

**New Strategy
and Council of Europe Action Plan
for Social Cohesion**

**approved by the Committee of Ministers
of the Council of Europe on 7 July 2010**

NEW STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL COHESION

I. Introduction

1. The Council of Europe defines social cohesion as the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members – minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation – to manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all members. Social cohesion is a political concept that is essential for the fulfilment of the three core values of the Council of Europe: human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

2. The Council of Europe was founded in 1949 to promote the values of peace, democracy, human rights and dignity, and to work for stable democratic institutions that offer governments and citizens a reliable legal framework. It is therefore the only pan-European forum for discussing the changes European societies are undergoing, and for setting a Europe-wide agenda with an emphasis on social rights, social policy and social cohesion based on solidarity, co-responsibility and pluralism.

Why a strategy for social cohesion in the 21st century?

3. Social cohesion is a dynamic process and an essential condition for social justice, democratic security and sustainable development. Divided and unequal societies are not only unjust, they also cannot guarantee stability in the long term.

4. This New Social Cohesion Strategy is presented at a time when the meaning of the term “progress” is changing. In the past, it equated with a vision of prosperity, justice and freedom. Today, progress also means protecting society from regressive trends, ensuring the sustainability of social justice in a context of limited material and environmental resources, avoiding irreversible situations and ensuring inter-generational equity. Societal progress calls for a close examination of the social and economic disparities in our societies as well as of the social and environmental costs of current patterns of production and consumption.

5. A social cohesion strategy is, therefore, an essential means of ensuring that all those concerned participate and co-operate fully in a democratic and sustainable development process. All societies face conflicts and divisions caused by disparities in the distribution of wealth, ethnic and cultural diversity and the different ways that environmental conditions affect people’s lives.

6. At their 2nd Summit, the Heads of State and Government of Council of Europe member states recognised that social cohesion was “one of the foremost needs of the wider Europe and should be pursued as an essential complement to the promotion of human rights and dignity”. The Council of Europe has done much to promote and develop the concept of social cohesion. It has helped to operationalise it by promoting access to social rights and has explored topics such as how to improve the quality of life together, the positive impact of public policies, and the development and use of indicators.

II. Acting for social cohesion

7. The new strategy is based on four pillars:

- reinvesting in social rights and a cohesive society;
- building a Europe of responsibilities that are both shared and social;
- strengthening representation and democratic decision making and expanding social dialogue and civic engagement;
- building a secure future for all.

It will be complemented by the Council of Europe Action Plan for Social Cohesion.

A. Reinvesting in social rights and a cohesive society

8. The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights – ETS No. 5) and the European Social Charter (ETS No. 35) encapsulate the Council of Europe's commitment to human rights, including economic and social rights. In order to make them a reference standard for the whole of Europe, all member states, which have not yet done so, are invited to consider ratification of the revised European Social Charter (ETS No. 163) and the Protocol providing for a System of Collective Complaints (ETS No. 158), as well as the European Code of Social Security (ETS No. 48) and its Protocol (ETS No. 48A). Social and economic rights reduce citizens' fears, which are expressed in different ways, and guarantee a certain capacity to face the future.

9. Social rights have played a prominent role in European development and distinguish Europe from other regions of the world. The European model of social rights has served to generate and maintain social cohesion and social solidarity, although globalisation and other developments are putting this model under pressure. The emerging pattern of a fragmented society, with an increasing number of people facing obstacles to the full enjoyment of rights or dependent on benefits and other public services, together with rising inequalities between rich and poor, poses one of the greatest challenges to social cohesion in Europe.

10. The Council of Europe is at the forefront of developing a renewed understanding of citizenship and promotes action to avoid the polarisation of societies. It has, therefore, analysed the obstacles to access to social rights across a range of fields, provided examples of how those obstacles can be overcome and identified principles for improving such access. It has then developed cross-sectoral policy guidelines on access to social rights, incorporating different areas of social policy, for member states to implement.

11. Reflecting changing social conditions, the revised European Social Charter has defined a series of new rights. Adaptation and change are essential in a world where new opportunities and new constraints are continuously emerging.

12. Policies must ensure that:

- access to social rights is guaranteed in practice and that these are developed further, with a view to creating conditions for the well-being of all. Procedures and methods for delivering social rights should allow society to evolve by taking into account the challenges of plural societies and by meeting the need for change and social mobility;
- barriers to a proper understanding of rights, users' responsibilities, expectations and procedures resulting from the use of institutional language, are recognised and overcome;
- members of groups potentially in a situation of vulnerability fully enjoy their social rights, by eliminating any source of double standards, discrimination and accumulation of difficulties;
- all stakeholders and other actors are committed to the long-term financial and qualitative sustainability of social rights. The governance of health care and social protection requires citizen and stakeholder responsibility and participation. Citizens should have an active part in any reform and be aware of its long-term consequences;
- steps are taken to promote the well-being and empowerment of families, which are critical for the quality of life and the prevention of poverty, especially among children;

- people with disabilities are integrated into society and that the Council of Europe Disability Action Plan 2006-2015 is implemented in its entirety;
- sustainable solutions are found to ensure that everybody has a decent home while helping people in a situation of vulnerability to avoid excessive debt.

13. Public authorities must try to ensure that those emerging from exclusion and poverty do not fall back into the same situation. Citizens should have the right to innovate in key areas of community life.

14. Investing in a cohesive society also requires us to initiate policies that recognise and value every person's potential to contribute to quality of life for all. All members of society, including the poorest, have skills and values that can be mobilised for social cohesion. A culture of mutual recognition could develop into a tool for mobilisation and fulfilment that gives meaning and purpose to everybody's life, in particular those who are isolated and not active within their community.

B. Building a Europe of shared and social responsibilities

15. The fundamental responsibility of states and governments in terms of social cohesion is undisputed. Public authorities are the guarantors of human rights, including social rights, and participatory democracy. However, throughout Europe, new concepts of governance through partnership and dialogue are emerging at all levels. To engender a widely-held sense of social responsibility, all stakeholders – not just governments and other public authorities but also social partners, civil society, citizens, corporate partners and the media – should recognise the need to act responsibly and help to develop awareness of shared or co-responsibilities.

16. Citizens should develop an awareness of belonging to a community and be encouraged and empowered to accept their responsibility to contribute to the life of their communities.

17. Member states should therefore develop a wide range of participation instruments at all levels, with the possibility of combining them and adapting the way they are used according to circumstances. This might include exchanges of information and opinions, for example, in public meetings, forums, groups and committees whose tasks are to identify priorities for policies and actions, advise and make proposals, as well as round tables, opinion polls and surveys. Representatives of public authorities must not unilaterally elaborate policies without co-operating with the other actors, including, of course, the citizens concerned with these policies. All stakeholders must be empowered to make choices and act accordingly. Governments and corporate stakeholders must always be aware that their political or economic choices have an impact on the lives of those not involved in the decision making and take into account the differences between men and women.

18. A shared or co-responsible approach is therefore essential for meeting the major challenges of society, such as the fight against poverty, securing the well-being of all, ensuring sustainable development (both from an ecological point of view and in terms of protecting future generations) and living in a pluralist society, thus avoiding social exclusion.

19. Citizens' capacity for action depends to a large extent on political and institutional arrangements. Without such arrangements, individuals – especially the most vulnerable – cannot fully accept responsibility for managing their own lives, including their successful integration into the labour market. For citizens to be actively involved in society, their specific needs and expectations have to be taken into consideration by public authorities.

20. Governments at all levels could further improve their contribution by:

- increasing the transparency of their decision making and their policy objectives and results in order to make citizens fully aware of the meaning and contribution of public policies;
- ensuring the representation of the whole of society in public services and providing adequate levels of training and skills to improve communication and address issues related to intercultural dialogue;
- creating the necessary conditions for elaborating common objectives and a shared vision in sensitive areas for future well-being, such as social justice, energy patterns, water and resource consumption and interaction in pluralist societies, and acknowledging citizens' efforts;
- measuring societal progress in terms of reducing social, economic and gender-based inequalities in addition to measurements of progress based exclusively on economic criteria, such as the gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate.

21. The Council of Europe has already developed tools to support the principle of shared responsibility. The “multi-partite social model contract” establishes a framework for linking public and private service providers, particularly for groups in a situation of vulnerability. Indicators of well-being for all have been developed using a methodological approach which involves citizens in defining the criteria to be applied. These models can be adapted to different situations throughout Europe.

22. A shared-responsibilities approach could also contribute to a renewed vision of economic development and employment creation. Enhanced social and environmental links could encourage businesses to seek a long-term balance between decent working conditions; reconciliation of work, family and personal life; recognition of and respect for local knowledge and resources; and economic benefits.

23. A comprehensive reference work on the existing and potential contribution of social-cohesion based enterprises should be prepared and disseminated throughout Europe. An analysis should be carried out of models of employment creation supported by social links, solidarity and new developments in consumption patterns.

24. A Council of Europe charter of social and shared responsibilities should become the reference tool for action to promote well-being for all in the 21st century, and provide a perspective on the present generation's obligations, and the challenges they face to ensure future generations' right to well-being.

C. Strengthening representation and the democratic decision making process and developing social dialogue and civic engagement

25. Citizens and communities should play a prominent role not only in the initial stages of public policies – through their votes and associative activities – but also in their implementation. They lose confidence if they are not involved in the reform process and policy implementation, and reforms, particularly of universal health and social protection policies, tend to be perceived by people as a potential threat to their well-being. Where the emphasis is on strengthening the interdependence of all players, positive interaction with citizens becomes a valuable source of information and renewal for public authorities.

26. Democracy is not simply a mechanism for people to come together and vote. It is a complex and more dynamic process which encourages individual and collective reflection, seeking and sharing of information and debate with a view to achieving the best possible result for the common good, as well as for each individual citizen.

27. Empowering citizens to act represents a political commitment to creating opportunities and motivation, especially through dialogue and deliberation. Public authorities should ensure

that there are appropriate and sufficient representative structures to encourage all members of society to participate, with particular attention being paid to citizens and groups of citizens who have more difficulty becoming actively involved or who, de facto, remain on the sidelines of public life.

28. Participation of children and young people is a fundamental right and a key element for the future of society. This can improve decisions affecting children and young people and progressively encourage their commitment as citizens to society and its institutions.

29. By calling on citizens' moral and ethical resources, public authorities may achieve results in terms of solidarity and sustainability which could not be achieved in any other way. At the same time, public authorities should allow for experimentation and innovation, and avoid rigid solutions.

30. What will make this possible is the political will to promote a real climate of trust between authorities, citizens and civil society organisations, through creating synergies and complementarities between them, maximising transparency, while minimising asymmetries between information methods. If the desired effect is to last, these processes should be accompanied by a true delegation of responsibilities to the local level, where much can be gained from the benefits of proximity.

31. Representation deficits need to be identified and remedied, taking all of the above into account. While people at risk should be actively encouraged to make use of their potential and capabilities, the other segments of the population should also be active in finding common solutions and arrangements to society's problems, as proposed in Recommendation Rec(2001)19 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the participation of citizens in local public life.

32. In the case of specific groups of citizens, in particular those in situation of vulnerability, non-discrimination, independent living and full participation in the life of the community must be the guiding principles of all legislation, policy and practice. Their representative organisations and the individuals themselves should be encouraged and empowered to become fully committed in that process at all levels.

D. Building a secure future for all

33. The lack of clear perspectives makes it difficult to accept responsibility, particularly for young people. Investing in young people should be a priority in Europe. Society as a whole has to support their transition to sustainable employment and personal fulfilment, family life and social commitment.

34. Social mobility, including that of migrants, should be promoted. Societies must offer a secure future and perspectives for everyone, for every group of society, while providing extra support for those in disadvantaged situations. Everyone must have the right to be creative, to give sense and perspective to their own lives, and to take risks. Social protection and social networks must be sufficiently strong for people to make their life plans in the knowledge that if they fail, they will be given a second chance and should be able to start again. The Council of Europe recommendations for improving social mobility should be applied by member states.

35. Immediate and sustained action at all levels to renew people's confidence in their future is imperative for overcoming the social and demographic challenges resulting from ageing populations in Europe and to global population movements, the consequences of climate change and unequal access to resources. Current societal difficulties need to be addressed, including the disturbing emergence of vicious circles of distrust and anxiety, which undermine confidence in public authorities and cause people to withdraw into themselves.

36. For most people, families are where social cohesion is first experienced and learnt. Families therefore play an important role in building confidence in the future and developing viable life projects.

Children, empowered and aware of their rights, must be able to evolve in a safe, violence-free and supportive environment. The organisation and the adaptation of the relevant services should be done accordingly. Member states' engagement for children's rights is an investment for the future.

37. Renewing confidence in the future does not only mean giving individuals opportunities to pursue their family and professional aspirations, but also more global objectives, such as peace, security, social justice, economic efficiency with a fair sharing of resources, a healthy environment and the protection of future generations' right to well-being. It is necessary to develop a new vision of security, based on non-material values that are indispensable for our well-being in the longer term, in particular social links and solidarity.

38. New models for reconciling family, civic engagement and professional life need to be developed so that everyone can achieve a personal and social equilibrium in a globalised society. How much time is devoted to different tasks should take account of the need to avoid stress and isolation, with particular attention to women and men's specific circumstances, both in the family and at work.

39. Our societies are ageing rapidly and pension schemes are much debated, including discussions on additional means of financing the system. Recent developments have shown that individual solutions are not always sufficient or safe. Public pension schemes must be refocused to ensure their long-term sustainability, which also calls for a strengthening of intergenerational solidarity. Different ways of financing social protection must be explored, in particular by increasing productivity at work.

40. Instead of focusing on older people as a risk factor, societies should make better use of the contribution, based on experience and qualifications, that they can make to social cohesion. This means that the family, organisations and professional services must support and promote the possibility for elderly people to participate actively in society. "Active ageing" is a concept of the future.

41. Despite, or because of, the shock of the economic and financial crisis, initiatives throughout Europe – and worldwide – aim at developing new forms of shared vision and responsibility for the future. With a view to exploring and making use of the full potential of such initiatives, the Council of Europe will take stock of the concepts, methods and tools used and evaluate whether and how they can be mainstreamed and applied in the wider context of social cohesion.

III. Council of Europe Action Plan for Social Cohesion

42. At the Council of Europe level, the European Committee for Social Cohesion has been entrusted, following the request by the 1st Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Social Cohesion (Moscow, February 2009), to elaborate and implement the Action Plan for Social Cohesion, which complements this New Strategy for Social Cohesion. The action plan will propose specific policies and action in favour of social cohesion that have been drawn up in co-operation with different Council of Europe departments.

43. The European Committee for Social Cohesion will regularly re-examine the priorities of this strategy, evaluate progress and consider whether the strategy needs to be revised. As in 2004 and 2010, the Council of Europe New Strategy for Social Cohesion will be thoroughly reviewed in 2015.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE ACTION PLAN FOR SOCIAL COHESION

I. Introduction

1. The Council of Europe defines social cohesion as a society's capacity to ensure the well-being of all its members by minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation; to manage differences and divisions and to ensure the means of achieving welfare for all. Social cohesion is a dynamic process and is essential for achieving social justice, democratic security and sustainable development. Divided and unequal societies are not only unjust, they also cannot guarantee stability in the long term.
2. In a cohesive society the well-being of all is a shared goal that includes the aim of ensuring adequate resources are available to combat inequalities and exclusion.
3. The Council of Europe has brought the concept of social cohesion to European level, a concept which is essential for the fulfilment of the Organisation's three core values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law.
4. The Council of Europe legal instruments, particularly the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5) and the revised European Social Charter (ETS No. 163), offer a reliable legal framework for the protection and promotion of human rights, including social rights, and thus effectively contribute to social cohesion.
5. The Final Declaration of the Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Social Cohesion (Moscow, 2009) confirms that social cohesion "is more relevant than ever and requires a renewed political commitment". The ministers therefore asked the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to "draw up a Council of Europe Action Plan in the field of social cohesion, building on existing activities and taking financial resources into account".

II. Aims and nature of the Action Plan for Social Cohesion

6. The responsibility for creating the necessary conditions to promote and ensure social cohesion lies with the member states. This action plan can help them as they put their political commitment to social cohesion into practice. It is based on the following four pillars defined by the Council of Europe New Strategy for Social Cohesion, approved in July 2010:
 - reinvesting in social rights and a cohesive society;
 - building a Europe of responsibilities that are both shared and social;
 - strengthening representation and democratic decision making and expanding social dialogue and civic engagement;
 - building a secure future for all.
7. Social cohesion can not be imposed, nor achieved by following a one size fits all blueprint. While some policy measures are necessary for a stable society and for social cohesion, different situations require different approaches. This action plan can therefore be adapted to the specific situation in a country, region or municipality. As social cohesion can never be achieved by just a top-down approach, the plan foresees the active participation of all citizens – men and women – in defining its specific objectives and the pace of implementation.
8. Taking into account the diverse situations in Council of Europe member states, the following objectives and actions are a precondition for socially cohesive societies. Member states may have differing priorities in relation to them. However, the more those policy objectives are implemented throughout Europe, the more cohesive Europe will become. It is also important to

underline that, depending on national circumstances, the adoption of policy measures under the action plan may be a matter for central governments, and/or regional or local authorities.

9. An extensive collection of Council of Europe conventions, recommendations, policy guidelines and reports covering all aspects of social cohesion, which is cross-referenced with each policy action proposed, will complement the action plan. Its aim is to give the action plan – from the outset – a European nature based on the work of the various Council of Europe bodies in support of social cohesion.

III. Policy action for social cohesion

10. With regard to the need to invest in social rights and a cohesive society, member states are invited to:

- consider ratification of the relevant Council of Europe instruments, where they have not yet done so;
- implement the Council of Europe Disability Action Plan 2006-2015;
- offer all citizens – men and women – equal opportunities, while providing additional support for those in disadvantaged situations;
- create the necessary conditions for all citizens to enjoy full access to social rights, regardless of their socio-economic position, gender or ethnic background; this comprises the need to identify and overcome the barriers created, *inter alia*, by information procedures and institutional language, and to eliminate discrimination and double standards;
- take the necessary measures to make sure that persons in vulnerable situations receive income support and have guaranteed access to social and financial services as well as health care;
- introduce effective means to involve all stakeholders, including citizens themselves, in guaranteeing the long-term financial and qualitative sustainability of universal social rights;
- promote the development of social links, networking and solidarity as tools for the creation of decent jobs. Support entrepreneurship and initiatives in sustainable social and environmentally friendly projects;
- promote families' stability, well-being and autonomy, which are critical for the quality of life and the prevention of poverty;
- ensure that everyone has access to housing of an adequate standard while helping people in vulnerable situations to avoid excessive debt.

11. With regard to building a Europe of shared and social responsibilities, member states are invited to:

- create conditions for the effective sharing of social responsibilities between public authorities at all levels, citizens and other relevant stakeholders;
- empower stakeholders, including civil society and individual citizens from different backgrounds, to make choices for the well-being of all and act accordingly;
- ensure that policy objectives are elaborated and decisions made in a transparent manner and that they involve all citizens – men and women – and stakeholders in the debate on the vision and policy content of a cohesive society;
- introduce procedures enabling all citizens to express their expectations in terms of social cohesion;
- promote the representation of men and women belonging to minorities or of migrant origin, particularly in public services;
- ensure transparency in the determination of the objectives of public expenditure;
- measure societal progress in terms of reducing social and economic inequalities in addition to measurements based on exclusively economic criteria, such as the growth rate of the gross domestic product (GDP).

12. With regard to strengthening representation and democratic decision making and expanding social dialogue and civic engagement, member states are invited to:

- encourage citizens and communities to play a prominent role not only in the initial stages of public policies – through their votes and associative activities – but also in the implementation of these policies as well as in the evaluation of results with a view to informing future planning;
- ensure that there are appropriate and sufficient forms and structures of representation to encourage all members of society to participate, including more vulnerable groups of citizens;
- with a view to the integration of specific groups of citizens, particularly those in a situation of vulnerability, make non-discrimination, independent living and full participation in the life of the community the guiding principles of all relevant legislation, policy and practice.

13. With regard to building a secure future for all, member states are invited to:

- create the necessary conditions for elaborating a shared vision of well-being, including for future generations, together with citizens and other stakeholders;
- ensure that all children are able to grow up and develop in a peaceful environment;
- offer all young people equal opportunities with a view, in particular, to facilitating their entrance into and progress on the labour market;
- make special additional provisions – particularly policies for the promotion of social mobility for all – to support young people in disadvantaged situations, who can be particularly vulnerable and get involved in anti-social behaviour or even delinquency;
- develop and promote policies to enable individuals, especially young women and men, to maintain the right balance between their professional and private lives and civic engagements;
- address the major current challenges to societal development – including on a global level – such as peace, security, social justice, economic efficiency – with a fair sharing distribution of resources, a healthy environment and the protection of future generations' right to well-being, and develop relevant political solutions;
- explore a new vision of security, based on non-material values, in particular social links and solidarity;
- recognise the valuable role older citizens can play in society and provide adequate and sustainable pension schemes and other support services, while strengthening intergenerational solidarity;
- devote more attention to the sustainability of social security systems. Facilitate the adequacy and accessibility of certain benefits;
- support families because it is within the family that social cohesion is first experienced and learned, confidence in the future is built and viable life projects are developed.

IV. Methodology

A top-down and bottom-up approach

14. The Action Plan for Social Cohesion is designed to strengthen the social cohesion commitment of all stakeholders. Placing the emphasis on shared social responsibility presupposes that the different public and private players, as well as citizens, feel directly concerned and assume this responsibility over time.

15. It is necessary to develop this process at European, national and local level in conjunction with the citizens themselves. In order to ensure a transversal approach, the widest possible participation should be sought. The participation of citizens and other stakeholders must be voluntary and the implementation framework must be flexible enough to accommodate this factor.

16. The Action Plan for Social Cohesion must be based on two simultaneous processes:

- a top-down approach, based on the legal and policy instruments drawn up by the Council of Europe (European Social Charter, European Code of Social Security, recommendations of the Committee of Ministers, resolutions of the Parliamentary Assembly, etc.);
- a bottom-up approach designed to bring about shared social responsibility, dialogue and a vision of the future, first at local level and subsequently at regional, national and European level.

i. Capitalising on the achievements of the Council of Europe

17. The Council of Europe has considerable experience of both approaches, and this action plan emphasises the interaction between them. This interaction is the innovative component of the plan. It allows the New Strategy for Social Cohesion and other legal and policy instruments to become more visible, better known and applied in the field. At the same time, the process of building shared social responsibility will take on a broader and more concerted dimension by drawing on these reference texts and policy instruments elaborated at the European level.

18. Where the bottom-up approach is concerned, the citizen participation method devised by the Council of Europe will enable priorities in terms of well-being for all to be defined and systematised, while remaining accessible and easily transferable.

ii. Principles for implementation

19. If the Action Plan for Social Cohesion is to fully achieve its objectives, a number of principles must be respected:

- learning, sharing information and mainstreaming;
- interaction and complementarity of legal instruments and policy recommendations promoting social cohesion in the Council of Europe;
- creating a link with other Council of Europe instruments and actions;
- complementarity with policies of the European Union and the United Nations (particularly the International Labour Organization (ILO));
- regular assessment with a view to evaluating and, if appropriate, adjusting the process.

iii. Co-ordination at European level

20. The European Committee for Social Cohesion (CDCS) will co-ordinate and follow the implementation of the Action Plan for Social Cohesion by member states. These are encouraged to give regular feedback on the implementation of the action plan with a view to exchanging experience, methods and best practice.

21. The Council of Europe Secretariat will provide a collaborative space, detailed guidelines for setting up the Action Plan for Social Cohesion, and, if required, arrange for methodological assistance with implementation.

22. The objectives of the Action Plan for Social Cohesion may be revised following future updates of the Council of Europe New Strategy for Social Cohesion.