

ONLINE ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE REPORT

Employment challenges and opportunities in the social care sector: the case of long-term care

On 16 November 2021, Eurodiaconia and Social Services Europe (SSE) jointly hosted an online event to discuss how we can harness the recent recognition of the long-term care sector as a frontline service and build on this to safeguard the delivery of quality services. During the conference, barriers to recruitment and retention of staff were identified, best practices on how to improve conditions for the workforce in the sector were shared, and policy recommendations were delivered on how to build a favourable ecosystem for quality, accessible, and affordable social services for all.

The online round table kicked off with an introduction by Eurodiaconia's Policy Officer, **Ms. Kewan Mildred**, who welcomed the participants and introduced the topic of discussion, stressing how Eurodiaconia members have been at the forefront throughout the COVID 19 pandemic providing services to people in need, amidst challenges that they had been experiencing for years, such as acute staff shortages, inadequate funding, and lack of attractiveness of the sector.

Then, the first-panel discussion on key barriers to recruitment and retention of staff in the care sector started, moderated by Eurodiaconia's Head of Advocacy, **Ms. Anne-Sophie Wislocki**. She briefly introduced the subject and gave the floor to the first panellist, **Ms. Johanna Pisecky**, Social Expert at **Diakonie Austria**, a member of Eurodiaconia and one of the five biggest care providers in Austria. Ms. Pisecky started by addressing the issue of low staff-patient-ratio in the long-term care sector, particularly in elderly care, which translates into a lack of adequate time to perform care tasks, creating a vicious cycle of high staff turnover and low quality care.

In addition to that, she mentioned a high level of staff strain, high workload, irregular working hours, and low wages –due to underfunding of the social services– all of which increases unattractiveness of the sector. These challenges have been aggravated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a higher workload leading to more staff turnover and staff shortage. She stressed that this acute shortage would probably increase, with many workers expected to leave the care sector after the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, she shared some of the challenges regarding training new care workers and re and upskilling of staff in Austria. For instance, she mentioned the high tuition fees to become a care worker compared to training in the police force and the lack of financial recognition of additional training.

On his part, **Mr. Pavol Vilček**, Diocesan Director of Spišská Katolícka Charita, **Caritas Slovakia**, one of the largest social service providers in the country, stated that the main

challenge they face in Slovakia is the underfinancing of the social care sector, mainly due to low public resources. He went further to explain that the percentage of GDP spent in long-term care in Slovakia is 0.8%, considerably lower than the European average of 1.7%. He exemplified that while the public military expenditure commitment in Slovakia is 2% of the GDP, there is no similar social care expenditure commitment. Mr. Vilček also mentioned high taxes and social security contributions as another challenge, which in Slovakia are about 50% of total employment costs. According to him, this is problematic because high taxes directly affect staff wages, and they do not translate in high social expenditure. He asserted that because of low wages, care workers go to work to western European countries, causing a “care drain” that increases staff shortages. To face this, the Caritas Slovakia network has introduced circular models where caregivers go work for a certain time (six or twelve weeks) to a partner organisation in western Europe and then come back to their original positions.

After this, Ms. Wislocki opened the floor for a first round of questions from participants, followed by some recommendations presented by the panellists. Here, the importance of incentivising young people to choose care professions was highlighted, as well as the need for a greater focus on long-term care in existing EU funding and in the European Semester. Finally, it was underlined that comparable data collection on long-term care at the EU level is key for creating better policies and improving awareness.

Then, the second panel discussion on promising practices to encourage employment in the sector was initiated. Ms. Wislocki gave the floor to the first speaker, **Ms. Lucie Slámová**, Foreign Relations Assistant at **Diaconia ECCB**, Czech Republic, member of Eurodiaconia. She started by stressing that currently, unemployment in the Czech Republic is very low, so retaining good workers is difficult, particularly as the non-for-profit cannot compete with the wages provided by the state and in other sectors of the economy. Thus, Diakonie Czech Republic tries to focus on a caring approach towards workers to improve staff retention.

She explained that they have developed a clear methodology for all their centres that defines what is expected from each specific employee, including directors and managers. This is based on a competency model that provides clear criteria to evaluate and train staff. Likewise, employees’ feedback plays a central role for the organisation and is gathered on a regular basis. Ms. Slámová stated that this is crucial for a good and open workplace environment that contributes to employees’ satisfaction and well-being.

Then, it was the turn of the second panellist **Mr. Théo Bezerra**, from the **Syndicat Employeur du Lien Social et Familial (ELIFSA)**, a French member of the Federation of European Social Employers. He took the floor to present some insights on FORESEE, a two-year project run jointly by 14 member organisations of the Social Employers. Mr. Bezerra explained that the objectives of the project are to foster cooperation among employers’ organisations, increase the attractiveness of social services through the better understanding of the challenges for effective recruitment and retention and the strengthening of social dialogue, to build capacities of social partners in social services at national and EU level, and to develop tailored practices for more attractiveness of the sector.

He described that the project partners are currently working on identifying common problems in the social sector across European countries and some good practices from social partners. He explained that some of the issues that they have encountered are competition for workers

at three levels: between countries and regions, between public and not-for profit organisations, and between not-for profit and for-profit organisations. Secondly, they have seen that there is an issue with the image of the social sector, which creates difficulties with recruitment of workers. Some good practices identified from social partners across Europe are awareness-raising campaigns for the general public in the Czech Republic, or campaigns for attracting workers in France. Third, they have identified training, the recognition of qualifications and diploma, and the provision of attractive career paths as critical aspects in the sector, as well as some good practices such as collaboration with universities in Greece. Finally, Mr. Bezerra mentioned demanding and often stressful working conditions and wages as a common problem in the sector, with social dialogue and increased democracy within organisations cited as possible solutions.

Finally, the third and last panel on “How to harness the recent recognition of the care sector and tackle recruitment and retention of quality staff challenges” was, moderated by **Mr. Mathias Maucher**, Policy and Project Coordinator of **SSE**. He introduced the topic and presented the first speaker, **Mr. Adam Rogalewski**, Policy Staff Health and Social Services, of the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU). Mr. Rogalewski discussed the importance of the European Care Strategy announcement and how it could help to implement principle 18 of the European Pillar of Social Rights on access to long-term care.

He continued by stating that the pandemic exposed how much policymakers had left care aside, and how little recognition it had over the last years. According to him, this reflects on the poor working conditions that care workers experience across Europe, which are aggravated by the psychosocial risks and stress related to care work. This, together with acute care staff shortages affect mental health and well-being of workers in the care sector. He insisted on the importance of developing measures to improve care workers physical and mental health. He concluded by saying that care should not be seen as a commodity, just as health is not a commodity. Thus, a change of perception is necessary and more investment in care is crucial for the future of the system. According to him, reinforced sectorial social dialogue at the European level would be helpful to achieve this much needed change.

Then, **Mr. Sylvain Renouvel**, Director of **Social Employers** took the floor and emphasised how much of a big problem underfunding represents for the sector, as the root of many other challenges. This is particularly tricky because at the end, underfunding mainly affects beneficiaries and the quality of the services they receive. He explained that underfunding is also the main cause of low wages of the sector. In fact, according to Eurofound, average wages in the sector are 21% less than the average for the global economy. Adding to that, underfunding causes a higher level of part-time positions in care services. Thus, for him, underfunding is the first thing to tackle, and this is something that Member States need to understand. He also recognised that social partners should play a key role in the improvement of working conditions, in fostering well-being of caregivers, and in giving them training opportunities. Finally, he highlighted that EU initiatives should support well-being at work.

In her intervention, **Ms. Laura Jones**, Board member of **SSE** and Secretary General of the European Platform of Rehabilitation (EPR), focused on the topic of recognition. She stated that we have seen an increase in recognition of the care sector amongst the public due to the pandemic and the difficult conditions under which caregivers have been operating. However, she warned that this has not translated yet into full recognition from policymakers, and thus

policy initiatives. Unless we have real recognition of the importance of long-term care then funding will not follow to the extent it should. She recalled how SSE has been active in calling on the European Commission to consider the importance of social services in fulfilling the European Pillar of Social Rights and highlighting the role that services and their staff have in the implementation of social initiatives. Therefore, she called on the Commission to make sure that social services and their staff are recognised and supported in these initiatives.

Regarding funding, Ms Jones explained that SSE has been assessing the impact of public procurement on social services, but also exploring other models of funding which might better support social services and ensure better working conditions. She also underlined that the initiatives that address long-term care should envisage both social and health care in an integrated and holistic manner. Finally, she hopes to see a broad involvement of all stakeholders in the announced European Care Strategy, the incorporation of a lifecycle approach to long-term care, a focus on quality, upskilling and reskilling and for the European Care Strategy to properly address recognition and resilience of the sector.

To close the panel discussion, **Ms. Kathrin Riedler**, Policy Officer, from DG EMPL at the **European Commission** addressed the upcoming European Care Strategy. She affirmed that the initiative would take as a starting point the long-term care report recently launched jointly by the Commission and the Social Protection Committee, which has quite a big chapter dedicated to workforce challenges. She continued by stating that the strategy shows a commitment from the Commission to better recognise and give visibility to the care sector.

Concretely, the Care Strategy will be a Commission Communication covering childcare (the revision of the Barcelona targets) and long-term care (through a Council Recommendation), applying a lifecycle approach. Ms. Riedler indicated that it will aim at setting a framework for policy developments that ensures access to quality services for all. She concluded by reiterating that the European Union has limited competence on this topic, thus a lot must happen at the national level. However, she assured that the EU will provide support and guidance to Member States, so they address the urgent challenges of the care sector.

To close our event, **Ms. Heather Roy**, Secretary General of **Eurodiaconia** presented some final key messages. She underscored the crucial need for investment in staff, and she identified some gaps that need to be closed, such as the financial gap, the gender gap among care givers, or the gap on the economic value placed on care and the real value it has in our societies. She also recognised that care is becoming a commodity, as well as people who require care. In her views, this is dangerous and needs to be avoided, otherwise the care system risks becoming beyond the reach of many people, particularly those from vulnerable groups.

She concluded by delivering some policy recommendations. For instance, she mentioned the need to leverage all EU funding instruments to prioritise investment in the care sector. Equally, she proposed that a fixed percentage of national budgets should go to the care sector (as a GDP percentage), that should then be integrated into the European Semester. Moreover, she asserted that the exclusion of care spending under the stability and growth pact should be promoted. Finally, Ms. Roy emphasised that while the announcement of a Care Strategy is very welcome, what we need to work towards is a Care Guarantee in Europe, that works with Member States to deliver certain standards on access to care services for all.