

EU policy on social services of general interest (SSGI): Towards a "voluntary quality framework for social services"?

EPSU background paper - October 2010

(1) Introduction

1. The European Commission in its Communication on the 2010 report on social protection and social inclusion recognizes the importance of social services and notes, "Not all Member States have the financial means to meet rising demand and some have large gaps in their safety nets. Narrowing these gaps is now a priority."
2. However, are the gaps narrowing? Social services are confronted today with a double challenge: the worst crisis since the 1930s and the ongoing policy emphasis on the Internal Market by the European institutions. The public sector has become the main target to compensate for the budget deficits generated by the financial bail-outs for defaulting banks. Priority is given to budget consolidation through reductions in public spending rather than through tax collection. The result is a lack of services that seriously jeopardizes social justice and social inclusion. This runs counter to the European Commission's stated aim of "narrowing these gaps."
3. As noted in the latest report from the European Commission on taxation trends: "Similarly to the trend recorded for the PIT (personal income tax), since the second half of the 1990s, corporate income tax (CIT) rates in Europe have been cut forcefully, from a 35.3% average in 1995 to 23.2% now. Unlike the case of the PIT, this trend has not been interrupted by the financial crisis, on the contrary a few Member States introduced further cuts in 2010 (the Czech Republic, Greece, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia) and none increased them."

4. In effect, EU policy on social services, and public services in general, has been driven by two issues: first, Internal Market questions about the application – or not – of competition policy to public service providers; and second, financial concerns about levels of public spending. These have overshadowed questions about how to develop high quality services to the benefit of all citizens.

5. The EPSU position paper on ‘social services of general interest’ (SSGI) drawn up in response to the 2006 Communication from the European Commission reiterates our support for the development of high quality social services throughout Europe, available to all on the basis of need and collectively organized and financed. We emphasise that social services are public services and that they ensure the development of a cohesive and fair society.

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