

Interview with Mr Alfonso Lara Montero in German Association for Public and Private Welfare in Berlin, March 14, 2019

Question 1: Mister Montero, the German Association has been active in the field of European social policy for many years and has seen tangible changes in the last 10 to 15 years for the social agenda of the European Union (EU). In your opinion, how has the range of topics related to social goals and priorities in EU policy changed over the years?

Alfonso Montero: There has been a number of changes linked with the political priorities of the new European Commission (since 2014) on one hand and the wider economic and social environment on the other. In 2010 the European Commission together with EU Member States agreed the Europe 2020 strategy. The previous Lisbon Strategy focused on the open method of coordination and benchmarking while with EU 2020 the heads of state agreed targets to reduce unemployment, poverty and social exclusion and early school leaving. The European Commission which was appointed in 2014 announced that it would continue working towards these targets. But there was no clarity on how and no clear continuation. The Convention against poverty and social exclusion, which was responsible to assess progress, did not continue its meetings.

Due to the financial and economic crisis in Europe and the difficulties in a number of countries, the European Commission took decisions together with governments in those countries, such as Greece, Portugal, Italy or Spain, that were primarily driven by economic considerations. This led to negative social consequences which the populations are still enduring.

Both economic and social considerations are interrelated and can not really be separated but those decisions led to a retrenchment of social policies that sidelined the social agenda. Because of this, I think that the European Commission realised the need to revive social issues and came up with the “European Pillar of Social Rights“, which was announced in 2015 – seven years after the beginning of the crisis. It is a political declaration which intends to tell the peoples of Europe that social issues should be given renewed attention. However, the European Pillar is not legally binding. The implementation of the rights and principles of the European Pillar is to be assessed through a series of recommendations in the context of the European Semester, which is the cycle of coordination between Member States and the European

Commission -mainly from an economic perspective, though in latest assessments social issues, especially employment related ones, are being given more relevance.

Question 2: What changes do you expect to see in European Social policy after the European elections in May 2019?

Alfonso Montero: Depending on the composition of the new European Parliament and the new European Commission, we may see a Commission focused on jobs or there might be a shift towards a broader view of social inclusion, which is obviously what ESN supports. We do not know yet. We have to be aware of trends which are taking place all over Europe and beyond and how social policies and the implementation of those policies is changing. Key shared values have been put into question. More than ever, it is crucial to make sure that we emphasise the importance of social policies in supporting our societies and the role that the European Commission and the European Parliament can play in raising awareness and taking initiatives in this field. This may include EU directives in those areas where it is possible to legislate like procuring services but also benchmarking and funding instruments to promote values of solidarity and support to reach a more cohesive Europe.

Question 3: And which topics are on the agenda of the European Social Network?

Alfonso Montero: ESN is an independent network. Our main focus is to support our members and those who, like our members, work in local social services in public authorities across Europe. For them, it is important to be aware of how colleagues in other countries are solving similar problems. ESN is currently working on issues of quality. We have studied how quality has changed in the last years and this is the main topic of our annual conference in Milan in 2019. This is an issue that will continue to feature prominently at the conference next year which we will hold in Germany as part of Germany's presidency of the European Council. We will be looking at quality improvement with a focus on community care: changes in how care is organised in the community, how to ensure the participation of users and their families in community care, how the workforce needs to be supported and trained, what type of qualifications are required to perform their tasks as well as the relationship between the workforce and the wider stakeholders in the community.

Other themes we are working on as part of our 4-year-programme with the European Commission to 2021 are related to integrated care and support, that's to say, how social services work with other services to help people with multiple needs that should be assessed from a multiprofessional perspective, and the digitalisation of social services, which is a topic related to innovation and will be assessed through a newly launched working group. We continue our overarching policy groups, one on the European Semester, where the German Association participates, and in 2018 we launched another strand of work on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to link EU policy frameworks with relevant international frameworks. With this work, we are supporting our members to gain knowledge on these policies so that they are able to influence them.

We should also remember that in addition to policies, instruments such as EU funds, including the ESF, ERDF, or FEAD, which our members use frequently to implement their social services programmes, can play a vital role in bringing Europe closer to citizens.

We have examples of ESN members coming together to apply for European projects funded with social innovation funds, as well as individual members who currently run social innovation programmes with EU money. The Secretariat provides them with advice as we have been working at European level for 28 years, and their success is proof of the value they gain from being a member of our Network. The use of EU funds for social innovation shows that our members address social challenges from a progressive perspective.

As the EU moves to a new funding framework, ESN is following progress and organising a debate at the European Parliament on 9 April 2019 with ESN members and MEPs to discuss how the new funding framework should look like from the perspective of quality social services. This is key to ensure that those working locally see the benefits of European initiatives in the field of social policies.

The interview was conducted on March 14, 2019 in the German Association in Berlin by Cornelia Markowski.

[The complete interview in German](#)