



Open Letter to the 25 EU Heads of State and Government

Before the Informal Meeting of EU Heads of State and Government of 27 October 2005

From the Platform of European Social NGOs

As you prepare to meet at the end of this month, social NGOs urge you to bear in mind the views of thousands of citizens' associations and voluntary groups around Europe, which are reflected in this letter.

The major challenges facing the EU - such as globalisation and demographic change - are leading to questions about how social and economic policies are organised in European countries. These are legitimate concerns, and social NGOs are not against reform. Indeed, we believe that reforms are required to adapt to the impacts of far-reaching changes, not least the shifting social needs which social NGOs are confronted with in their daily work.

But "reform" must not mean abandoning the fundamental values and principles which, as we have learnt from history, are so important for a modern and cohesive society. All EU member states have committed - for good reason - to guaranteeing fundamental rights, social cohesion, a high level of social protection, equality between women and men, and the combating of exclusion. These words have practical implications which must be at the heart of discussions in the Informal Council on October 27, where the aim must be to ensure that equity in society, and efficiency in the economy, will be equally promoted.

Whether we talk about a social model, economic and social models or competitiveness and social justice is not important. What matters is that welfare states are as important as ever to translate our shared values and principles into practice - and they also contribute to competitiveness and growth if they are well designed. As people face uncertain futures with new work patterns, changing family formations and increased insecurity, the state needs to play a strong role in ensuring that changes do not jeopardize their ability to participate in society. The potential costs of not doing so, and adopting a short-term vision focusing exclusively on financial sustainability, are just too high.

We call on EU leaders to remember their commitment to reaching this key goal as they start their debate on the reform of the European economic and social model: it is their duty to ensure a future for European society in which every person can participate, in which every person can live in dignity, and in which the fundamental rights of every person are respected. Doing so is good for the economy as well as social cohesion in the long term. What good is a model which is financially efficient but fails to put in place the elements of an equitable and socially just society?

No-one is left untouched by the fast-shifting developments confronting Europe, and social NGOs as well as other actors are reflecting deeply on what is needed. NGOs are committed to working with governments and institutions to contribute their expertise on how policies impact on people's lives, in order to achieve the best reforms for our societies. We urge governments to actively promote and welcome such participation in shaping Europe's future.

At the June Summit, Heads of State and Government failed to meet the expectations of citizens. It is vital not to make the same mistake again. A strong message is needed that the EU will deal with their biggest concerns and ensure there is a future for European values and principles in our economic and social models.

The enclosed statement - adopted by the European social NGOs who together form the Social Platform - sets out the values and principles which we believe must be at the heart of the debate on economic and social policies.