
Sharing opportunities for churches and diaconia to shape the Europe 2020 strategy and its social objectives –

A focus on Country Specific Recommendations

**Europe 2020 Seminar
Report**

10-11 April 2013

On Wednesday, 10 April, the conference started with an opening prayer and a round of introduction, followed by the first session where the **Secretary-General of Eurodiaconia, Heather Roy**, gave an overview on the Europe 2020 strategy and the structure of the European Semester. She outlined the current context of the economic crisis that has increasingly challenged especially low-income households and people experiencing or at risk of poverty. Finally, she gave a brief introduction to the Social Investment Package published by the European Commission in February this year and how it relates to the work of member organisations of Eurodiaconia and the Church & Society Commission of CEC. During questions from the floor the issue of solidarity and participation was mentioned by several participants. It was also remarked that decisions taken at EU level do not necessarily reflect the tone that is used in national governments, which is why Country Specific Recommendations are not taken seriously in all member states.

During the second session **Ms Verónica Lope Fontagné, MEP and Member of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs**, joined the seminar to speak about how significant stakeholder involvement is in the European Semester process. She underlined that the European Parliament is demanding a stronger role and participation of the national parliaments and the European Parliament as well as of civil society and social actors in shaping the Country Specific Recommendations and in deciding on the content of the European Semester. She emphasized that most of the states do not reach the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy. Reflecting the experiences of the EP and her personal role as rapporteur on the European Semester 2013 she criticized the very tense timetable of the European Semester. Regarding this timetable and the drive of its process she diagnosed a clear lack of transparency and legitimacy. She also supported the demand to protect the national social budgets against austerity measures in this time of crisis.

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In the last session of the day, **Egbert Holthuis, European Commission, Head of Unit for Social Policies, Innovation and Governance, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion**, presented the differentiated functioning of the work of the European Union and the European Commission on social policy. It has still to be kept in mind that the EU has no competence in many areas of social policy, but it can stimulate new approaches on different ways: through the European Semester and the Country Specific Recommendations, but also through the Open Method of Coordination, which is a tool for exchange on best practice between the member states, especially in the area of social inclusion policy. And the cooperation with other international organisations like OECD and World Bank should not be forgotten. In this time of a deep and severe crisis it should be discussed if the principle of universality of services has to be secured or if priorities have to be established, which also includes that some services are less important than others. Holthuis underlined the importance of the new approach of the Social Investment Package which describes the positive contribution of social policy and social services to economy, growth and jobs in Europe. In the discussion he explained that Country Specific Recommendations will not be renewed every year, because their implementation takes time. For the dialogue with civil society and social actors he highlighted the necessity of figures and data if proposals are made to the Commission.

In the morning of Thursday, the 11 April, the participants heard three presentations how church and diaconal organisations are involved in the European Semester. **Jean Fontanieu, Federation de l'Entraide Protestante, France**, concluded that the reality in France is far away from the discussions on the European level. An implementation of the CSRs does not take place. The preoccupation is the deficit in the national budget. The Federation advocates to stop the decrease of financing social policy and to increase prevention. It promotes that vulnerable persons should not be the victims of the crisis. To suffer from the crisis is not a fatality. It tries to campaign for brotherhood as a basis for social cohesion. The Federation is especially involved in action for young people, intergenerational solidarity and migration. **Martin Schenk, Diakonie Austria**, described the disappointment with the involvement of stakeholders in Austria. The hearing with NGOs seems to be without any result and follow up. More effective is the national platform against poverty of the ministry for social affairs. There the Diakonie has possibilities to advocate and to present new projects and ideas towards the government and the society. One example is the "alternative budget" which underlines the real needs of a household. **Stephanie Scholz and Katharina Wegner, Diakonie Deutschland**, reported a different situation. Since the first European Semester the Diakonie Deutschland is advocating for its involvement and comments critically on the National Reform Programme that Germany is presenting in Brussels. They estimate the European Semester as a welcome tool to raise the voice on the national and European level. In the following discussion it becomes evident that the involvement differs from member state to member state. In **Finland** the church is part of the complex process of the European Semester. A member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is an official member of an expert group on social affairs dealing with the European Semester. In **Scotland** the situation is very different and involvement in the process is difficult.

During the last two sessions the participants analysed the CSRs of 2012 and established and discussed own alternative recommendations which they would like to be included in the CSRs 2013. The participants agreed to hand over these alternative CSRs in an appropriate manner by CSC and Eurodiaconia to the European Commission and to follow up this process in the future. More churches and more diaconal organisations should be gained to work on the European Semester which is binding together national and European level in the field of social policy.