

**Address of Mrs. Sotiroula Charalambous, Minister of Labour and Social
Insurance of the Republic of Cyprus,
at the CoE Conference of Ministers responsible for Social Cohesion
(Moscow, 26-27 February 2009)**

Session III

“Policies for social cohesion and well-being for all – a vision for the future”

Good morning.

I am pleased to be moderating the third Session of our Conference and look forward to fruitful discussions that will lead us to a joint vision for the future.

In very simple terms, social cohesion is what binds people together. It is an ongoing process of developing a society of shared values, shared challenges, equal opportunities and active citizenship. A society in which all people have access to fundamental social and economic rights without discrimination, accept responsibility for one another and respect diversity.

In today's global economy, which is characterised by constant change and uncertainty, social cohesion is critical. It is a fundamental determinant of whether people will benefit from globalisation and changes and be protected from the risks associated with them.

With this in mind, I will share with you the thoughts and efforts of the Cyprus Government for the modernisation of its social policy agenda, in response to challenges brought about by socio-economic and demographic changes, globalization, the global economic crisis and our accession to the EU.

The aim of the Cyprus Government is to find the right **mix of policies to promote growth and employment and at the same time to guarantee social cohesion**. We acknowledge the important contribution of economic growth and employment to social cohesion but we recognise that **social cohesion is not a foregone conclusion of improved growth prospects and employment**. Our social agenda, therefore, underlines the **interdependence between employment, economic and social policies** for the enhancement of social cohesion and well-being.

Our social inclusion strategy, for example, is based on the belief that **social inclusion is an essential dimension of social cohesion**. But we do not view social inclusion merely in terms of improving the financial situation of poorer groups in society. We believe that social inclusion requires much more than anti-poverty measures, as **income alone is not enough for people to feel that they are part of society and can contribute to it**.

Our social inclusion strategy, therefore, encompasses policies and measures for **active inclusion**, as well as the **social integration of vulnerable groups** of society. At the same time, our social inclusion strategy includes measures for the **reconciliation of work and family life**, which aim not only to meet the needs of employed parents and encourage women's participation in the labour market but **also to enhance family solidarity and safeguard the best interests and welfare of the children and adult dependants receiving care services**.

To this end, we are promoting a **package of measures** defined by the Ministerial Advisory Body for Social Policy and the newly established Forum for Demographic and Family Policies. I would like to say at this point that we give high priority to the aspect of **quality** and are working towards the improvement of policies and measures in order to better serve the needs of citizens and safeguard their well-being.

We consider **participation** and **partnership** to be **essential dimensions of social cohesion**. As mentioned in the Council of Europe Revised Strategy for Social Cohesion, "the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all must be seen as a responsibility for all". The Cyprus Government encourages community initiatives and response to social needs by providing technical advice and grants for the establishment of **family support services** on a local level.

Services developed in partnership with not-for-profit voluntary organisations and local authorities include care services for children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. **Community participation** in service delivery has contributed to the provision of cost-effective, needs-led, flexible local services.

Recognising the principle of community participation as both an aim and a means of **social development**, the Government encourages **social dialogue** and pursues **citizen participation** not only in the delivery of services but also in decision-making and the formulation of policy. This, in our view, is a **tangible way of making people feel that they are an important part of society**.

Citizen participation in Cyprus is well illustrated by a variety of boards and councils that have been established by legislation or by decision of the Council of Ministers, which ensure wide representation of non-governmental organisations representing users. These advisory bodies are concerned with specific social issues such as, ageing¹, special needs², disability³, family violence⁴ and drug abuse⁵.

We cannot ignore the fact that demographic and social changes pose a challenge for social protection systems. In order to effectively address the effects of demographic ageing we have to **ensure the sustainability of social protection systems without compromising the adequacy of social insurance benefits**. In parallel, changes in family structures and new patterns of employment call for the **modernisation of social protection systems**.

This, of course, is a challenge that concerns all and not just the Government. We, therefore, engaged in a **dialogue with the social partners** concerning the long-term financial sustainability of the General Social Insurance Scheme. In 2008 consensus was reached on a package of reform measures to be implemented and a relevant bill has been submitted to the House of Representatives.

I should point out that we are **committed to the modernisation of our social protection system** through legislative measures and policies that reflect the principles and objectives of the **decent work concept**. Within this framework we aim to improve the adequacy of pensions in order to ensure a decent standard of living for all citizens and especially the elderly who are more likely to be at risk of poverty.

¹ The Coordinating Body for Issues Concerning Older Persons

² The Committee for the Protection of People with Mental Retardation
The Advisory Board of “Nea Eleousa” Home for Children and Adults with Mental Retardation

³ The Pancyprian Council for People with Disabilities

⁴ Advisory Committee for the Prevention and Combatting of Family Violence

⁵ The Anti-Drug Council

We consider employment policies to be an integral part of our social model and view **access to employment** both as a key route out of poverty and social exclusion and as a means of prevention, economic growth and productivity. Since 2006, a **personalised approach** has been applied for jobseekers from vulnerable social groups aiming at increasing their employability through vocational guidance and training. Since great emphasis is given to the promotion of **lifelong learning** for the enhancement of adult education a comprehensive Lifelong Learning Strategy, covering the period 2007-2013 was adopted in 2007.

A basic goal of Government policy is the implementation of the principle of **equal employment opportunities** for every person, irrespective of nationality, gender, age, religion or special needs. As in many European countries, migrant workers from third countries constitute a major challenge. In 2007, a new **Strategy for the Employment of Foreign Workers** was adopted by the Council of Ministers. The aim of the Strategy is to secure equal treatment between local and foreign workers as regards terms and conditions of employment.

Health is, of course, an essential precondition of well-being. We are in the process of modernising the organisational structure and services of the health system, with a view to implementing a National Health Scheme. Similarly, in the area of **long-term care**, we are focusing on improving quality and increasing provision.

Another important component of well-being that promotes social cohesion is related to **housing conditions**. The great majority of people own their houses which, generally speaking, are in good condition and well equipped. Nonetheless, the Government is strengthening its housing policy and applies housing schemes that address the needs of low and medium income families, those living in disadvantaged areas, large families, people with disabilities and people belonging to other vulnerable groups.

Before closing, I would like to refer to the aspirations of **young people** and the uncertainty felt by citizens about their individual and shared futures. In the case of young people, I want to add that their hopes, enthusiasm and outlook are also **influenced by their childhood experiences of society**. Therefore, the cultivation of **a view of children that facilitates their participation and a focus on children's**

rights are vital preconditions for the future well-being of young people. Within this framework a Commissioner for the Protection of Children's Rights⁶ has recently been appointed in Cyprus with the mission to promote and protect the rights of the child as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In addition, we are committed to promoting **education programmes that focus on young people's health and well-being and prepare them for adult life and future roles**, and also to **building employment pathways for them**.

I would also like to mention that we lay emphasis on promoting policies based on **full respect for equal treatment, diversity and multi-culturalism**. This arises from the fact that we are intrinsically an Island of various communities and religious groups – Greek-Cypriot, Turkish-Cypriot, Armenian and Maronite. Secondly, we are receivers of workers from different countries. This makes it imperative for us to have **integrated policies that unite in diversity**.

As regards our future actions and the policies related to social cohesion and the welfare of all citizens, I would like to underline that **there is no formula that could apply to all countries**. Each country should define and implement policies and measures that better respond to its own needs, characteristics and particularities. The exchange of views, ideas and good practices is always extremely useful and this is why we strongly support the work of the Council of Europe in this direction. At this point, I would like to say that Cyprus is seriously considering hosting the 2011 Forum for the Future of Democracy, which will be devoted to social cohesion.

Finally, I would like to state that it is more important than ever **to unite our efforts in order to make sure that investment in social cohesion in our societies is at the same level as investment for economic growth**. Only then could we enhance the prospects for young people and increase their feelings of security and well being for the future.

⁶ The Commissioner for the Protection of the Rights of the Child Law was passed by the House of Representatives on 7/6/2007.