



MENTAL HEALTH EUROPE – SANTE MENTALE EUROPE aisbl
Boulevard Clovis 7, B-1000 Brussels
Tel +32 2 280 04 68 - Fax +32 2 280 16 04
E-Mail: info@mhe-sme.org
www.mhe-sme.org

**Mental Health Europe Position Paper on the occasion of the
8th Roundtable on Poverty and Social Exclusion
Stockholm, 15-16 October 2009**

**Social Inclusion of people with mental health problems
in times of recession**

The effects of the current economic crisis on the mental health sector in Europe

Mental Health Europe welcomes this year's Roundtable on Poverty and Social Exclusion's focus on social inclusion in times of recession. The current financial and economic crisis has a considerable effect on the mental health and well-being of the population. Due to financial hardship and uncertainties about the future, especially depressions, anxiety-disorders and Burn-Out are more and more commonplace. When users of mental health services are asked about the major issues that concern them in their daily lives, personal finances are consistently identified as a major source of difficulty and distress. 1 in 3 people with a serious mental health condition are thought to be in debt. Concerns and anxieties regarding finance constitute a significant stress factor¹, which is exacerbated in times of recession.

Conversely to this development, several countries responded to the crisis and their rising public deficits with cuts in spending for public services, including mental health and social protection. This is particularly the case in the Baltic countries, Hungary, but also in some "old" EU Member States. Some countries like Hungary and Latvia are furthermore subject to conditionality of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans, demanding them to cut public expenditures. This is further aggravating the negative effect on mental health and access to basic social rights. Moreover, in many countries mental health services are not free of charge and because of co-payments people often cannot afford to get treatment and medicine. Current developments in many countries also include redundancies and the closing of health, social and educational institutions. Payments to health and other state employees are delayed such as in Greece and Estonia.

Since the economic and financial crisis hit Europe, depression increased within the population, affecting not only people made redundant in the crisis, but whole families face an insecure future. Due to unemployment and increasing poverty, social bonds are weakening and there has been an increase in suicides. Another related negative effect that can be observed in the current situation is the increase in domestic violence. The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people is fundamental to the future social and economic growth of the European region.

¹ Jenkins R, Bhugra D, Bebbington P, et al; Debt, income and mental disorder in the general population. *Psychol Med.* 2008 Oct;38(10):1485-93. Epub 2

Targeted measures need to be taken in order to fight child poverty and to prevent the onset of mental disorders in childhood.

Pressure on those people who still have work is growing. A recent Eurobarometer survey² revealed that in certain countries up to 65 % of the employees are anxious about their job security. Mental disorders are increasing in the working environment. Most common diseases are depression, burn-out feelings, but also heart rhythm disturbances, stomach problems etc. People often escape their reality by misusing alcohol, drugs and by engaging in other negative behaviours affecting mental and physical health.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is warning of a "social crisis" with forecasted rises in unemployment. Mental Health Europe would like to point out that budget cuts in the social and health sector have a negative influence on solidarity and social cohesion and demands that measures are taken to counterbalance the effects of the economic crisis on the social situation and the health and well-being of the population.

Mental Health Europe would like to remind policy makers of the commitments made within the European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing in the frame of its five priority areas: older people, youth, mental health in the workplace, depression and suicide as well as the fight against stigma, discrimination and social exclusion. In times of recession with its effect on the mental health and well-being of the population and the deterioration of available health and social services, these priorities are more relevant than ever. MHE demands the effective implementation of the European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Union and consequently at the national and regional level.

The role of the EU Active Inclusion Strategy in the recession

Mental Health Europe took note of the Swedish Presidency priorities in the field of Employment and Social Policy which has, among other targets, the aim to reduce the negative effects of the ongoing crisis, to find measures to reintegrate the unemployed into the labour market and to promote the active participation of people with a reduced work capacity because of ill-health.

The implementation of the Active Inclusion Strategy plays a decisive role bringing these goals forward on European and national levels. MHE advocates for a swift implementation of the European Commission's Active Inclusion Strategy. Adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services for people with mental health problems should be effectively implemented. The social dimension of the Active Inclusion Strategy should be strengthened in order not to forget those vulnerable groups in society such as people with serious mental health problems who are, temporarily or permanently, not able to participate in the labour market. One of the reasons is that employers are reluctant to employ someone with known mental health problems; therefore unemployment is common for most people who suffer from mental health problems. This needs to be tackled by targeted support programmes, encompassing flexible labour market participation structures such as, for example, gradual labour market integration and mentoring.

Everyone should be entitled to a minimum income in order to be able to lead a dignified life and to have access to quality health care. This should also be guaranteed for the most vulnerable groups in society such as people with mental health problems. Another serious problem that occurs in the current recession is that more people lose their accommodation and become homeless due to overwhelming debt and poverty related to an inability to work, ill-health and a

² European Commission, Special Eurobarometer on European Employment and Social Policy, July 2009

lack of strong family and social ties. Facing extreme poverty, in comparison to the rest of the population, a higher proportion of homeless people suffers from mental health problems. Most of them are not getting adequate treatment which is against the principle of human dignity. Housing is one of the fundamental rights of people as well as the access to quality healthcare and social services. Mental Health Europe demands that policy-makers ensure these basic rights are provided and steps are taken to avoid and fight homelessness.

Besides drawing attention to the extremely vulnerable groups in society, it needs to be pointed out that surviving on a low income is reality for many people nowadays, especially in times of recession. The gap between the rich and very poor is widening, the right to access social protection and care depends increasingly on the socio economic status of the person. This situation is unacceptable and is to be avoided.

Policy-makers need to work towards and finally reach Europe's goal of a cohesive society. For people with mental health problems, the integration into society and having equal opportunities proves particularly difficult due to the still prevalent stigma and discrimination which users of mental health services face on a daily basis. People with mental health problems are among the most socially excluded groups in our society.

Civil society involvement to shape the future of Europe

In spring 2010, the European Union will shape its future strategy and decide upon the EU's goals for the next decade. In particular, there will be challenges in fighting the effects of the economic and financial crisis and its repercussions on the social situation of the European citizens. NGOs can play an important role in this process as they represent civil society. The EU's upcoming civil society consultation is a good step in the right direction.

The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) under which EU Member States agreed to voluntarily coordinate their policies and good practices on social protection and social inclusion including the areas pensions, health and long-term care, is an important tool. In this frame, local and regional authorities as well as social partners and NGOs are to be involved; this is still not happening in a satisfactory manner. NGOs can make a decisive contribution to the further development of policies; they are representing a specific part of civil society, their interest group. They are therefore experts in their particular field and can efficiently contribute to the improvement of policies.

In particular, in times of the economic and financial crisis many governments and donors cut back their support for NGOs. This is a very worrying development since it needs to be ensured that the voice of the citizens is heard in Europe as part of a democratic citizenship process. Therefore targeted support schemes for NGOs from the side of the European Union with commitments from its member states are highly desirable.

Mental Health Europe welcomes the EU's decision to designate the year 2010 as the European Year to the fight against poverty and social exclusion. This will ensure a widespread awareness of poverty and social exclusion in Europe among European citizens at the grassroots level. Simultaneously, MHE is disappointed with the inadequate funding available for actions and projects related to the EY2010's focus to fight against poverty and social exclusion. Nowadays, people with mental health problems are still frequently confronted with stigma, discrimination and exclusion. MHE would like to draw attention to the fact that people with mental health problems have the potential to make a valuable contribution to society and have the right to access employment, training and education and to take part in social life.

One crucial field of activity, where close interaction with civil society is absolutely necessary, is to prevent mental health problems in the first place, to maintain good mental health and to foster mental health promotion measures at EU and on the national, regional and local level. Mental health and well-being should be seen as the centre of quality of life for individuals and society which will contribute to the achievement of the EU's Lisbon strategy to ensure social cohesion and economic growth and preventing societal disorders. Prevention, early detection and efficient treatment limit the personal, economic and societal consequences of mental disorders.

Mental Health Europe calls on policy-makers to take leadership

- The effective implementation of the European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing needs to be ensured. The respect of human rights and the promotion of mental health and wellbeing for all must become key priorities in all policies!
- In the sense of a Social Pact, the exit out of the crisis needs to be managed in a coordinated way, encompassing social protection, housing, employment and training, while at the same time ensuring the reliable functioning of health, social and educational institutions and services in all EU member states.
- Develop a more egalitarian and inclusive social model in which the non-profit sector is an essential actor in order to empower the citizen and to mediate between the most vulnerable, such as people with mental health problems, to pass the right message on to policy-makers.
- Foster the exchange of best practices between EU Member States in the frame of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), in which civil society should also be involved through regular consultations and coordinated interactions with policy-makers.
- Effectively implement the Active Inclusion Strategy with adequate minimum income schemes and a concrete outline on how to integrate those who are excluded from the labour market, how to make labour markets more inclusive and ensuring access to quality services.
- Invest in social and health services to ensure citizens' access to a social Europe and acknowledge the important role of health and social services as a motor for job creation and this investment should be part of the national recovery plans!
- Improve social protection systems in order to cushion the impact of the economic downturn – Commit to strengthen these systems!
- Mental Health Europe calls on policy-makers to take leadership to protect and promote the mental health and wellbeing of the population. The citizens of Europe must be empowered to design and receive the care which is appropriate for a democratic society and a modern Europe!

About Mental Health Europe

Mental Health Europe (MHE) is an organisation committed to the promotion of positive mental health, the prevention of mental distress, the improvement of care, advocacy for social inclusion and the protection of human rights for people with mental health problems, their families and carers. MHE vision is of a Europe where mental health and well-being is given high priority in the political spectrum and on the European health and social agenda, where people with mental health problems live as full citizens with access to appropriate services and support when needed, and where meaningful participation is guaranteed at all levels of decision-making and administration. MHE's values are based on dignity and respect, equal opportunities, freedom of choice, anti-discrimination, social inclusion, democracy and participation.

www.mhe-sme.org