

## **EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR ALL**

# **PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION AND COMBATING POVERTY THROUGH COOPERATION IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND WORK IN EU NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES**

Brussels, 2-3 December 2010

### **Introduction**

This conference will consider how enhanced cooperation in education, training and work can improve social inclusion and combat poverty.

The European Training Foundation (ETF) is an EU agency, whose mission is to help transition and developing countries to harness the potential of their human capital through the reform of education, training and labour market systems in the context of the EU's external relations policy. The ETF contributes to the interplay between EU internal policies, the implementation of its external relations policies and the experiences of EU neighbouring countries. The ETF's vision is to make vocational education and training a driver for lifelong learning and sustainable development, with a special focus on competitiveness and social cohesion.

Poverty and social exclusion persist, and are even getting worse, in many countries, whether developed, in transition or developing. Consequently, 16% of Europe's population live below the poverty line (set at 60% of a country's median income). In the EU neighbouring countries<sup>1</sup> that share reaches 50%. While social divisions vary from place to place; rural populations, women, ethnic communities, people with disabilities and unemployed young people are often among the people most at risk. Furthermore, the current global economic crisis is having a disproportionate impact on the lives of the most disadvantaged individuals and groups. Despite progress in other spheres of life, the obstacles to achieving equity and social inclusion appear formidable. However, education, training and labour market reforms have the potential to make a lasting positive impact on societies.

Combating poverty and social exclusion is a pan-European issue and among the key priorities of the European Union. The EU2020 strategy identifies three main priorities for the EU in the coming decade: *smart growth*, *sustainable growth* and *inclusive growth*. The strategy<sup>2</sup> also launches a number of flagship initiatives, among them the "European platform against poverty", aiming to ensure that the benefits of growth and jobs are widely shared and that people experiencing poverty and social exclusion can live in dignity and take an active part in society.

The Lisbon strategy was the first EU policy to emphasise the goals of sustained economic growth, more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. At the 2000 Lisbon summit, EU leaders reached an agreement to establish the Social Inclusion Process to play a decisive role in the eradication of poverty by 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> ETF partner countries: Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Egypt, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244), Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Russia, Serbia, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

<sup>2</sup> Europe 2020. A strategy for sustainable, smart and inclusive growth. Communication from the Commission. COM(2010) 2020. Brussels, 3.3.2010.

In 2008, the European Commission confirmed its commitment to social inclusion and adopted a renewed Social Agenda to underscore the importance of combating poverty and social exclusion, while emphasising the goals of active inclusion and the instruments needed to achieve them: sufficient minimum income, inclusive labour markets, and access to quality services including education<sup>3</sup>.

The EU designated 2010 as the *European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion*<sup>4</sup>. The Year aims to raise public awareness and renew the political commitment of the EU and its Member States to this agenda. It will give a voice to people who live with poverty and social exclusion, and to inspire all European citizens and other stakeholders to engage with these important issues.

As a global player with a long-term engagement to promote freedom, stability and prosperity worldwide, pursuing the international development agenda has always been a key priority for the EU. In 2010 an EU action plan is being launched to support the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and address issues of access, quality and inclusion in education. Education can provide the opportunity for millions of people to overcome poverty, lead healthy and productive lives and contribute to global stability and prosperity<sup>5</sup>.

The EU neighbouring countries have faced serious development challenges in the past two decades. They have been involved in or initiated multiple transitions: political, economic, social, and demographic. While each of these transitions is difficult and demanding in itself, the fact that they are often taking place in parallel adds further complexity and implies a competition for the countries' limited resources. Economic and political agendas often dominate the social policy issues and priorities. In addition, these countries have been badly affected by the world economic downturn, posing further threats to their development and even to their security and stability.

All this has resulted in the erosion of the social fabric and capital, the rupture or low performance of social welfare systems and traditional social safety nets, often resulting in extreme disparities and the aggravation of poverty and social exclusion. Countries need to develop policy responses, and pay attention to the social distribution of the benefits of education; training and work. In their efforts to address the challenges, EU neighbouring countries may benefit from exchanging ideas between each other, with EU Member States and internationally.

The European social model could be of particular relevance in this regard, its main characteristics being "*promotion of employment, improved living and working conditions ... proper social protection, dialogue between management and labour, the development of human resources with a view to lasting high employment and the combating of exclusion*"<sup>6</sup>. The EU2020 priorities of sustainable and inclusive growth based on knowledge and innovation also contain many elements that can help to address the challenges in ETF partner countries. Although EU experience is not directly applicable in the EU neighbouring countries, it could launch relevant national debates and be tailored to fit local contexts. The ETF's reference to EU approaches, where appropriate, facilitates mutual learning between the EU and partner countries, contributes to making the EU a reference point for the wider world and strengthens the external dimension of EU policies in human capital development.

It is in this context that the ETF, in partnership with EU institutions and international actors, is organising this conference. The purpose of the event is to enhance policy dialogue and cooperation for promoting social inclusion and combating poverty through education, training and work. The event will build upon existing experience in EU neighbouring countries, the European Union, the ETF and others on this topic to consider how education, training and employment systems can better promote social inclusion and combat poverty, and identify future avenues for cooperation. All stakeholders participating in the event will bring their knowledge, cultures, values, policy priorities and experience from their specific contexts to the discussions.

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<sup>3</sup> French Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2008, Results of the informal meeting of ministers responsible for combating poverty and social exclusion, Marseilles, 16 October 2008; Commission of the European Communities, Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a Commission Recommendation on the Active Inclusion of People Excluded from the Labour Market, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Article 11 of Decision No 1098/2008/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2008 on the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010).

<sup>5</sup> More and Better Education in Developing Countries. Commission Staff Working Document. SEC(2010)121 final. Brussels, 4.2.2010.

<sup>6</sup> Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (EEC)

Particular attention will be given to the strategic value of young people, as both a key challenge and opportunity for progress towards equity and social inclusion. Youth exclusion is highly gendered; in some countries female participation in education lags behind, in some girls and young women do not have access to the same quality of education or are not able to make free educational choices (type of education, subject of education), in some others boys' dropout rates are relatively higher, and in all of them, women's labour force participation lags behind that of men.

This strategic focus links to both the EU Youth in Action programme and the United Nations International Year of Youth. The Youth in Action programme aims to inspire a sense of active citizenship, solidarity and tolerance and to involve youth in shaping the future. It promotes mobility within and beyond the EU's borders, non-formal learning and intercultural dialogue, and encourages the inclusion of all young people, regardless of their educational, social and cultural background.

## Conference objectives

1. To enhance policy dialogue and cooperation on social inclusion and combating poverty through education, training and work in ETF partner countries
2. To create a platform to share innovative programmes and actions for promoting social inclusion and combating poverty through education, training and work with particular focus on youth and gender equity

## Expected outcomes

1. Enhanced awareness of the issues, challenges and policy approaches at all levels for promoting social inclusion and combating poverty
2. Innovative policies, programmes and actions of ETF partner countries, EU and beyond, shared to support mutual learning

## Conference design and methods

The ETF facilitates policy and practice learning platforms – within and across its partner countries and among these countries and the EU institutions – to reflect on the causes of social exclusion. As a major input for the debate in these learning platforms, the ETF encourages policy discussions, exchange of opinions and examples of practice from the countries themselves. Exposure to the experience of neighbouring and other EU countries is expected to trigger the policy learning process. Cross-national comparisons can serve as starting points for policy makers to better understand the situation and problems in their own countries, as well as to seek eventual solutions by observing similarities and differences across national and cultural settings. By providing opportunities for sharing, communication, reflection and assessment of this knowledge within a community of peers, the role of the ETF, shared by the EU and other international partners, is to facilitate the knowledge exchange process.

The conference will consist of plenary discussions (with keynote speakers) and thematic workshops on youth employment, the gender dimension and partnerships for social inclusion. The conference will also make use of web-based interactive tools for communication in order to involve, virtually, more participants in the debates.

**Interpretation:** EN, FR and RU