

## EU must learn from its past mistakes on employment policy

Written by Maria João Rodrigues on 15 June 2015 in Opinion  
Opinion

EU employment policy took a hit during the austerity years at the start of the decade, but under the new commission things are starting to change, writes Maria João Rodrigues.



The employment guidelines are, together with the broad economic policy guidelines, a fundamental element of EU-level policy coordination, aiming to translate the Europe 2020 jobs and growth strategy into concrete policies.

It's in these 'integrated guidelines' that we Europeans express our basic understanding on how our pension systems, job markets, social inclusion, education, budgetary and investment policies should evolve.

They explain how to reach our 2020 targets of 75 per cent employment, 40 per cent tertiary education completion, fewer than 10 per cent of school dropouts and lifting at least 20 million people from the risk of poverty and social exclusion.

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I have worked in this field since the 1990s, having coordinated negotiations on the Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs and helped to design Europe 2020, so contributing to the next stage as an MEP is an honour and a real pleasure.

The current integrated guidelines were negotiated by the 2010 Belgian EU council presidency, with a progressive push from the parliament.

This is evidenced by priorities such as supporting young people's transition to the labour market, or active social inclusion. However, even these guidelines show a 'spirit of austerity', developed at the time by the conservative majority in Europe and which fully prevailed in 2011.

When the global financial turmoil turned into a sovereign debt crisis in Europe, the conservative majority of the time decided to respond by abandoning a stimulus-based recovery plan in favour of austerity and labour cost-cutting.

'Fiscal sustainability' overshadowed all the other guidelines during the first few years of this decade. The short-term priority of deficit reduction prevailed over longer-term considerations, resulting in low growth, a massive investment gap and rising debt-to-GDP ratios.

EU priorities did not really start to build on the integrated guidelines until 2012-2013, by which time austerity had produced a second recession and unemployment reached record-high levels. Today, we still face most of the challenges we did in 2010, and our 2020 targets are just as distant.

Meanwhile, technology keeps evolving, climate protection and resource efficiency are increasingly needed, and more people are migrating into our ageing continent.

But we have an opportunity to improve our policies - by learning from mistakes, embracing new opportunities, strengthening our guidelines and sticking to them.

The EU's economic policy mix has improved under the Jean-Claude Juncker' commission, with more focus on investment and understanding that successful structural reforms require budgetary flexibility.

But the new college has been very quiet when it comes to Europe's social problems, despite promising initiatives from the previous mandate, such as the youth guarantee, social investment and social business.

That is why the S&D group advocates much more concrete employment guidelines and insists on a balance between economic and social priorities in EU-level coordination.

We emphasise investment in people: good-quality childcare and education for all little ones, real help in taking first steps on the labour market through the youth guarantee, lifelong learning and good working conditions so that people can work - and enjoy it - for as long as possible.

The EU's new investment plan should involve investing in new skills, based on real partnerships between finance, business and the public sector.

At the same time, we insist on decent wages and fair labour market, which are crucial for healthy demand and less inequality.

Because the commission's proposal came late, so does parliament's debate on the guidelines. However, we have a good understanding with rapporteur Laura Agea and the shadows.

We are counting on the council to include our input in July's final wording of the country-specific recommendations.

## About the author

Maria João Rodrigues (PT) is parliament's S&D group shadow rapporteur on guidelines for the employment policies of the member states

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