



REPORT

EURODIACONIA 4th ANNUAL CROSS-PARTY BREAKFAST MEETING

Building up skills for social inclusion

On 11 October 2017, Eurodiaconia held the fourth edition of its annual cross-party Breakfast Debate at the European Parliament. This year's focus on 'Building Skills for Social Inclusion' aimed to mainstream an inclusive approach to employment and engage into a dialogue with EU institutions and policy-makers on the challenges faced and solutions needed by providers of skilling interventions and services targeting persons with "low employability". Emphasis was made on the potential of social enterprise settings as a bridge between skilling interventions and sustainable work inclusion. Also, the Debate stressed the job creation potential of work and social inclusion services, both as levers of employment and employers themselves.



From left to right, Maria Gimner (Stockholm City Mission), MEP Agnieszka Kozłowska-Rajewicz and Heather Roy (Eurodiaconia)

The event was hosted by MEP Agnieszka Kozłowska-Rajewicz (EPP, Poland) and combined the perspective of civil society (Eurodiaconia and its member Stockholm City Mission) and policy-makers (European Parliament, European Commission).

In her opening statement, **MEP Kozłowska-Rajewicz** emphasised the importance of the topic under discussion to build a more competitive and resilient Europe. She stressed the role of skills in shaping labour markets. For this reason, she welcomes the emphasis made in the New Skills Agenda for Europe on cross-cutting and key skills. MEP Kozłowska-Rajewicz underlined, in particular, the key role of soft skills as enablers of inclusion and better performance in labour markets, especially for people who have been outside employment for long periods.





Next, **Heather Roy**, Secretary General of Eurodiaconia, underlined the need to make the discussion on employment and skills meaningful for people such as long-term unemployed persons, persons with disabilities, people with mental health issues or addiction problems, migrants, etc. It is often the case that employment statistics and initiatives do not speak to such groups. Heather Roy mentioned the key importance of a more integrated approach between employment and social services in order to render interventions more effective and sustainable over time.

She also emphasised that partnerships (with employers, trade unions, etc.) are vital to ensure the right to decent, quality jobs for all. In her view, civil society organizations like Eurodiaconia members are in a better position to adopt such an approach and bring a holistic approach to skills based on their clearer understanding of the interlinkages between work and social inclusion challenges. Finally, Heather Roy encouraged EU institutions to mainstream their commitment towards inclusive labour markets and skills in the European Semester and the forthcoming European Pillar of Social Rights.

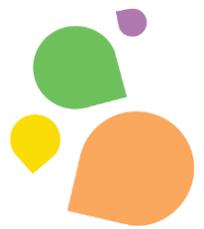
Maria Gimner, Marketing Manager at the Stockholm City Mission (Eurodiaconia member), presented the work of her organization supporting people through skills. Skilling interventions are part of a broader mission aimed at helping families, children and young people in need of adult support, elderly people facing loneliness, homeless people and people who have an addiction. The Stockholm City Mission services meet around 1,100 people each day.

Maria Gimner then focused on the role played by Stockholm City Mission's different social enterprises as bridges towards social and work inclusion. These social enterprises produce and sell goods and services made by employees, volunteers and participants in the services on their way into the labour market. The City Mission trains people and the goal of their interventions is that individuals become employable outside the City Mission. Products and services are sold at market prices and compete on the open market. Among the different social enterprise projects set up by the Mission, there is *Second Hand*, which gives new life to clothes, furniture and other items donated by individuals and businesses. *Remake* redoes worn textiles, furniture and gadgets into new, environmentally friendly and unique products. *Mat och möten* (food and meeting) is a café, bakery, banquet and conference activities. *Matcentralen/ foodcentral* takes care of donated foodwaste and sells it at reduced prices in social supermarkets. *Blixtjobb /Flash Jobs* creates on-the-spot employment opportunities on a daily basis for people experiencing homelessness and substance abuse issues.

Following this, **Risto Raivio** (European Commission, DG EMPL, Job Creation unit) took stock of recent EU initiatives around skills. As a result of the European Commission proposal to set up a Skills Guarantee, the Council adopted a Recommendation on 'Upskilling Pathways' in December 2016. Member States are now expected to define their priorities around such upskilling actions. The validation and recognition of previous skills is instrumental to this aim. The interplay between European and national levels is key at this stage. By mid-2018, Member States are expected to present concrete plans on their upskilling strategies. By the end of 2018, the European Commission will publish an assessment of national plans.

However, Risto Raivio emphasised that the EU is already taking prominent action around skills through EU funds. He also stressed the priority of action on people for whom distance from labour markets is largest. In these cases, the way back to work should be shortest. Interventions should, especially in these cases, encompass a combination of work-based actions, cultural and social inclusion. Risto Raivio then emphasised the role of social enterprises as bridges between skilling interventions and labour markets. In order to boost such a potential, the EC continues to work on improving the access to finance and markets of social enterprises.

According to him, the strength of social enterprise settings lies, in first place, in their ability to empower users to tackle mainstream labour markets. Secondly, social enterprises also facilitate the involvement and participation of users in the organization of activity. This is closely linked with the development of civic and soft skills which are key to ensure sustainable engagement in employment and society.



MEP Emilian Pavel (S&D, Romania) stressed the idea that the success of the New Skills Agenda partly depends on its ability to support the far-reaching changes produced in the conception of the life cycle. In this regard, the traditional dynamic of 'education-work-retirement' has shifted towards a new paradigm where learning and skilling needs are permanent across the life cycle. Linked to this, the sustainability of rising new forms of work largely depends in fact on a more dynamic supply of skills and skilling actions. MEP Pavel also pointed at the need to adopt a targeted approach where people who lack access to skills are a priority.

MEP Jean Lambert (Greens/EFA, UK) emphasised that a life-cycle approach is needed to address skills. In this regard, she pointed at the need to connect more strongly skills with policy frameworks such as the Recommendation 'Investing in Children'. In the same vein, she called for avoiding too 'youth-centric' approaches to skilling efforts. MEP Lambert stressed the societal dimension of skills, which are often viewed as a social marker of reliability or competence. In light of this, it is crucial to think of skills as a social demand (rather than an individual responsibility only) and introduce an anti-discrimination approach when addressing low skill levels and obstacles to skill access. She also underscored the key difference between qualifications and skills, the latter being more difficult to assess. For this reason, it is very important to create the right instruments of re-evaluation, re-learning and recognition of skills so that people are able to present the competences they have.

The discussion with participants reiterated the need to frame skills in the present context of changing demographics and labour markets. In some regional contexts, there are significant gaps in skilling opportunities when public support ceases; this is especially the case among young people in Eastern Europe who reach adult age. In these cases, the role of Churches and NGOs is essential in filling such gaps.

Skilling actions are sometimes impaired by gaps in the education system. In this regard, participants pointed at difficulties to issue certificates for pre-vocational training activities, which are key for the inclusion of young drop-outs.

The discussion also emphasised the need to elaborate more on who constitute target groups for skilling actions. Categories such as 'the most vulnerable' are often too broad to accommodate a person-centred approach, which is essential for such interventions.

EU funding is available to support skilling actions. In this regard, the European Commission Structural Reform Support Service works with Member States to support their reform initiatives; for instance in the framework of the Council Recommendation on Long-term unemployment. However, civil society organisations are also expected to have a role in shaping such reform initiatives.

To know more about Eurodiaconia views on skills:

- Eurodiaconia, [Building up skills for social inclusion](#), Policy paper, 2017.
- Eurodiaconia, [Services for Work and Social Inclusion of long-term unemployed persons. Good practice from Eurodiaconia members](#), 2016.
- Eurodiaconia, [Response to a 'New Skills Agenda for Europe'](#), 2016.
- Eurodiaconia, [Response to the European Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation on the integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market](#), 2015.

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