

Part one

Abstracts from the International Council on Social Welfare–European Region and Vilnius University Conference “Equal Opportunities for Individuals, Groups and Nations”, 14th–16th June 2007. Vilnius University, Lithuania

Pirma dalis

Tarptautinės socialinės gerovės tarybos Europos regiono ir Vilniaus universiteto konferencijos „Lygios galimybės asmenims, grupėms ir tautoms“, vykusios 2007 m. birželio 14–16 dienomis Vilniaus universitete, pranešimų santraukos

Thea Meinema (ICSW-European Region), Romas Lazutka (Vilnius University)

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS AND NATIONS

ICSW's basic mission is to promote forms of social and economic development, which aim to reduce poverty, hardship and vulnerability throughout the world, especially amongst disadvantaged people. It strives for recognition and protection of fundamental rights to food, shelter, education, health care and security. It believes that these rights are an essential foundation for freedom, justice and peace. It seeks also to advance equality of opportunities, freedom of self-expression and access to human services.

The European region of ICSW contributes to the European debate on social welfare, justice and equality and seeks to promote social welfare and active civil society participation. The European Commission proposes 2007 as the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All. This initiative is completely in line with the ICSW objectives of social justice and social equality.

ICSW-European Region and Vilnius University, reacting to the EU initiative, have organized an international conference in 2007. The conference targeted the priorities of a just society that is based on solidarity. As a new member of the European Union, Lithuania adds to the variety of Europe. The goal of the conference was to increase mutual understanding in the continent by sharing the experiences of countries with diverse histories and cultures.

The policy of equal opportunities is not limited to abolition of discrimination. It also means supporting everyone's equal and full participation. Laws alone cannot grant equal opportunities, while adequate economic and social conditions are missing, and when people lack support of the community. The conference covered a wide range of topics: from gender equality to migration, from solidarity of the society to the roles of NGOs, within three major strands: equal opportunities for individuals, for groups and for nations. These three strands were further explored in plenary sessions and in workshop sessions during the conference.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIVIDUALS

The European Year of Equal Opportunities for all will focus on four main priority objectives: Rights, Recognition, Representation and Respect. How do these objectives relate to the individuals involved? How do they become informed of their rights and responsibilities? Civil society can play an important role as an intermediary between individuals and governments, assessing policies and developments on their consequences at the level where it has most impact, individual human beings. NGOs are important both as self-help organizations, as advocates and as service providers.

Although the question of gender equality is not new in Europe, the employment of women, their salaries, and their participation in politics still lag, compared to those of men. Besides, the unpaid work in families falls mostly to women. During the time of transformation, women were more flexible and more active in the new EU countries and other post-communist countries. Women had and still have huge economic responsibility, while also caring for their families. There is a huge contradiction between emancipation of women in economic life and the inequality in the family in these countries. The combination of work and family life should be a shared responsibility of men and women.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROUPS

Migrants often have more difficulties in integrating in a new society because of cultural and educational differences. At the same time, most European countries have a need to increase their labour force by immigration. In the enlarged EU new problems of migration emerge. In hopes for better-paid jobs, one of the spouses, and sometimes both parents leave their countries, leaving their children for the long-term care of grandparents or neighbors. Some new member countries lose a large part of their labour force to this brain drain.

Migrants and other ethnic minorities are more vulnerable and are more at risk of social exclusion. The clash of cultures and religions creates tensions in many immigrant countries with a predominantly Western value base. Integration policies and conflict resolution programmes need to be implemented at the local level to assist host communities in adapting to their changing population.

Local communities also suffer a loss when active people leave, be it for purposes of migration to another country or to move from rural to urban area within a country. Yet it seems that the stronger communities get support of the European Structural funds – a cause for worry in the new EU countries. How the possibilities of the weak communities can be increased?

People with disabilities, with low education, ex-prisoners, drug addicts, single-parent families and some other groups still suffer from insufficient possibilities to participate in economic, cultural, and social activities. What kind of social work models can be effective in those cases? Are there any examples of good practice that communities could share on the European level? What is possible role of civil society organizations in supporting communities and groups at risk and defending them from exclusion in getting equal opportunities?

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR NATIONS

It seems that within European Union the members have different pace of development and varying opportunities for it. Besides, considerable differences can be observed between the EU members' and other countries in Europe. What exactly we define as the sustainability and export capacity of the European Social Model? Should it become a global social model?

Large social groups outside the EU, as well as inside some of the new EU members, suffer from lack of solidarity in societies. The Czech Republic and Slovenia have low poverty levels and demonstrate forms of social cohesion. Meanwhile, some older EU members in southern Europe (Portugal, Greece, Italy) are characterized by high inequality and high levels of poverty. The Baltic States, although developing well economically, do not choose to invest much in social welfare. Why such different attitudes toward social welfare exist? Are the differences in poverty and inequality outcomes of conscious choices made by states?

How can countries create opportunities for learning from each other – both within the EU, the Council of Europe and at the global level? There is a need for increased learning opportunities, as well as in the cooperation between countries in the northern and southern hemisphere. Good and unsuccessful practices need to be shared while open-minded and honest discussion will assist the learning process.