

## **CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE "EU 2020" STRATEGY**

### **Comments from Eurocarers**

#### **Introduction**

Eurocarers is a European organisation with the aim to advance the interests of carers, and represent and act on their and their organisations' behalf, irrespective of the particular health need of the person they are caring for.

Carers provide unpaid care by looking after an ill, frail or disabled family member, friend or partner, outside a professional or formal framework.

Among the principal aims of Eurocarers are

1. exchanging, gathering and disseminating experience, expertise and good practice and innovations,
2. contributing to policy development at national as well as European level by acting as a voice for carers and advocating on issues relevant to carers, supported by evidence-based research.

This short paper sets out our response to the consultation on the future EU 2020 strategy.

#### **Comments**

##### *Initiative for a new EU strategy welcome*

Eurocarers welcomes this paper, which invites all stakeholders and citizens to contribute their views on a new social and economic strategy for the EU, as a follow up to the Lisbon Strategy.

We fully agree that the time is right to reconsider and review the EU's overall priorities, to develop a sound basis for a coherent and comprehensive strategy, which addresses the main societal challenges faced by all Member States. This is particularly important in view of the current economic downturn which is having - and will continue to have - a substantial impact on many vital aspects of society.

##### *Need for a broader concept of growth*

The draft paper focuses on three main drivers for change towards achieving a sustainable social market economy, which is also 'smarter and greener':

- Creating value by basing growth on knowledge
- Empowering people in inclusive societies
- Creating a competitive, connected and greener economy.

Eurocarers particularly welcomes the explicit recognition of the need to 'empower people' and the reference to 'inclusive societies', as this will ensure an explicit focus on EU citizens and the need for their engagement.

While the suggested three main drivers are in line with current and future societal requirements, Eurocarers would like to underline that an important additional dimension and some of the key elements for the success of a future strategy are lacking. While the proposed strategy aims to help build a competitive and dynamic economy, thriving labour markets and sustainable social security systems, some of the basic requirements needed to reach these objectives are not or not sufficiently being referred to, i.e. the importance of health related issues and the challenges posed by societal/demographic developments.

Against this background, we would like to suggest a broader concept to achieve the objective "to promote growth for all" by adding a fourth priority for EU 2020, i.e. creating caring societies

### *Health & well-being as the basis for successful outcomes of the strategy*

Good health and well-being is the precondition for a productive and dynamic workforce; and is at the core a competitive, sustainable and dynamic economy. A healthy population and healthy workforce will be better equipped to make a substantial contribution towards ensuring the sustainability of social security and social protection systems. Therefore, actions focusing on prevention of (chronic) illness, health promotion and access to quality care provision across the life span should be an indispensable part of a future strategy.

Disappointingly, however, the Strategy's background document does not make any mention of health or health related issues at all. This is surprising, as the Commission is currently active in a number of domains which explicitly recognize the importance of health in relation to reaching social objectives, e.g. the Open Method of Coordination on social protection and social inclusion.

Another example is Commission's clear 'Health=Wealth' message, voiced in many official statements and on many previous occasions. The current crisis may well lead to governments cutting back on their health spending, and it would seem highly important to ensure that this is not the case: health spending should be regarded as an investment towards sustainable societies. Eurocarers is happy to note that, in a recent speech, health Commissioner Vassiliou sent a similar message to member State governments. In other words, given the importance the Commission attaches to health-related issues, it would only seem fitting that the 2020 Strategy would explicitly refer to the need to invest in healthy societies and positive health outcomes.

### *An increasing need for care – and who provides this?*

Societies across the EU (and indeed, across the world) are facing unprecedented challenges due to the ageing of society. While demographic change is being referred to in the background paper, the approach seems a little one-sided: it would seem that the only answer to face demographic challenges is a dynamic and growing labour market:

'the challenge presented by European demography ...was expected to result in a substantially reduced potential growth by 2020....employment rates of both men and women will have to rise rapidly and social protection systems will have to be

modernised so that they provide an affordable response to the future needs of our society'

Needless to say, labour market growth and sound social security systems should undoubtedly be crucial parts of a strategy to address demographic change. However, the paper does not take account of an additional dimension to future paid employment that can have a direct impact on labour market growth and sustainable social security systems, such as the increasing need for unpaid care, and – more importantly – who provides this care. Most of the care (in some countries 80 %) is currently being provided by relatives, friends and neighbours (predominantly women). It could easily be argued that this form of care is at the heart of formal health and social care provision systems.

EU2020 should not repeat mistakes of measuring economic objectives purely through outputs and outcomes of paid employment and resulting wealth. In addition to the paid workforce, over 100 million people in Europe – predominantly those in employable age – are increasingly undertaking an unpaid caring role and responsibilities to meet the care needs (e.g. due to demographic ageing)

Official calculations of the economic value of unpaid care are still rare, but in the United Kingdom academic studies suggest that the value of unpaid family care already matches the economic costs of the country's total health budget.

These figures reveal a growing pressure on those who should participate in the formal economy through paid employment, but will need to reduce their formal economic role to meet unpaid caring responsibilities, both at the expense of paid employment and their own future financial security.

#### *Conflicting policy goals?*

Bearing this in mind, it becomes obvious that there are (potentially) conflicting policy needs which will need to be reconciled if a future strategy is to be successful:  
on the one hand, there is an economic need to increase labour market participation to ensure a thriving and competitive economy and to keep national social security systems financially sustainable (NB the Lisbon Strategy specifically included explicit targets for raising the number of women and older workers in paid employment).  
on the other hand, the growing number of frail older people, and those with long term conditions and disabilities, is rapidly leading to a growing need for care provision, which puts pressure on those in the labour force with care responsibilities, as well as on health and social security budgets.

Taking active measures to increase labour market participation, along with other demographic developments (e.g. smaller families, greater mobility, more divorces – all leading to a decreasing informal care provision resource) puts the provision of unpaid care under great (and growing) pressure.

Therefore, if carers are expected to continue to care – and they are – active policy measures will need to be taken in the short term in a number of policy areas  
Eurocarers believes that future policy decisions on employment and social policies should enable individuals to have genuine choices in relation to take up caring, paid employment or a combination of the two. In other words, there should be adequate supports in place for working carers if they choose to combine work and care.

## *Policy recommendations*

This means in a practical sense that:

- enhanced and practical options for reconciliation of work and family life/care responsibilities as well as access to these options should be developed, in order for carers to maintain an adequate work-life balance; such as flexible hours, part-time work, care-leave, ad-hoc day-care facilities, promotion and development of information and communication, and technologies for telework and telecare.
- measures to facilitate returning to the labour market should be put in place.
- occupational health services should take account of the (impact of the) caring situation of the employee when assessing health and health needs.
- flexicurity, i.e. flexibility combined with (social) security is indispensable for carers, if they are to continue to provide care. Carers issues should be considered an integral and crucial part of the EU and national flexicurity debates and policy development.
- there should be legal provisions to safeguard pensions and social protection for carers leaving paid employment in order to care, to provide benefits to carers in relation to the time dedicated to care for dependent relatives (e.g. paid leave).
- an infrastructure of care should be put in place to support carers in paid employment and those wanting to return to work, such as
  - available, high quality and reliable formal care services,
  - address and prevent shortages of formal caregivers,
- develop and extend services that support carers, e.g. flexible home care services and respite care schemes,
- promote the development and use of telecare support systems.
- in cases where the caring responsibilities become too heavy, financial compensation should be available to compensate for lost income and social security rights.
- lastly, The knowledge needs of unpaid carers should be recognized and life-long learning & knowledge initiatives should be extended to the unpaid caring workforce

## **Conclusions**

Eurocarers would like to underline that a new EU strategy should not deliver exclusively in relation to economic objectives – it should also take account of social realities.

EU2020 states “Delivering this sustainable growth requires agreement to an agenda that puts people and responsibility first.” Eurocarers wish to add that delivering a sustainable solution to future economic and care needs will require to create more caring societies and economies which recognize and support the economic role of family carers and invest in carer recognition, knowledge and support.

We would like to thank the Commission for this initiative and would be happy to be involved with future initiatives and debates in this important area.