



**Bureau contribution to the European Commission
first-stage consultation on reconciliation of
professional, private and family life**

December 2006

Introduction

When reflecting on how best to respond to Europe's demographic challenges, policy makers need always to keep in mind that for the first time in centuries, young Europeans are starting their lives with fewer opportunities than their parents had when they were young. Unfortunately, despite this new reality possibly having severe consequences for the future of Europe, the will of policy makers is grounded rather in the current demographic context, which makes the European Social Model financially unsustainable.

The primary reason why comprehensive reforms are needed, is, in the view of the European Youth Forum (YFJ), to ensure that the young and the future generations of Europeans have access to at least the same rights and benefits as their parents enjoyed. The demographic challenges facing Europe today are therefore, above all, a question of sustainable development. For this reason, the Sustainable Development Strategy of the European Union needs to be given the means to allow the long term improvement of Europeans' living conditions.

The European Youth Forum also acknowledges the role of the Lisbon strategy, aside from the Sustainable Development Strategy, in helping EU Member States to make optimum use of the "window of opportunity" open to them over the next decade, to design and implement adequate reforms ensuring the financial viability of European demographic change. Policy makers' willingness to design a new intergenerational Pact is also welcome, provided that this Pact is the fruit of a genuine dialogue with civil society. As such, the representatives of younger and older people should be given the adequate space to participate in and contribute to the debate on pension reform in Europe.

Since the publication of the European Commission Green Paper on confronting demographic change in March 2005¹, the YFJ has been actively engaged in the debate on demographic change in Europe, and has adopted a position paper on the Green Paper² and begun a dialogue with other European NGOs such as AGE-The Older People's platform and the European Women's Lobby (EWL). Through this paper, the European Youth Forum wishes to pursue its commitment to the demographic change debate.

As the representative body of youth organisations and young people in Europe, the European Youth Forum wishes to bring its full contribution to the Commission consultation on the reconciliation of professional, private and family life.

¹ Green Paper on "confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations", COM (2005) 94, 16.3.2005

² "Embracing the future", European Youth Forum Bureau position paper on the Green Paper on Demographic change

1. Youth autonomy as a precondition for reconciliation policies

Reconciling work, private and family life has been rightly identified by the European Commission as a decisive condition to promote a “demographic renewal in Europe”³. No demographic renewal will, however, be possible if young people continue to be the victims of discrimination and to be subject to precarious employment, which can lead to their social exclusion for an extended period.

The situation of young people in the labour market and, more generally, within European societies, needs urgently to be addressed by European policy makers, as it is a precondition for the success of any policies aimed at achieving the hoped for reconciliation. The first step to reconcile work, private and family life is indeed to increase youth participation into decent employment and offer all young people a significant level of autonomy in their lives.

To that end, the European Youth Forum urges the European Commission to mobilise the existing instruments at their disposal that could help achieve greater youth autonomy. Since the adoption of the White Paper “a new impetus for the European youth” in 2001, almost no action has been undertaken by the European Commission to implement its chapter on Youth Autonomy. The European Youth Forum therefore urges the European Commission to ensure a proper follow-up to the Youth Autonomy chapter of the White Paper on Youth.

In addition, any work on youth autonomy should be developed in close connection with the work of the European Union and its Member States to implement the European Youth Pact. The European Youth Pact should however not be the only instrument mobilised to improve youth autonomy, as the issue goes beyond access to employment, greater levels of social inclusion and the reconciliation of work, family and private life. Youth autonomy will only be possible if European policy makers provide young people with better access to housing, transport and infrastructure. In order to make progress towards greater youth autonomy, the European Youth Forum believes that the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion should also be mobilised.

In addition, local and regional authorities should be given the means to develop actions tailored to the needs of young people. The European Social Fund is a crucial financial instrument of the European Union, in order to keep a coherent approach at the European level, while adapting the policy responses to the needs of young people at the local level. The European Youth Forum therefore urges the European Commission and the European Union Member States to invest more of the funds available through the European Social Fund to finance projects aimed at increasing youth autonomy in Europe. In addition, youth organisations should always be

³ See the Commission communication “the demographic future of Europe - from challenge to opportunity”, October 12th 2006.

considered as relevant partners in the implementation of projects, if such projects are to have an impact on young people's lives.

2. For the generalization of reconciliation policies

“Reconciliation policies can be defined as policies that directly support the combination of professional, family and private life”⁴, and over the last two decades, a great variety of mechanisms have been set up to allow for greater combination. Developing childcare services along the Barcelona objectives⁵, encouraging the use of maternity and parental leave, considering flexible working arrangements and enacting financial allowances are amongst the mechanisms used to promote the combination of work and family life. Reconciliation policies mainly target younger workers, who in today's context, often need to choose between building a professional career and having children.

The double aim of reconciliation policies is to maximize the participation of Europeans, including women, in the labour market, while offering the services, work arrangements and rights which will allow Europeans to have the number of children that they wish to. In the context of ageing societies, the underlying aim of reconciliation policies is therefore to preserve the productivity of Europeans and make sure that focusing on present productivity will not threaten Europe's demographic future. In that sense, companies are the first beneficiaries of reconciliation policies.

But reconciliation policies also aim at conferring greater possibility to individuals to choose when to have a child, without being penalized for making that choice. In today's conditions, this objective is not fully accomplished. For example, even though facilities were agreed to allow parents to take leave of their jobs for a fixed period of time, in 2006, such facilities are still not being used by young fathers. These opportunities are not being utilised, firstly because paternity leaves are not easily compatible with the European cultural model of the male breadwinner, but also because young fathers know that it would hamper their professional development. Similarly, although it often remains implicit in the world of work, many women continue to be downgraded following their return to employment after maternity leave.

This distortion between existing legislation which confers rights to Europeans and the reality on the ground - where many structural obstacles still prevent a greater use of reconciliation mechanisms - is not acceptable. In the following section, the European Youth Forum will make a series of recommendations that would permit the establishment of a culture of “reconciliation” between work, private and family life in Europe.

⁴ See the report of the EU Expert Group on Gender, Social Inclusion and Employment “Reconciliation of work and private life: A comparative review of thirty European countries” - September 2005

⁵ By 2010, EU Member States committed to provide childcare to at least 90% of children between three years old and mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.

3. *The European Union, its Member States and its Social Partners, need to engage in action to build a “culture of reconciliation” in Europe*

The European Youth Forum urges Social Partners at all levels to continue and deepen their work on reconciling work, private and family life and for this reason welcomes the Framework of Actions on gender equality agreed upon by UNICE, UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC in 2005. The priority of social partners should be to make sure that the use of reconciliation mechanisms is a free choice for the employee without the interference of any external constraints, whether implicit or explicit, from his/her employer. In addition, sanctions should be foreseen in the case of employers not respecting the right of their employees to make use of reconciliation mechanisms. The European Youth Forum also believes that it is the responsibility of the social partners to envisage innovative ways to use new technologies and envisage new forms of work, which can facilitate the reconciliation of work, private and family life.

Further action from the European Union may be needed in order, notably, to agree on a common framework for Member States to organise reconciliation services and mechanisms. Tools could also be developed to allow the systematic and regular exchange of good practice between Member States when it comes to the design and implementation of reconciliation policies. In 2007, the development through EU-SILC⁶ of comparable data for the 25 EU Member States should be used as an indicator of the need for further action by the European Union in the area of reconciliation policies.

As reconciliation policies have an important cost, the European Youth Forum invites the European Union and its Member States to work more specifically on the financing of reconciliation policies. Such policies serve the general interest, so the role of public authorities should go beyond demonstrating the benefits of reconciliation policies to employers: public authorities at all levels should assume their full responsibilities and foresee adequate funding in their budgets to build infrastructure. Information campaigns on reconciliation should also be developed in close collaboration with the social partners and civil society organisations; such information campaigns should encourage individuals to reconsider their inherited gender roles and understand why caring responsibilities need to be shared equally between women and men.

Lastly, the universality and affordability of reconciliation services should be ensured so that all Europeans can access them, irrespective of their own social status. It is particularly important for young people who often face limited financial capacity or are even financially dependent.

⁶ Survey on Income and Living Conditions

Conclusion

Reconciling work, private and family life goes hand in hand with the cultural evolution of Europe. In recent decades, women's emancipation, the changing patterns of families, and an ageing population, have had important consequences on the daily lives of Europeans. Reconciliation policies are helping to adapt working conditions and public services to the new parameters of our societies, considering also the evolution of the role and composition of Europe's families. Such adaptation is an important progression for our societies, however, the process that will lead to the combination of one's work, private and family life needs time and an open democratic debate on what is the best way to achieve "reconciliation".