

## **Social Protection and Inclusion**

**By Julian Micallef**

Within the package proposed by the European Commission to modernize the single market, we also find calls for investment in social inclusion and non-discrimination, career opportunities, gender equality, mobility and integration, and in long and healthy lifestyles, among others. The stated objective for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to ensure that all EU citizens are able to access resources that improve their “life chances” – a Weberian term to explain an individual’s social situation.

In a report discussed by the Ministers responsible for employment and social affairs, in preparation for the Spring European Council, the theme of inequality and social vulnerability recurs. Despite the increase in economic growth and job creation coupled with reduced unemployment, including that considered as long-term, the figures show that part of the EU population is still at risk of poverty. For every 25 individuals working, four of these still remain at risk of poverty. The overall picture is of course worse – almost 80 million citizens, or 16% of the whole EU population, risk income poverty. Of these, women and children remain the most vulnerable.

Access to health care is also a cause for concern. According to the report, differences do not only exist between Member States but also between the various social strata - socio-economic status, place of residence, ethnicity and gender - which essentially confirms consistent trends. The more problematic aspect is that the gap between the better and worse-off is not getting narrower. Parts of the EU population within the highest placed socio-economic groups have registered a better increase in life expectancy than those in the lowest groups.

What is being done at a pan-European level? The preferred mechanism has been termed as the Open Method of Coordination, essentially an intergovernmental exercise based on guidelines and the sharing of best practices leading to integrated action among the Member States. It is being suggested that efforts should be focused on the following areas: increasing the employment rate of older workers; monitoring pension reforms and raising awareness on the risks associated with various schemes; ensuring equal opportunities for all; strengthening the educational outcome of each child; reinforcing inclusion and anti-discrimination policies particularly in favour of immigrants and ethnic minorities; combining quality job opportunities with providing the necessary services for families as part of the efforts to combat child poverty; and ensuring equal access to quality healthcare and long-term care while promoting health lifestyles.

It may indeed seem to be a tall order. However, concerted action is required to fight Europe’s social ills. Financial instruments such as PROGRESS (for employment and social solidarity) and the European Social Fund can be of a major help. After all, the Lisbon strategy is not solely an exercise in the maximization of competitiveness. It also comprises the European Union’s social agenda to make life worth living for its citizens.

For further information *Forum Malta fl-Ewropa* may be reached on telephone 2590 9101 or via email [foruminfo@gov.mt](mailto:foruminfo@gov.mt).

*Julian Micallef is Civil Society Coordinator at Forum Malta fl-Ewropa.*