Report from the conference on the social dimension of the upcoming Dutch Presidency of the Council of the EU

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In advance of the Netherlands taking over the Presidency of the Council of the EU in January 2016, Social Platform organised a civil society conference to discuss the social dimension of the Dutch Presidency. The event, which took place on 17 November in The Hague, gathered more than 70 representatives from civil society, including many chairs and directors of national NGOs, to discuss the Dutch Presidency priorities in the social field together with Ms **Jetta Klijnsma**, Secretary of State for Social Affairs and Employment.

The Dutch Presidency will focus on two overarching priorities in the social field: the fight against poverty and decent work. An integrated approach which takes into account the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon is necessary to effectively tackle poverty. The Dutch Presidency intends to present Council Conclusions on this matter in June to promote concrete solutions and facilitate the exchange of best practices. The support of civil society is fundamental in this area, as NGOs are the ones who have real expertise on what the reality on the ground is and can provide input and propose solutions to tackle the various dimensions of poverty: financing, health, housing, access to quality services and employment to name a few.

In her intervention, **Ms Klijnsma** recalled the recent dramatic events of Paris and stressed that in such difficult times we need to find answers and solutions together. It is imperative to focus on neighbourhoods in the fight against social exclusion and invest in people, and civil society has a decisive role to play in this process.

Ensuring decent work and decent wages is a key aspect of addressing the escalating problem of in-work poverty and in the framework of labour mobility. In this area too, it will be important to join forces and work together in the coming months, as the Commission is going to propose a review of the current framework and some Member States' claim for a restriction of rights.

Jana Hainsworth, President of Social Platform, expressed her criticisms to past and existing approaches towards tackling the social and economic crisis and meeting the poverty target of the Europe 2020 Strategy, but rejected the recurrent idea that nothing can be achieved at EU level. The EU has a significant role to play through its policy frameworks, funds and governance tools. Far from being viewed as a cost, social policies should be considered as an investment with high future economic and social returns – an investment whose importance in keeping society together is clearer now than ever.

Ms Hainsworth recognised that the two priorities identified by the Dutch Presidency are significant ones and are very much in line with what we, at Social Platform, believe are effective measures to promote social inclusion: targeted integrated approaches and social investment. She welcomed the opening to civil society and accepted the invitation made to reinforce cooperation. At the request of the State Secretary and drawing upon the expertise of its members, Social Platform already provided significant examples of best practices in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. We will certainly continue to support the work of the Dutch Presidency, and in doing so we will actively present our own requests. We developed a package of universally-accessible social standards which include adequate minimum income schemes, adequate minimum wages, common standards for unemployment benefits and rights-based and non-discriminatory access to quality, inclusive and affordable services, and we are keen to share our vision with the Dutch Presidency when it comes to the creation and implementation of the pillar of social rights envisaged by the Juncker Commission.

Two panel discussions followed this introduction.

The **first panel** focused on how to ensure an adequate income to people, both when they are working and cannot work, and what role the EU can play in this.

Marjolijn Bulk, Policy Adviser on European Affairs for the Dutch Confederation of Trade Unions FNV and member of the European Trade Union Confederation Executive Committee, expressed her willingness to work closely together with Social Platform to change the EU's social agenda. She supported Social Platform's calls for an increase in wages that would have a beneficial impact on the economy through effects on internal demand and investments while restating the importance of social dialogue and of respecting the autonomy of social partners' collective bargaining.

Fintan Farrell, Acting-Director of the European Anti-Poverty Network, stressed that minimum income should be about having enough to thrive and not simply to survive. He underlined the importance of reference budgets to identify national baskets of goods and services to set up adequate minimum income schemes and the role the EU can play in it through a framework directive. We often hear about welfare fraud but the non take-up of social benefits reaches 60 per cent in some Member States. Wealth redistribution to fight inequalities should be a political priority as well as the consolidation of the EU of welfare states.

Jan Wilker, Institutional Coordinator at the European Youth Forum, called for a holistic approach to create the necessary macroeconomic environment to ensure quality jobs and inclusive growth. Youngsters often face multiple discriminations including in their professional environment. The implementation of structural measures like the Youth Guarantee should be closely monitored and the differentiation of minimum wages based on age should be avoided.

The **second panel** focused on labour mobility and on the role of adequate social standards and services in intra-EU mobility.

Rina Beers, Senior Policy Adviser at Federatie Opvang and former President of FEANTSA, recalled the high economic and social costs of homelessness for society. She described the situation faced by specific vulnerable groups such as people with mental and psychological problems and EU citizens that after moving to another country lose their job or become ill and fall into destitution.

Trinus Hoekstra, Project Manager at Kerk in Actie of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, contested the rhetoric about welfare tourism and fraud and stressed that people move country to escape poverty, find a job and have a better future. It is necessary to ensure access to services and a basic level of social protection for everybody, and acting at the local level is key.

Jumbo Klercq, founder of "The Elephant, Learning in Diversity", reminded participants of the importance of differentiating between voluntary and "forced" mobility. The recognition of education and skills is fundamental when it comes to mobility and the biggest challenge is now that of valuing informal learning, which is now becoming increasingly important but is very difficult to measure.

Questions and comments from the audience throughout the afternoon ensured a lively and interactive debate. A representative of the Dutch Basic Income Network called for the disconnection of labour and income to address present and future challenges of our societies. Other participants intervened to underline that the integrated approach the Dutch Presidency will pursue should effectively take into account different dimensions - disability, active ageing and access to care and to services for children of mobile workers - as well as recognise the role specific actors such as social enterprises can play in addressing poverty and social exclusion.

Discussions continued during the networking cocktail which closed the conference and provided further opportunities to strengthen links between Social Platform and national NGOs

and to lay the basis for a meaningful dialogue and successful cooperation with the Dutch Presidency.