

Public consultation on the future “EU 2020” strategy

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The present EU 2020 strategy offers a one-sided vision of European society built on economic growth and full utilisation of human resources for the benefit of European industrial private sector. As such, the EU 2020 strategy is antagonistic to its alleged goal of serving “the people and responsibility first” (p. 2) as it neglects other values (affective, familial, social, environmental, etc.) that are formative of human lives.

With respect to transparent and accountable governance, the document does not address at all how a decision on the present direction of the EU has been taken, and what actors had access to negotiating it – thereby reducing the accountability of the document. Moreover, with economic growth being omnipresent in the text, there is no description of what the unintended consequences of such an approach may be, and who will profit from it.

1. Economic crisis

The EU 2020 strategically mobilises and magnifies the economic crisis to incite and increase fears of future development in Europe and to buttress policies outlined in the EU 2020 strategy. Instead of building on an assessment of whether and where errors have occurred and where responsibility should be located, the proposed strategy does no more than to offer the same path the EU has trodden thus far. The economic crisis has offered a unique opportunity for deep reflection and reconsideration of basic values on which the EU stands and which have informed much of public policy making over the past three decades; instead, the document enforces the tendencies that are the likely causes of the present economic crisis. Thus, the opportunities the economic crisis has offered in terms of reconsidering the underlying values of European societies, and relatedly the sources of mistrust of European citizens, will not be taken up.

2. Wellbeing of Europe conceived predominantly in economic and market terms

The EU 2020 strategy is one conceived of mainly in economic and market terms; Europe is projected as an economic space in competition with other regions of the world that needs to enhance its economic standing.

Priorities such as fight against poverty, social exclusion, environmental protection, education, research as well as gender equality, non-discrimination and the quality of life in general are secondary to the dominant priority of economic growth. The pursuit of these values is not a goal in and of itself but one subservient to the value of economic growth. Attention to these issues is to legitimate economic growth as a basic value and ensure “social peace”.

Analogically, social inclusion, too, is linked to the goal well performing labour markets and tackling inefficient labour market segmentation. Social inclusion in the document can be also

seen to serve the goals of the market and increased performance rather than as battling continuing status discrepancies in European publics. We can see a very similar tendency with environmental issues where references are made exclusively to economy (green economy, green jobs, greening the economy).

EU's failure to address social, cultural and environmental issues in the EU 2020 strategy in other than economic terms is narrow-sighted. In the evaluation carried out by the World Economic Forum where the fulfilment of Lisbon objectives has been assessed, Northern European countries with very high social standards and levels of labour market protection fared best (Zadrazilova 2007).¹

The EU 2020 strategy may therefore be highly alienating to segments of European inhabitants concerned about well-being conceptualized differently than in purely economic and resource-related terms.

3. Individuals viewed as labour source and consumers

The EU 2020 strategy does not consider EU inhabitants as human beings in the public sphere with their expectations, demands and ideas but as units of labour and consumers who need to spend money (ideally online) in order to boost European private sector with the help of public funding.

Again, such a vision of EU inhabitants can be highly alienating as it reduces the full range of human experience to the measurable and calculable (in terms of efficiency of production and amounts of spending).

Furthermore, the proposed strategy places great emphasis on gainful activity (as a source of economic growth as well as of better protection against poverty and exclusion) and implicitly in the document, it is gainful activity that is constituent of citizenship. Nevertheless, this concept is strongly exclusionary. Excluded are the unemployed, as well as those performing other types of work than gainful activity. The pressure on a person being gainfully active at all cost will lead to a reduction of social and employment rights. Short-term contracts and self-employment pose such a threat, and since the EU does not act in a unified manner in the area of social policy, the likelihood of unemployed individuals being excluded in society which is exclusively built on employment is to be expected.

4. Gap between goals of mobility and intergenerational solidarity

There is a gap in the EU 2020 strategy in the repeated calls for heightened mobility of the labour force (allegedly for the benefit of the mobile labour force) and the call for intergenerational solidarity and other implicit demands on EU inhabitants in their private roles. While the document talks about flexicurity, there is actually very little contained in the document to show a clear policy vision of bridging these two goals in a meaningful manner.

5. Impersonal, dehumanised society in a virtual world

The EU 2020 strategy offers a vision of society that is impersonal and dehumanised through its stress on the digital. This pertains to areas such as education and health where human contact has been repeatedly shown to be of a major factor of success (personalised role models for students and pupils, successful cure procedure with humane-oriented healthcare services). These roles can hardly be expected to be ensured online.

¹ http://www.cap.lmu.de/download/2007/2007_eu-china_zadrazilova.pdf

6. Dangers of virtual space neglected

The EU 2020 strategy puts enormous stress on digitalisation and online services. It completely fails to address the dangers related to virtual space from online banking fraud to abuse of personal data to child abuse and gender-related violence etc.

7. Gender / sexual / class / ethnic equality not addressed properly

The document does not address properly the existing disparities and inequalities in society, including on the labour market. Thus, when the document states that the employment rates of “immigrants with low levels of education, women and those recently arrived” need to be improved, there is no mention of how fairness and equality of opportunity shall be ensured given the blatant discrimination of these groups on the labour market and in other walks of life and their highly vulnerable position on the labour market. Furthermore, the document repeatedly refers to citizens whereas large portions of immigrants and those recently arrived cannot make claims to citizen rights and protection.

Given the strategic objections above, the following claims in the document need to be challenged:

- page 1: “Delivering this sustainable growth requires agreement to an agenda that puts people and responsibility first.”

The document repeatedly shows that it is not people and responsibility that are put first, but economic competitiveness, consumption and the interests of private corporations.

- Page 3: “In developing a new vision and direction for EU policy, we need to recognise that conserving energy, natural resources and raw materials, using them more efficiently and increasing productivity will be the key drivers of the future competitiveness of our industry and our economies.”

The document repeatedly alludes to the mantra of increased productivity/reduced resources without providing any suggestion how this may be done although there is an implicit assumption of greater exploitation of people through less job security and stress on unhindered mobility, which actually reduces social cohesion and the well-being of citizens. Again, this does not portend responsibility to citizenry.

- Page 3: “In order to meet these challenges, 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.”

The document does not suggest any way how to reconcile increasing the employment rate for both women and men with the future needs related to aging population.

- Page 4: “...the development of entrepreneurship and a smooth transition between jobs will be crucial in a world which will offer more jobs in exchange for greater adaptability;”

Here the document does not provide any suggestion how the State and the EC will address private issues related to “greater adaptability” in terms of changing schools for children, building roots and affinity (thus relatedly responsibility) to a given location etc. This approach highlights the “resource” imagery of the document where people are not born to bring to fruition their personalised visions of self but rather an economic vision of a resource in service to private commercial needs.

The pressure on adaptability and flexibility is attributed above all to individuals on the labour market. Adaptability and flexibility should be distributed among the labour market

participants and actors in a more balanced way and including also transnational enterprises and firms.

- Page 5: “It also needs to maximise and accelerate the practical benefits of research for Europe’s businesses and SMEs - including through major public-private partnerships. The attractiveness and performance of Europe as a research location also depends on creating an internal market and attractive career prospects for researchers. Innovative firms should be able to have access to pooled public and private sources of growth capital, for example venture capital; this needs to be coupled with administrative simplification and technical support to promote the incubation and growth of small innovative firms.”

While the document puts stress on research and innovation for Europe’s businesses and SMEs (and not, for example, for the benefit of European citizens), it does not put any stress on other areas of human life that apparently also generate the much-touted innovativeness and prosperity, that is, culture and especially live arts.

- Page 5: “...helps universities and research institutions to raise capital through the commercialisation of their ideas and inventions is needed to develop the creativity, knowledge and research capacity in Europe.”

The dominance of the economic perspective is clearly visible here, as well. The document makes no mention of the values of the creative commons, open access etc. and views knowledge purely in terms of marketable goods for sale which obviously restricts access rather than opening it.

- Page 6: The aim for 2020 is to achieve a genuine European Knowledge Area, underpinned by a world-class knowledge infrastructure, in which all actors (students, teachers, researchers, education and research institutions and enterprises) benefit from the free circulation of people, knowledge and technology (the 5th freedom).

Despite the recent rhetoric from the European Commission concerning two-way communication between science and society and science addressing societal needs, the EU 2020 strategy for science and research is one cut from society as the relevant stakeholders include, apart from the immediate actors, only enterprises, not NGOs and other civic society formations.

- Page 6: “Supply and demand need to be matched better. Labour mobility must be promoted to ensure that people can take up new opportunities by moving to where their skills are most needed.... Finally, despite its substantial contribution to growth, the potential of migration is not fully factored into policy making at EU or national level.”

Rather than ensuring opportunities for people, the document provides a vision of society where people are put at disposal of the private capital, forced to move their units of resource where such units of resource are required, rather than planning meaningfully their lives in their social networks. The document completely fails to take into account the need for stability and the growing demands related to aging and care for the elderly placed on families.

- Page 7: “In order to create more jobs, a more entrepreneurial culture needs to take hold in Europe, with a more positive attitude towards risk-taking and a capacity to innovate. **Self-employment** should become a real option for those who may have recently lost their job.”

While self-employment is a vital resource for society and individuals in developing their skills and ensuring livelihood, self-employment cannot be made the *modus operandi* for the labour

market as such a change would shift further costs from private corporations onto individuals finding themselves in increasingly insecure conditions and whims of the market.

- Page 8: "...a fresh approach to **industrial policy** is necessary to support industry by putting the emphasis on sustainability, innovation and the human skills needed to keep the EU industry competitive in world markets."

Again, as in the rest of the document, the needs of private capital and industry are put at the forefront of European policy. This approach is in no way counterbalanced by similar shifts in industry to suit the needs and demands of society. There is then a clear imbalance between the demands placed on citizens for the sake of industry and the demands placed on industry for the sake of citizens.

- Page 8: raising productivity and reducing pressure on resources

The document again sets the goal of raising productivity and reducing pressure on resources, and one wonders how the EC plans to do this, in particular in terms of human resources. Unless, as the document could also suggest, that the pressure on resources concerns only non-renewable source of energy but not necessarily the human resources.

- Page 9: "The framework of the **single market** gives us the size and the scale necessary to achieve these objectives. It is the central tool which ensures that citizens reap real benefits from increased competition and that companies operate on a level playing field."

It is here that the document becomes perhaps most cynical when it acts as if the proposed EU 2020 strategy is for citizens to reap benefits when it is the private entrepreneurial sector that is to reap the benefits of the free circulation of all resources, including human ones, irrespective of wider social, affective, environmental and other needs of citizens.

- Page 10: "...the EU needs well functioning markets where competition and consumer access stimulate growth and innovation... This requires strengthening their ability and confidence to buy goods and services cross-border, in particular on-line."

This part of the text underlies the skewed and one-dimensional vision of European society; in addition to serving as a human resource for the benefit of private capital, citizens are viewed as consumers buying goods. The document does not offer any vision of society where citizens may actually wish to opt out of the consumer culture, not contributing to further senseless "conspicuous consumption" and thus contributing to the preservation of the environment and resources.