

- 1) Honour to speak on behalf of Social Platform – 47 network fighting for social justice & participatory democracy  
Celebrations of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the EU & 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary.  
Yesterday I attended the conference on the European Social Fund – where we were reminded of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of European Social Fund. It is a reminder that at the very beginning Europe was a project for people – with their well-being & welfare at the very heart.
- 2) Underpinning the work of all Social Platform members is the principle of human rights. The rights over every individual to live a life in dignity. Our members might be working specifically on equality and non-discrimination, welfare & provision of services, social protection or employment policies. Our fundamental belief is that people must have agency in their own lives and have their voices heard.
- 3) The question we are asked to address is what makes an individual social excluded - not able to fully participate in society. In my view there are causes linked to the individual – behaviour, self-perception – and there are structural causes linked to the environment – influenced by legislation, policies, social norms, the design and approach of support services and professionals.
- 4) We have witnessed over recent years a corrosion of solidarity across many of our societies – with a much stronger focus on individual responsibility. In my own country a right-wing press has fed a stereotype of “benefits scroungers” that has seeped into mainstream consciousness. Even left-wing politicians feel pressure to stand against a so-called “something for nothing” culture.
- 5) This is wrong & we count on you in your role in parliamentary debates to stand up against such discourse. Change does come with individual behaviours. However responsibility does not lie with the individual but with legislators, policy makers and society at large to create an enabling environment to allow and support individual responsibility.
- 6) I prefer to link of responsibility as ‘**ability to respond**’. The “ability to respond” is not a function of age and maturity. It depends on individual circumstances and experience. And it is not constant over time. It is important to recognise that anybody can find themselves in vulnerable situations and at risk of exclusion at different points in their lives.

What does this mean in practice & in relation to your role in the Parliamentary Committees.

- 7) First it is a **creating a culture of non-discrimination**. We need to create a culture where every individual is accepted and celebrated for who they are. There are many among our constituencies who face stigmatisation, hate speech, lack of access to services – simply on the basis of how they look, their religious belief, their sexual orientation, a disability – and the list goes on. The EU is a project that has non-discrimination and social exclusion at its

core. And yet, an EU horizontal directive that would require Equal Treatment across all areas of society – not just in employment – is not being championed by many in the Council. We understand that change is not only legislative, but legislation is critical in shifting social norms and providing means through which those suffering discrimination can get redress.

- 8) Secondly, for those on the margins of society laws, we need to create **a support system that facilitates their reintegration**. The approaches advocated by our members are non-judgemental, person-centred and strengths-based. For people to help themselves they need to be treated with respect and they need to have access to basic goods and services that allow an individual to live a life in dignity. Support must be offered without conditionality or coercion. So for example, our member working on homelessness advocates for 'Housing First' – the notion that by giving an individual housing security you can help them get back on their feet.

We see an extraordinary shift in attitudes in recent years towards a more punitive, coercive approach around getting people back to the labour market. I am convinced that having a job is not only the best route out of poverty, but also a means of achieving greater sense of purpose and meaning in life – BUT often there are many steps a person needs to take before being accessing employment and these investments have an economic value even if they don't immediately increase job take up.

This is why we advocate for minimum income schemes & access to quality services.

- 9) Thirdly, briefly about **employment policies**. What we know is that having a job does not automatically lift people out of poverty and social exclusion. Levels of in-work poverty have been increasing over recent years across the EU (8,3% in 2010 to 9,5% in 2015), even more so in the Eurozone (2.2%).

In our position on the Pillar of Social Rights we advocate for minimum wages and fair working conditions for all. Part of this is about respect for non-discrimination in the labour market. It is also about investing in diversity and people's capacity. Many of our members are working with social enterprises, which promote supportive environments for people with disabilities, experience of exclusion, to fully participate & contribute with their experience. We're also advocating for a strong work-life balance package including sufficient and protection leave periods for people to balance employment with care for dependent members of their family.

My message is social exclusion is not something that happens to individuals. It is perpetuated, or indeed tackled, by changing social norms in our societies. This has to be driven by our political leaders taking responsibility for strengthening legislation and policy reforms which make discrimination unacceptable, require employees to treat their employees with respect and dignity, and provide effective support systems that enable people to get back on their feet.