

**Conselho da Europa (1a reuniao Ministros responsaveis coesao social),
Moscovo, 26/27 Fevereiro 2009**

Dear Ministers, dear participants:

I would like to start by thanking the Russian government for hosting and organizing this Conference, which deals with topics of great importance to all of our countries.

I would also like to thank the Council of Europe and the authors of the Report produced by the "High-Level Task Force on Social Cohesion in the 21st Century".

I wish to stress the quality and insight of this report. It raises many key issues for the future of social policies. Not only does it cover different policy fields as it maps the main challenges and possible ways forward in many of them.

An important contribution is provided by the main topic itself, which is explored with rarely seen depth: the very idea of social cohesion.

Social cohesion is a core concept that is often accused of being ill-defined and vague – sometimes fairly, sometimes as an excuse not to deal with it. But in any case, discussing the definition and dimensions of this key concept is, undoubtedly, a major contribution to international policy debates about social and economic policy. Because cohesion is itself central do these debates which have only become more prominent with the current global financial crisis.

This conceptual discussion helps build solid ground for integrated discussions on the future of social policies. And one basic thing is entirely clear: more than about social assistance, social cohesion is about social rights and their effectiveness through time.

In my view, one of the angles we can adopt towards cohesion policies is the concept of sustainability, which has direct links with globalization and demographic changes, comprehensively dealt with in the report. Sustainability is a concept which has also too often been understood too narrowly.

Most times, sustainability is understood as just the financial sustainability of social policies and protection. But it is a mistake to put it that way. We must think of a concept with three dimensions: financial sustainability (the capacity to generate enough resources), economic sustainability (the

relation between social cohesion and economic competitiveness) and social sustainability (the adequacy, coverage and quality of policies to social configurations and risks).

Take the demographic challenge. It is a complex and decisive problem, which endangers the sustainability of our economic and social systems. But there is no single cause and no simple answer. So we need to look at more than its financial implications, but for the different social and economic factors at stake.

First of all, we need more inclusive labour markets. These should deal better with increasing life expectancy, better integrating older workers through the promotion of flexible active ageing policies. This has been the path in successful reforms of social security and the labour market throughout Europe, including in my own country.

More inclusive labour markets should, in addition, move towards the full integration of women in employment, with effective conditions of gender equality. And, of course, they should also ensure decent patterns and rights for the integration of migrants, from the point of view of human rights and recognising the relevant role they play in many European economies.

But demographic changes require more than new financial arrangements in social security or changes in the labour markets. They also imply investment in education, qualification and lifelong learning, because this is a decisive factor for economic competitiveness and also for individual opportunities. For both social and economic reasons, qualification is key to the future. And countries, such as my own, which still lag behind in education indicators have all to gain in programs designed to foster access of all to competences, training and learning opportunities – in the Portuguese case, the *Novas Oportunidades* (New Opportunities) program.

On the other hand, demography also calls for a renewed attention to how our economies and labour markets are socially framed. We need more effective support to families, in order to ensure that individuals can fully participate in the labour market while securing them better conditions for family life and conciliation between family and work. Issues such as quality and accessible childcare, family social services and long-term care are key to sustainable answers to economic and social challenges and are important tools for economic recovery. It is a road Portugal is also taking in our anti-crisis program.

I conclude by recalling the importance of the process of globalization. This concept, too, has been understood rather narrowly, as it is underlined in the Report.

In this context, national policies are necessary but are not sufficient: what happens in one country is conditioned and in turn influences what happens in other countries. And other levels of governance, namely in the supranational arena, play a key role.

Council of Europe is in a privileged position, given its width and its nature as a pan-European organisation. It has conditions to bring our countries closer, fostering progress and shared responsibilities in challenges whose configuration may differ from country to country but that are, in fact, ever more common. Social cohesion, in its different forms, is certainly among the most important.

At present, social and cohesion policies are essential to build an answer to the current crisis. But, in the long run, they are equally important to build a more secure, dynamic and inclusive Europe.

Thank you.