



HIGH LEVEL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

“SOCIAL ECONOMY – FOR ECONOMICALLY SUSTAINABLE AND SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE EU”

16- 17 April 2018, Sofia

Boyana Residence, Triaditsa Hall, Boyana Quarter, Vitosha Lale 16 Str

Concept Note

Policy context

In recent years, the social economy has evolved, and it now marks a development with the potential to actively change socio-economic relations and create the preconditions for their better consolidation. The social economy is a key element of the European social model and has its core principles - solidarity, social justice, social cohesion, equal access to employment. It is based on a socio-economic paradigm that places people and their needs first and foremost.

In one of the important strategy papers “Europe 2020”, inclusive growth is based on social cohesion and welfare by reducing inequalities and polarization. It is here that the social economy has an essential role because it is able to make social cohesion a factor of competitiveness. Today, the social economy is an integral part of the debate on making important political decisions at European level - the debate on the future of Europe¹, the debate on future European investments in people, and the debate on the social dimension of Europe in the spirit of the Gothenburg European pillar of social rights.

Today, more than ever, United Europe needs levers for change, opportunities to empower citizens to create strong societies. The social economy can respond to these challenges. It is able to contribute actively to the wealth and balance of society, to bring an entrepreneurial element that leads to lasting and stable growth - economic and social.

¹White Paper on the Future of Europe, Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025, European Commission, 1 March 2017

Objective

The object of the conference is to encourage the exchange of views on the challenges and opportunities for the future of the social economy in the context of the digital revolution and inclusive growth. The discussions will focus on improving the understanding of the role of the social economy in addressing some of the major challenges that Europe is facing, e.g. creating sustainable and decent jobs, improving social justice for all and reducing inequalities. In order to achieve these goals, European Union and candidate countries politicians, representatives of international organizations, social partners and civil society organizations will gather to discuss how the social economy can better respond to and contribute to the needs of inclusive economic growth.

Challenges and political choices

A number of challenges of contemporary development are related to the aging population in Europe, the creation of sustainable and competitive jobs in the context of new technologies, decent and fair labor in the context of globalization. The changing demands of the labor market challenge the adaptability, knowledge and skills of workers, and the opportunity to reconcile work and private life. At the same time, investing in early childhood development, integrating vulnerable groups into the labor market, social inclusion of people with disabilities, and creating better educational opportunities for young people must be based on responsible public funding.

These challenges put pressure on public policies, on the functioning and financial stability of social systems, on education and health, on employment patterns, social services, pay and incomes. These developments are both challenges because they create new needs that need to be met, and also a source of new jobs and the opportunity to create new public arrangements on the basis of reciprocity and hybrid forms of the relationship between the state and the market.

Today, almost a third of the population aged over 65 lives alone, and up to two-thirds of people over the age of 75 are dependent on informal care provided primarily by the family. One in six of the elderly lives in poverty, with older women especially at risk of receiving low pensions as a result of incomplete careers. By the end of 2016, the youth unemployment rate is 18% in the EU and 20% in the Euro area.

Challenges in the economy and the social sphere affect the standard of living and well-being of Europeans. For a sustainable unified market there must be good economic results combined with good social living conditions. One of the driving forces behind this is the social economy. But to fulfill its role and its purpose, it must

be developed and encouraged. It can only prosper and realize its full potential if it has the opportunity to take advantage of adequate political, legislative and operational instruments and conditions for support. This requires the social economy to be a part of the relevant policies and programs at all levels - European, national and local. One of the challenges of promoting the social economy lies in recognizing and acknowledging its importance, not only in terms of strengthening social cohesion and limiting territorial imbalances, but also in developing economic competitiveness. In this sense, social enterprises contribute and are part of the economic development strategies of many European regions, which is also in line with the guidelines of the European Commission in the field of social economy and the development of entrepreneurial activities.

Questions for the discussions for each Panel:

Panel 1: Social economy ecosystem

Today's societies face challenges, but also opportunities, which determine the different ecosystem for the development of the social economy. The processes take place in different environments, political frameworks and actors, thus defining a stable or less credible environment for the development of the social economy.

- How the social economy is becoming sustainable and which are the favorable conditions for a strong social economy in the European Union?
- The focus of the panel will be on: impact investing, financial tools, favorable conditions for a strong social economy.

Panel 2: Pillars of social rights and social economy

Today, more than ever, the citizens of a united Europe rely on effective rights and a better quality of life. The social economy sector in Europe contributes to better access to Labour market, fair employment and working conditions and new quality jobs – the three main themes of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

- How we can foster disadvantaged groups to be better integrated in society and at the Labour market, what is the role of different actors in the social economy and how we can reach better empowerment in social economy?
- The focus of the panel will be on: social inclusion, silver economy, role of women in social economy.

Ministerial round table

The main objective of the ministerial round table is to promote partnerships at all levels on the basis of an integrated approach and co-operation.

- How we can foster more political unified Europe on the basis of social economy.
- Can the social economy contribute to the convergence of social protection systems and socio-political solutions at European level?
- Can a single strong social economy sector at European level be possible and how Member States would contribute to this?
- What is needed in order to have stronger social economy sector?

Letter of intent on stronger partnership in the field of social economy and social entrepreneurship discussion

The purpose of the letter of intent is to give the conference participants the opportunity to express their willingness to join the letter's message and to support a stronger partnership in the field of social economy and social entrepreneurship. It is not binding, and the joining of the messages in it is on a voluntary basis.

Panel 3: The future of social economy

Identifying and predicting "accurate" skills in a rapidly changing economic and social environment is a challenge that could be overcome through social entrepreneurship and the social economy.

- What are the new challenges for social economy?
- The focus of the panel will be on: digital economy and social innovation; the future of work and social economy.

Panel 4: "Scale me up" - the change of scale of social economy

Conditions for development of social economy – social dialog, partnerships, science approach in social economy.

- What are the new places for social economy and how they contribute to better recognition and scale of social economy?
- The focus will be on clusters, third places, public procurements, science in social economy.

Panel 5 – Social economy and territorial development

The development of the social economy could turn into a generator for creation of new jobs and for revival of the economy and life in slowing and depopulated regions.

- How social economy solves demographic problems in terms of uneven territorial distribution of the population and of the workforce?
- How social economy becomes an instrument for implementation of sustainable development goals?