



MEETING REPORT

DISCUSSION ON CHALLENGES IN URBAN AREAS FROM A NORDIC PERSPECTIVE

20 October 2016

On the 20th of October, Eurodiaconia held a discussion in the European Parliament on challenges in urban areas from a Nordic perspective. Therefore, Eurodiaconia invited representatives of its Nordic members to Brussels to share their experiences with Members of the European Parliament and other European stakeholders. The meeting was hosted by MEP Cecilia Wikström and visited by representatives from EU offices of Nordic regions as well as by civil society representatives.

Introduction

Heather Roy welcomed the speakers and participants and introduced the topic. She thanked Cecilia Wikström MEP for hosting the meeting and presented the speakers for the discussion.

Cecilia Wikström opened the discussion by stating that society needs hope, cooperation and coming together to solve contemporary social challenges. She explained that vulnerable groups should be given a voice in decisions affecting them, and in the help targeted towards them. She presented social protection and its limits to be a major issue, stressing that social systems must support the most vulnerable in society, including for example people with disabilities and migrants. She stressed the need to address legal migration and asylum, recalling that more people than ever have to flee their home country, with 85% being hosted outside of Europe in camps in developing countries. In this context, she called for a certain level of social security for migrants in the hosting countries while at the same time maintaining a high level of social protection for European citizens. Next to social security systems, Cecilia Wikström mentioned the labor market to play a major role in providing a better life for vulnerable people. It has to offer a decent income and be accessible for people in poverty. She wished the participants a fruitful discussion and gave the floor back to Heather. Heather Roy reassured the need for a minimum standard of living and introduced Eurodiaconia members and their background.

Panel discussion

Anna Österberg from the Association of Diaconal Institutions in Sweden (ADIS) was the first speaker of the panel discussion. She stated that many people in Sweden do not understand the system in the country, questioning why it does not do more for vulnerable people despite the capacities and the will of civil society to get engaged and help. She presented the experience of a colleague who works directly with undocumented children, retelling their complicated situation of lack of perspective and a secure future due to a new law enforced by the Swedish government (see below). The law determines that they may not be able to stay in Sweden after their 18th birthday.

"I run out of air when my colleague calls to inform me about a new policy for unaccompanied minors. How else are you supposed to react when you find yourself at the end of the road? For you to realize what these words mean to our kids, the words would have to cry or scream out of agony. Because this decision to give

Page 1 of 3





the kids temporary residence permits, just to be able to deport them when they turn 18 takes away all their hope and prolongs the nightmare they already live in. I cry easily, but actually what I feel is rage. Wrath, even. For how can you remove “aching reasons” from the legislation just because there are so many who have them?

And what are we going to say to our kids who struggle on with their Swedish lessons, go to school, do their unpaid internships, and who slowly built a trust that sometimes makes them dare to sleep at night? On our wall there is a sign saying: ‘just because it is black in the dark doesn’t mean there is no color’. One of our kids put it up because he thought it was a message that all the kids in the home needed to take part of. And now I cling to these words. Maybe we will find color even in this compact darkness.”

The next speaker was Helle Christiansen from Kirkens Koshær, presenting her view on the social protection system in Denmark. She explained that society in Denmark has been mostly homogenous in the preceding decades, which shaped the understanding of the social security system. Whereas temporary help for people who did not contribute to the system is mostly accepted, long-term help is seen critical by society. She pointed out a number of common problems faced by all Nordic countries, such as homelessness, including youth homelessness, exclusion of elderly people and poverty among migrants. Regarding the latter, she specifically stressed the problems to access the labor market which leads to increased movements into the black market where migrants, including intra-EU migrants, do not have any rights and are exposed to exploitation and instability. In this context, she calls on Christian organisations in the Nordic countries to advocate in order to convince politicians to change the inaccessible system and market.





Andor Urmos from the European Commission presented the work of DG REGIO on urban development. He introduced the EU's cohesion policy and related funds available to support social aims. He explained the potential use of European Structural and Investment funds for social services in an urban context, stating that poverty and social inclusion are a thematic conditionality. The ERDF has a special focus on sustainable urban development to which approximately 15 billion euros have been allocated. Key areas of funding under the urban strategy are the support of a low carbon economy, environment and social inclusion. Concerning budget allocation within the cohesion policy, Andor Urmos stressed that the Nordic countries such as Finland and Denmark do not make effective use of their resources for social inclusion initiatives. Following, Andor Urmos presented the urban agenda for the EU which was launched by the European Commission in 2015. This agenda wants to put more focus on the urban dimension and sets up partnerships with cities, Member States and the European Commission. So far, four partnerships have been launched on the topics of urban poverty, integration of migrants and refugees, air quality and housing. Initiators and members of the partnerships on urban poverty do not include Nordic countries so far, and Andor Urmos encouraged Nordic stakeholders to consider participation. On a last note, he presented the Urban Innovative Actions initiative which provides resources to test new approaches to address urban challenges, including urban poverty and inclusion of migrants and refugees. The next call will be launched in December 2016.

Judith Sorensen from the Desk Office of the ESF and FEAD in Denmark presented funding priorities and projects of Danish organisations working in the social sector. She explained the FEAD program, stating that it can be used for social assistance and food aid. In Denmark, most of the money allocated under FEAD went to support the most socially excluded such as homeless people in the current funding period. The amount of money is relatively small as compared to the other countries and hardly sufficient to make a great impact, Judith Sorensen stated. She also pointed to problems with complex regulations and struggling managing authorities which make the effective use of FEAD more complicated for small social service providers. Judith Sorensen continued by presenting project examples funded under FEAD, including a locker room project which provides homeless people with a locker for their personal belongings, and a project for homeless EU migrants run by Eurodiaconia member Kirkens Koshaer. The project offers sleeping options and outreach activities for EU-migrants living on the streets. Additionally to FEAD, Judith Sorensen introduced the ESF in Denmark. She explained that the ESF is mostly used for projects on integrating people into the labour market, also those under the priority axis of social inclusion. They focus on labour market integration activities for vulnerable people such as long-term unemployed, youth and migrants.

The last panelist was Sirpa Pietikäinen MEP. She started off by reminding that Europe was built for the people and for people's needs, and not for the market. Nevertheless, the EU managed to address mainly the markets and failed its people. She reiterated that there are constitutional rights for everyone, but that member states not always protect them, especially not of those who are outside of the labour market. In this context, Sirpa Pietikäinen mentioned the non-discrimination regulation which received wide support of civil society and the European Parliament, but was not sufficiently taken up by member states. In Finland for example, elderly people are discriminated and do not get the same benefits as the working population. She furthermore mentioned the accessibility act which aimed to ensure that specifically elderly people and people with disabilities do not get discriminated, stressing the need for an enabling and not a discriminating society. She said that there is a need for two further directives ensuring basic income and basic services for all people, even if on different levels in different member states. The role of civil society she defined in three ways, first of all as an added value in the form of personalized love and support. Secondly, civil society shall act as a defender of rights and check on the quality of public social services. Thirdly, she stressed that, especially from a Nordic perspective, civil society is expected to provide a major part of the services and that service providers are often procured by the government. In this context, she pointed to the danger of being expected to make profits in an area where there is no market, forcing competition which leads to worse outcomes for people. At the end, Sirpa Pietikäinen reiterated the need to uphold human dignity for all.

Heather Roy confirmed the importance of keeping the focus on rights and dignity. She summarized the main points mentioned in the discussion, stressing the need to bring funding, policy and social work together in order to address the pitfalls in the Nordic systems effectively. Heather Roy thanked the speakers and participants for attending and closed the meeting.