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Presentation made for the SOLIDAR/ISS training academy :

Ways of promoting social services

Frankfurt, November 3, 2014

1. INTRODUCTION

Promoting social services requires a two-sided approach :

- On the one hand, we need to promote individual social services, which requires ever more effective strategies, including in terms of communication, such as the “unique selling proposition” approach;
- On the other hand, we need to avoid “aligning” social service providers to the traditional individualist approach of commercial service providers, and this requires, among others, a strong and continuous involvement in networks allowing to join forces, making use of the rich diversity of individual services and including them in a broader strategy.

We should never forget indeed that non-profit social services are accountable for their contribution to a more cohesive social model not only in terms of service provision, but also in terms of advocacy and how they voice the concerns of their beneficiaries/clients.

2. SOME KEY FACTS AND FIGURES ABOUT EUROPE AND SOCIAL SERVICES

2.1 THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU)

When addressing issues at EU level, we need to have a clear view on its specific institutional environment, which supposes some insight into the Treaties.

Among their main provisions, let us here insist on some of them:

- In the preamble to the Treaties, one of the provisions sets the objective of “an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe”. If we translate this in terms of social cohesion or in terms of convergence, we can distinguish two periods :
 - During the first 50 years elapsed since the signature of the Treaty of Rome (1957), the European Community succeeded in fostering convergence among its Member States as well as among its Regions.
 - Since then, divergence instead was the rule, not only among Member States and Regions, but also among citizens. In spite of the “EU 2020” strategy’s ambition to lift 20 million people out of poverty between 2010 and 2020, this number as increased instead by 6 to 7 million between 2010 and 2012...
- Fundamental rights are a cornerstone of the European Union, and this is even more obvious since the Treaty of Lisbon which fully enforced the Charter of Fundamental Rights.
- Social policy belongs to a much larger extent to the competence of Member States than to the European Union’s. A major challenge therefore concerns the interaction between economic and social policies.

- The Treaties also include and institutional architecture which is not entirely comparable to the standard national democratic architecture: although there is a Parliament, its competences are not as large as it is the case in the Member States. The Commission also has an important role in the legislative procedure, as it almost has an almost exclusive right of initiative. On the other hand, the European Council also has some legislative competences.

Next to the Treaties, we should also mention secondary law, which is implementing them.

But apart from primary and secondary legislation, an important role is also played by strategies, policies and programs, and eventually projects.

Strategies are composed of a broad set of policy measures. Among the most important ones is the EU 2020 strategy mentioned above, which aims at achieving a “smart, inclusive and sustainable growth”. Other less comprehensive strategies which are of importance for social services are Active inclusion¹ and Social Investment².

An important paradox I think important to mention can be found in the contrast between the “cost” of the European Union and its impact. Most people are not aware that the total budget of the European Union is hardly 1 % of the consolidated Gross Income of its Member States - and 2/3 of this amount goes back to them through the structural funds and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) ! On the other hand, EU is sometimes said to have an influence on up to 80 % of national legislation and policies – if such a thing can be quantified. This shows how important it is to raise awareness on European issues.

Finally, I would like to highlight a phenomenon which is likely to explain this poor level of awareness, as well as the lack of trust and confidence towards Europe : as is often the rule, wider organisations are very easily used as scapegoats for national politicians for excusing their own shortfalls, which is odd when we know that they also participate to the elaboration of EU policies...

2.2 SOCIAL SERVICES IN THE EU

“Social services” are not clearly defined at EU level, but are referred to in many documents, in particular as “social (and health) services of general interest”³. Among their main characteristics, we should mention their person-centeredness and their relation to fundamental rights, which they are supposed to implement. In many respects, they can also be considered as investments because of their contribution to what is sometimes called “human capital”.

Most social services are being provided by social economy enterprises, in particular by non-profit organisations (NPO’s) which account to up to 80 % of social economy enterprises.

Social enterprises are often defined through a set of principles they are supposed to abide to. However, their main feature, which is too often overlooked, lies in the fact that they are not THEMSELVES on the market – in other terms, they cannot be sold or bought. This is a consequence of their double specific feature :

- Their “members” are natural persons (with the possible exception of foundations), which qualifies them as “stakeholders-based”;
- They are normally subjected to a full or incomplete “asset lock” constraint, i.e. their assets may not (or not fully) benefit their members (“non-distribution constraint”). Such a constraint is fully binding for NPO’s.

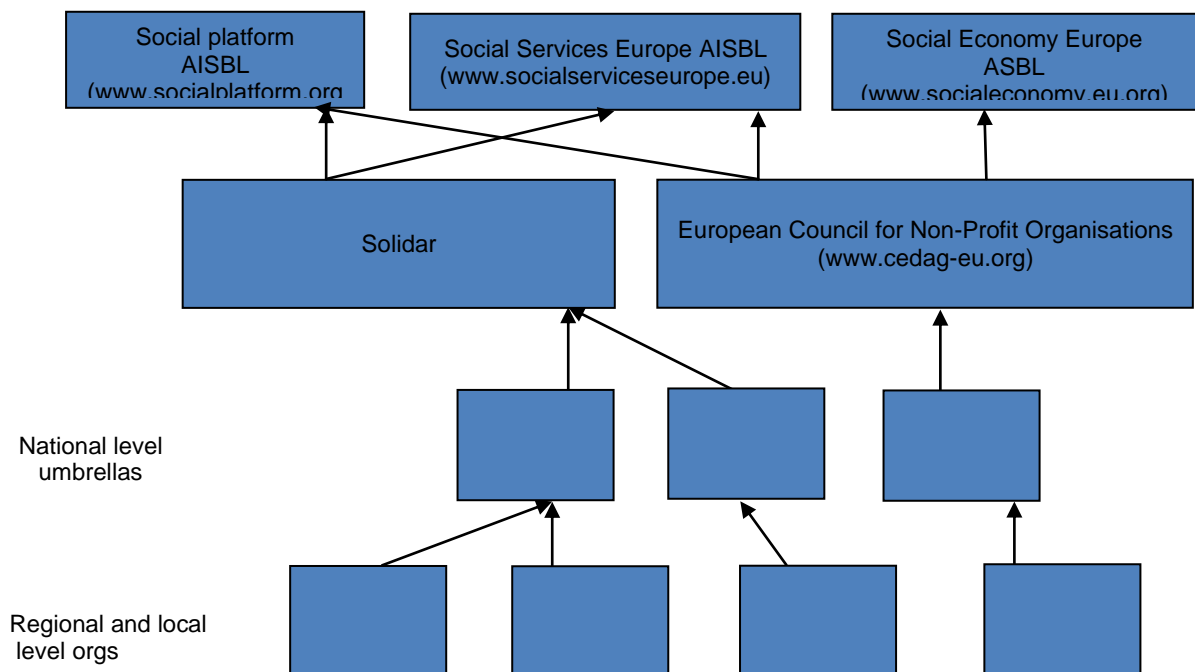
As already mentioned, non-profit social services may only be effectively promoted if they succeed in networking with likewise organisations at local, regional, national and European level – which is sometimes referred to as “multi-level governance”.

¹ Commission recommendation of 3 October 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market (C(2008)5737) – cfr. http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/;ELX_SESSIONID=5LdvJchGjHcBJ4QhnpJ4JTjqfLp82nPDBv98Gdg1hkzcx1W5TsQd!1614968761?uri=CELEX:32008H0867

² Cfr. <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1044>

³ COM(2007) 725 final of 20/11/2007 – cfr. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2007:0725:FIN:EN:PDF>

As regards social services, this structuration at EU level may be represented as follows, taking the examples of Solidar and CEDAG:



- Social Platform is Europe's largest network representing social NGO's. Its members are European-wide organisations representing users' groups as well as service providers ;
- Social Services Europe is mainly composed of members of Social Platform who define themselves as "Service providers", and needed a specific space to exchange more deeply on particular issues ;
- Social Economy Europe is the umbrella representing "historical" social economy organisations in Europe (Co-operatives, associations, mutualities, foundations).

3. HOW CAN WE PROMOTE SOCIAL SERVICES IN EUROPE ?

There are various ways to promote social services in Europe :

- The first one is, as already mentioned, at micro level. This requires not only better communication strategies, but also more involvement in "evidence-based" assessment methodologies ;
- The second one consists in more and better involvement of grass-roots organisations in networks and umbrellas able to advocate more efficiently for the common interest of their members and their beneficiaries/clients ;
- The last one consists in raising a more critical profile in view of the "Social business initiative", which has an extremely dangerous "hidden agenda", i.e. the dilution of social economy enterprises, with their strong values and standards, into a larger whole where social responsibility is "voluntary" rather than compulsory.

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