus in Europe that social protection systems need to be modernised. National social protection systems need to be adapted to take account of changes in employment patterns and the labour market, demographic trends, rising costs of healthcare provision and pensions, technological developments, globalisation and changing family structures. At the European Union level, the Lisbon European Council concluded that social protection systems 'need to be adapted as part of an active welfare state to ensure that work pays, to secure their long-term sustainability in the face of an ageing population, to promote social inclusion and gender equality, and to provide quality health services.' Furthermore, social protection is now increasingly perceived as a 'productive factor' contributing to economic performance and supporting the expansion of the labour market.

In the European Union, the commitment to adapting social protection systems was consolidated in a 1999 Communication from the European Commission entitled 'A Concerted Strategy for Modernising Social Protection' and a new Communication on social policy was presented in summer 2000. The Lisbon European Council invited the Council to 'strengthen co-operation between Member States by exchanging experiences and best practice on the basis of improved information networks' and to mandate the High Level Working party on Social Protection to prepare a study on the 'future evolution of social protection'.

The Lisbon Summit exemplified the increasingly integrated approach being taken to issues of economic development, employment and social cohesion at the Community level. The needs of young people in the context of a reform of social protection systems should not be neglected. The European Youth Forum's reports on young people and social protection in Europe have highlighted the key areas where young people run the risk of experiencing poverty or becoming socially excluded due to the lack of social security provision. The reports also indicate the importance of quality training, education, health care and housing provision to ensure the full and equal position of young people in society.

Young people in countries outside the European Union experience many of the same problems as young people in the European Union. However, the difficulties for young people in the countries in transition in Central and Eastern Europe are frequently much more critical. In the transition to democracy and free market economics, these

countries have had to adapt both social protection structures and policies. This transition has been smoother in some countries than others. Many of these countries lack sufficient economic resources to provide key social protection, including adequate social security benefits and health care.

Young people have been one of the groups that have suffered from changes in the employment market and social protection systems, particularly as employment is no longer guaranteed and unemployment has risen significantly among this section of the population. The young unemployed often have to rely on family support as state provision is very low or non-existent. This has made their inclusion in society more difficult and precarious, and extended the period for which they are dependent on their families. For those in employment, there is a trend towards young people being pushed into low-wage and informal sectors of the labour market. The income of these young people is often insufficient for them to live independently or without additional financial support, while the increasing number of young people working in the informal labour market have no access to social protection at all.

Poverty levels have risen considerably in many countries in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time as levels of unemployment has increased, the cost of living and access to education has gone up. Education is crucial to the needs of the changing labour market, yet for many young people the cost is prohibitive. Young people living through this transitional period in the Central and Eastern European countries face many problems in accessing education and entering employment, and while social protection needs to be developed for the whole population, young people must be a specific focus of measures to improve their situation.

The draft recommendations were discussed and approved by the Bureau in its meeting on 1-2 April 2000. They have then been forwarded as a to the Executive Committee on 14-16 April 2000 where they were discussed and amended in a working group (document Executive 0284-2K).

## Recommendations on Social Protection and Young People in Europe

1. Demographic trends indicate that the number of young people aged 15-29 in the European Union will decline by 13 million by 2015, while the size of the retired population will continue to increase. A similar trend is evident in most other European countries. In this context, young people and their participation in the employment market will become increasingly important for economic reasons. Any reform of pension systems must ensure that today's young people will have a sufficient pension for their retirement, especially in consideration of the increasing longevity of the population.
2. European employment markets have undergone significant change in recent years and will continue to alter. Any changes in social protection provision should give adequate support to young people in the transition from education to employment. Young people are particularly vulnerable during this period and need a range of support measures (including training, career guidance, etc.) to ensure that they can successfully enter the employment market. Particular attention should be paid to avoiding the phenomena of invisible young people, those who are not in training, employment or education and who do not receive unemployment benefit and social protection in general. It should also be recognised that many children are born into poverty and that social protection needs to be adequate for households to prevent social exclusion from an early age.
3. As young people are spending an increasing time in education and training, it is necessary to ensure that they have full social protection cover during this period, particularly in terms of access to housing and health care. There should be a smooth link from leaving education or training - at whatever level - to entering the employment market with full and comprehensive access to social protection throughout. Young people need to have the support to be autonomous, whatever their age or situation. The provision of social protection should not be linked to family or household status, but should be based on the position and needs of the individual.
4. Young people are potentially the most mobile group in the employment market, and young people from European Union Member States move both in their own countries and within the Union in search of employment. The co-ordination of social protection systems in the Union could be further developed to ensure the transferability of social protection provision. Full health care should be available to all European Union nationals in the countries where they live and work. This will provide the security necessary for promoting employment mobility in the European Union. As the accession countries join the European Union, systems must be in place to ensure their access to social protection when moving to a different country to work.
5. In employment, young people tend to receive lower incomes due to their more limited work experience and discrimination on the basis of age. Not only should

they receive equal pay for work of equal value, but also their incomes should be sufficient to ensure that they do not fall under the category of the 'working poor'. Women also receive lower wages than men. Women earn 73% of the hourly rate that men receive in the European Union.

6. Equality in social protection provision must be reinforced. The provision of social protection should be to the individual, and not based on his or her family circumstances. Pensions and unemployment benefits should not be linked to full-time and permanent employment, but take account of part-time employment and career breaks, especially for women and men with families. Employers should be encouraged to promote family-friendly policies and flexible work patterns for both men and women. Comprehensive childcare should be available to allow those who want to work, the opportunity to do so.
7. The principle of intergenerational solidarity should be respected in all proposals. The provision of social protection should be related to individual need, without one age group suffering at the expense of another age group.
8. A large number of people in Europe still live below the poverty line and suffer from social exclusion. Social protection provision must be available for everyone as a right, including the most vulnerable, and promote social cohesion. Greater access to information on social protection would also alleviate some problems.
9. Young people living in certain areas need more extensive access to certain forms of social protection. For example, young people from rural communities often have restricted access to health care. Resources need to be invested to ensure more equal access to social protection, whether individuals live in rural or urban environments.
10. The quality and access to health care should be developed to allow everyone to benefit from new technologies in health care equipment. There should be no discrimination in health care treatment on any grounds.
11. The problem of substance misuse is growing in Europe. Measures must be introduced as part of social welfare and health policy to develop the preventative approach and ensure that early access to rehabilitation programmes is available to young people.
12. The European Youth Forum welcomes the fact that applicant countries, as part of the *acquis communautaire*, will have to adapt their social protection systems in line with those of the European Union, which are currently being developed and modernised. The European Commission has stated that Central and Eastern European countries will need to develop 'efficient, effective and sustainable social protection systems'. The European Youth Forum believes that these must include adequate social protection for young people to eradicate the levels of poverty among young people and give them access to decent housing and health care.
13. There is a need to ensure that employment legislation designed to protect young people under 18 participating in casual or part-time work from exploitation.

National governments must be required to ensure that legislation such as Council Directive 84/33/EC 'Protection of Young People at Work' is fully implemented.