PRESS RELEASE

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European Semester’s Country Specific Recommendations

More caution needed when reforming social protection systems to address loss in healthy life expectancy

The recently published Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) and Ageing Report 2015 are extensive and interesting publications which provide a wealth of information, statistics and data on national economic, fiscal and social challenges that the European Commission uses to draft recommendations to EU Member States. However, a key indicator is missing in both documents: the Healthy Life Years indicator (HLY), which measures the number of years that a person at birth is still expected to live in a healthy condition. While we live longer, we live longer in poor health and the situation is deteriorating.

“No one seems to have noticed that the healthy life year expectancy has decreased from 62,6 years in 2010 to 61,5 years in 2013 (EU average) with some countries losing even more than 2 years of healthy life expectancy”, said Anne-Sophie Parent, Secretary General of AGE Platform Europe.

Yet, in the CSR 2015 the European Commission calls on EU Member States to “accelerate the benefits of structural reforms”, i.e. pursue their efforts to extend working lives, reform their pension and healthcare systems in order to limit the impact of ageing on public budget and boost economic growth.

Structural reforms should not result in poorer health

While we understand the need to reform social protection systems to make them more efficient and sustainable in the context of demographic ageing, we are concerned that the reforms introduced so far have resulted in such a significant decrease of the average healthy life expectancy in only 3 years of austerity measures, and we fear the impact this will have on workers’ ability to work for longer and on Europe’s productivity and growth in the future.

This, in our view, is the direct consequence of the crisis and cuts in essential social protection provisions caused by the focus put on cost savings and reducing public deficits.

“Is it socially feasible to expect people to stay at work for longer and be more productive if at the same time their healthy life expectancy is decreasing and is already several years below the official retirement age?”, added Ms. Parent.

Longer and healthier lives: an obligation derived from fundamental rights

The European Commission should ensure that Member States pay due attention to ensuring that national reforms respect and protect the fundamental rights of all citizens. The Charter of Fundamental Rights includes a number of social rights, such as respect for work and family life, and access to social protection and health care. Social rights are not luxury items that policy makers can afford to promote in times of prosperity. They form both the baseline and prerequisite for equal participation in society and are essential to keep everyone healthy and fit to work, contribute, consume and live independently. The Charter of Fundamental Rights should be clearly reflected in the European Semester process, clarifying the EU’s commitment to ensure that Member States respect all fundamental including social rights when pursuing economic reforms.

Therefore, AGE Platform Europe calls on the European Commission to re-orientate the European Semester and use it as an additional way to apply all solidarity and equality provisions of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Economic and social objectives are indistinctly linked and should support each other. Equality relates to the challenge of demographic ageing because material and social conditions need to be equally available across the life course to equalise the participation of all EU citizens, regardless of age. These include adequate financial resources for ex. through the Investment Plan for Europe, to ensure inclusive labour market, quality and universal health and long-term care, access to housing and the promotion of independent living. Hence, the promotion of social rights mirrors EU’s respect for equality.

“There is an urgent need to make sure that Europe 2020 together with the European Semester underpin EU social and equality provisions, by ensuring that the CSR clearly state that national governments must consider social, economic and environmental objectives on an equal footing”, concluded Anne-Sophie Parent.

Useful links

• AGE work on the European Semester: http://www.age-platform.eu/age-work/age-policy-work/european-semester
Note to the editor

About AGE Platform Europe
AGE Platform Europe is a European network of organisations of seniors and representing over 40 million older people in Europe. AGE aims to voice and promote the interests of the 190 million citizens aged 50+ in the European Union and to raise awareness of the issues that concern them most.

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