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## **Mental Health Europe's Response to the Commission Consultation on the future "EU 2020" Strategy**

### Key priorities for the EU 2020 Strategy

Mental Health Europe (MHE) welcomes the consultation process on the European Union's Strategy which will frame the policy directions leading up to the year 2020. Mental Health Europe would like to point out that citizens, also including the vulnerable groups in society, should play a bigger role in shaping the EU they live in to make Europe a place where everyone feels well, secure and where they are given the possibilities for their further development.

One of Europe's main goals should be to ensure social cohesion in the European Union and to reduce inequalities. This includes combating the negative effects of the financial crisis and growing unemployment which had a considerable impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the population since more and more people face financial difficulties, fear and uncertainty about the future. Additionally, depression and suicide rates have also been increasing.

In the consultation paper, the issues of health and wellbeing are only basically touched upon. It is important to acknowledge the importance of health and social aspects in an overall European strategy. The integration of vulnerable groups into society should be fostered since the number of people facing difficulties, suffering from exclusion such as homeless people and people suffering from mental illness or other forms of sickness or disability, migrants and other socially excluded or disadvantaged groups, is considerable. Not addressing the needs of these groups means excluding a significant percentage of European citizens.

### Creating value by basing growth on knowledge

The consultation document states that education is one of the most effective ways of fighting inequality and poverty. Mental Health Europe agrees with this statement and would like to add that good education systems are the basis for accessing quality jobs. Furthermore, the promotion of lifelong learning is of utmost importance. Participation in education with equal access for everyone improves opportunities for all to lead a life with activities according to everyone's talents.

Vulnerable groups in society are often excluded from quality-education. Education systems therefore have to be accessible for all to ensure equal chances in society to achieve a high level of education as well as quality employment. Support schemes for people with special needs should be assured in order to use the full potential of all available human resources.

At the same time, policy-makers should be aware of difficulties on the market and that not all persons can be employed at all times which may be the case due to structural deficits or due to sickness. Functioning social protection systems should be put in place in a satisfactory manner to ensure that no citizen has to live in poverty.

### Empowering people in inclusive societies

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. Policy-makers need to work towards and finally reach Europe's goal of a cohesive society.

The promotion of mental health and well-being contribute to an enhancement of quality of life for individuals and society which will contribute to the achievement of the EU's Lisbon strategy to ensure social cohesion, economic growth and preventing societal disorders. Prevention and health promotion can avoid the higher costs of treatment. The costs are high if people are excluded from the labour market and from participation in society; this has a financial impact on the health system, social security systems and results in a loss in tax revenues of states.

In the consultation paper, inclusion is mostly addressed via employment promotion. Vulnerable groups in society such as people with mental health problems, still face a heightened degree of stigma, discrimination and exclusion. They and other people who are sick often cannot work full-time and more flexible work patterns and flexibility schemes are needed. In a broader sense this also applies to families and the availability of (child and other) care services to ensure the reconciliation of work and family life.

Support should be given to the EU member states to implement the EU's Active Inclusion Strategy<sup>1</sup>, to reform their systems for granting an adequate minimum income to all, including those who are (temporarily or permanently) not able to work. 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. Access to quality services should be a basic right in modern welfare states to achieve social inclusion for all and to maintain social cohesion.

MHE acknowledges that the consultation paper recognises the need for a modernisation of social protection systems. This is not only necessary because of an ageing population; good social protection systems alleviate the effects of unemployment or sickness. In times of crisis, several countries reduced social protection. Several countries responded to the crisis and their rising public deficits with cuts in spending for public services, including health and social protection. Several countries also dismissed state employees and closed down health, social and educational institutions and delayed payments to remaining health and other state

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<sup>1</sup> <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0639:FIN:EN:PDF>

employees. Social protection should safeguard people from the effects of illness, age, unemployment and from poverty. A mechanism should be developed for difficult times, ensuring the most vulnerable groups are not left without any support.

Furthermore, health aspects should be given a greater emphasis and the widespread inequalities in health should be addressed in the EU's new strategy. In the European Union, health inequalities can often be observed as a result of belonging to a social class which influences people's living conditions, but also the availability of health services such as access to health care (in rural or urban areas). Other determinants are governments' investments in health, access of citizens to information, education and environmental factors. Mental Health Europe believes that an interdisciplinary approach should be followed, with synergy between the social, legal, education, environment and health policies.

In particular referring to the European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing<sup>2</sup>, Mental Health Europe would like to point out that mental health is decisive for all factors of life as stated in the Pact's priority areas youth and older people as well as mental health in workplace settings, improving working relations and a healthy working environment. Combating Stigma and Discrimination is another pillar of the European Mental Health Pact. Awareness-raising as well as the sensitisation that each person is valuable and should be treated respectfully, starting in educational settings, should be mainstreamed throughout the whole economic cycle and in society.

The EU Member States should be encouraged to exchange best practices in the field of social and health policies. A mentoring system should be applied where the most successful countries pass on their expertise to other countries. This is already taking place within the Social Open Method of Coordination but it should be strengthened. Setting quantified targets can help to fight poverty in all EU member states, for example, the eradication of poverty and an end to homelessness. The targets should be achievable but ambitious at the same time and should involve a coordinated action plan on how to reach these standards in the EU Member States. The Social Protection Committee has already developed social indicators<sup>3</sup>, these should be made more visible. A social scoreboard should be developed to measure the effects that new policies have on the social situation in a country, and in particular how it has an impact on the most vulnerable groups in society.

MHE welcomes the provision of more civil society involvement such as it is foreseen in the Lisbon Treaty. In this context, 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 and should be further emphasised. Local and regional authorities as well as social partners and civil society/NGOs should be involved in a coordinated way in order to efficiently contribute to the improvement of policies. It is important that participation procedures as indicated in the Lisbon Treaty are institutionalised and take place on a regular basis.

### Creating a competitive, connected and greener economy

The consultation document states that social, economic and environmental objectives must go hand in hand. The EU Member States should increase their cooperation in

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<sup>2</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph\\_determinants/life\\_style/mental/docs/pact\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/mental/docs/pact_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=756&langId=en>

these matters to turn this goal into reality. Different levels of development in these fields in the countries will make it challenging and an exchange of best practices among Member States should be encouraged. Moreover, the consultation document suggests that policies must demonstrably contribute to social cohesion, tackling unemployment and fostering social inclusion. Mental Health Europe sees this as a good step into the right direction, but further guidance and monitoring systems will be necessary to help the EU Member States to mainstream these goals. In this context, the education system and lifelong learning play a crucial role.

Synergies between the social, economic and environmental pillars should be applied; for example, ecological projects can benefit economic goals, but can at the same time be used to support the social inclusion of disadvantaged groups.

### **Mental Health Europe's Set of Recommendations for the EU 2020 Strategy**

- A stronger significance of the question of health and well-being of the population should be incorporated in the EU 2020 strategy. Health determines the wellbeing of the citizens and effects their involvement in society and the labour market. It therefore has an impact on the social cohesion and also the productivity of a society. Targets should be set to improve the health care systems of the EU's Member States in order to create equal opportunities for all persons and to build the basis for economic growth. The European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing, which was concluded between the EU Member States in 2008, should be mainstreamed into policy-making on all levels such as health, social policies, housing, employment, training etc.
- Social protection systems need to ease the situation in times of crisis and therewith ensure citizens' access to a social Europe. Health and social services also play an important role as a motor for job creation. EU Member States should support each other in managing the exit out of the current crisis and improve their social protection systems in order to cushion the impact of the current economic downturn. In this frame, the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) should be strengthened. Member States should commit to make their social protection systems more stable for the future. In anticipation of the ageing population structure, reforms towards the sustainability of pension systems are of utmost importance.
- Adequate minimum income schemes should be assured and a concrete outline on how to integrate those who are excluded from the labour market, how to make labour markets more inclusive, support flexible working schemes and ensuring access to quality services should be developed. In order to achieve these goals, the EU's Active Inclusion Strategy should be effectively implemented in the EU Member States.
- The EU Member States should create a climate that is promoting jobs and create incentives for companies to invest in human resources and skills development in order to apply an effective lifelong learning strategy. Keeping people in their jobs is the best way to prevent poverty and social exclusion.
- A social scoreboard should be developed to measure effects that policies have or will have on the social situation in a country, with regard to the overall population, but in particular to vulnerable groups. The Social Protection

Committee uses a set of inclusion indicators, these should be further developed and systematically applied in the EU Member States.

- Civil society should be regularly taken on board in policy-making through consultations and coordinated interactions with policy-makers. In this sense, non-governmental organisations can assume the important role to mediate and to represent the most vulnerable, passing the right message on to policy-makers.
- Mental Health Europe calls on policy-makers to take leadership to protect the most vulnerable members of society by promoting social justice as well as the mental health and wellbeing of the population – a decisive factor for social cohesion in 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.

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