



Mr Vladimir Spidla
Commissioner for Employment,
Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities
European Commission
B-1049 Brussels

7 July 2008

Re: Joint letter from the European social partners on childcare

Dear Commissioner,

In their progress report to the Tripartite Social Summit in March 2008, the European social partners agreed to submit a joint contribution to the Commission communication on childcare, due in September 2008, as part of their joint actions in the field of reconciliation of professional, private and family life.

In this context, this joint letter presents the European social partners' key messages on childcare. It builds upon the assessments of EU national social partners of the progress made in that field at the national level. The contributions with respect to childcare are annexed to this letter.

This letter is non-exhaustive and does not include other relevant topics with regard to childcare, such as its social and educational function in society.

Without greater efforts, the Barcelona targets will not be achieved by 2010

The provision of quality, accessible and affordable childcare for all is recognised as one of the most effective measures for achieving work-life balance, promoting the participation of women in the labour market and narrowing the gender pay gap. Quality childcare also brings a positive contribution to children's development.

In line with the Barcelona targets, a majority of Member States have invested more resources in the provision of childcare. However, despite some significant improvements in a number of them, the situation remains unsatisfactory in the majority of EU countries. Apart from a few cases, social partners drew attention in their assessments of the limitations of the availability of childcare facilities in their respective countries.

At the EU level, a wide variety of situations exist regarding the provision of childcare, both between and within EU Member States. In general terms, the assessments received from the national social partners express great concern about realising the Barcelona target by 2010 both in relation to the provision of childcare for 90% of children between 3 years of age and the mandatory school age, as well as the provision of childcare for at least 33% of children under 3. The overall situation is deemed to be unsatisfactory by the majority of respondents, with a slightly more positive outlook regarding the availability of pre-school facilities.

Childcare is often regulated by law at the national level but the provision of services is, in most cases managed at the local level. Regional disparities exist in terms of quality, accessibility and affordability. For example, the provision of childcare is particularly challenging in bigger cities and in remote areas.

Access to childcare is often limited due to a declining but still significant gap between the supply and the demand for childcare services. In order to bridge that gap, a majority of Member States have launched national strategies to raise the coverage of childcare infrastructures, along the lines of the Barcelona targets. Others have developed alternatives to the direct provision of childcare services by public authorities or subsidised organisations, such as giving allowances, the reimbursement of childcare costs, or fiscal incentives. In a number of cases and countries, social partners have played a stimulating role, in a variety of ways.

In practical terms, the gap between supply and demand for childcare acts as a disincentive to work for many potential second earners in couple families as well as for single parents. Moreover, the relatively high costs of childcare mean that in the short term, it may not make sense financially to enter or remain in the labour market. In line with the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy, the European social partners believe that the role of public authorities is to develop comprehensive good quality, accessible and affordable childcare infrastructures in order to ensure that work always pays more than inactivity. In addition, specific measures should be addressed to also enable unemployed people to access childcare facilities.

Ensuring the availability of childcare is first and foremost the responsibility of public authorities, but social partners can play a complementary role

Investing in childcare is a social investment benefiting the whole of society. Public authorities are therefore best placed to regulate and/or provide such services. In some countries, private companies are also playing a role in the provision of childcare.

European Social Partners recognise the complementary role that social partners can play. In their Framework of Actions on gender equality, in which supporting work-life balance is one of the four priority areas for action, they highlighted the importance of jointly approaching public authorities to develop instruments that help increase the availability of accessible and affordable child care facilities of good quality. They also mentioned practical tools to do so, such as sponsoring child care centres or providing an allowance covering part of the nursery costs to parents, and creating funds by collective agreements or other means to support childcare projects addressing specific needs of working parents such as care for sick children, care outside regular opening hours, etc. This can help in particular SME's.

The role of social partners has been highlighted by the national assessments. It includes for instance the contribution of social partners in informing public authorities about labour market needs so that childcare services enable greater participation levels in the labour market. This may also involve social partners' participation in tripartite consultative bodies and at various stages of policy development.

Through their position social partners influence decision-making and legislation in the field of childcare. Extension of opening hours, greater flexibility in childcare offers and the abolition of pre-scheduled closing days in childcare institutions are examples of demands reflecting the needs of employees and employers.

Furthermore, social partners can promote and participate in innovative projects funded under the European Social Fund (ESF). These possibilities have already been proposed in different action plans, sometimes in partnership with local authorities. During the months ahead, the European social partners will assess more closely these activities through their Integrated Programme, part of it focusing on the evaluation of social partners' involvement in the ESF.

Especially in countries where the provision of childcare services is still very low, employers may decide, on a voluntary basis, to provide childcare services for their employees. They can also facilitate access to childcare services for their employees. Existing administrative obstacles should be lifted and fiscal incentives could be put in place to help more employers decide to provide such services for their employees. In any case, the voluntary contribution of employers in this field should not lead public authorities to abandon their responsibility to provide such services.

Indeed trends in certain countries show that there are many advantages for employers and local public authorities to work in partnership to provide affordable and accessible childcare. Moreover, there is evidence that available public funds could be used more effectively in some countries through public-private partnerships.

Public authorities should ensure that childcare is affordable for all parents

Parents want childcare that works for their particular employment and family circumstances and corresponds to their financial means. Legislation in the area of childcare should be demand-led, and the diversification of service providers should prevail in order to better respond to the various needs of families. For example, it is

important to promote and broaden the availability of childcare options in order to meet the needs of working parents with children with special needs (i.e. affected by long term sickness, disability, etc.).

Provision should be judged on the quality of the service not on who delivers it. Moreover, the financial responsibility of public authorities is important to make sure that childcare services are and remain affordable. High costs are a barrier to the uptake of childcare facilities and these costs have a stronger negative impact on working parents with more than one child, low-income workers, single parents, job seekers and the unemployed.

Quality of services provided and quality of jobs in the sector are important conditions

Public authorities are responsible for carrying out inspections of childcare facilities as well as monitoring the quality of the services and the working conditions of its staff on a regular basis. These measures will also contribute to the positive development of the sector, not often considered as an attractive employment option and a sector which, in a number of countries, is widely lacking a qualified work-force. Quality of jobs in the care sector is an element that cannot be neglected and it can also positively affect social resistances of parents to leave their children in crèches.

Social partners representing employers and workers in the sector contribute to discussions on quality and organisation of childcare services.

Given the high number of women working in childcare services, improving working conditions in this sector can also contribute to the EU overall strategy of improving women's access to quality employment and reducing the gender pay gap.

Conclusion and actions

In order to increase labour participation rates, greater efforts are needed at all levels to ensure that childcare for 90% of children between 3 years of age and the mandatory school age, and for at least 33% of children under 3 is provided by 2010. These targets have to be achieved and further efforts should also be planned in order to reach full coverage of childcare facilities, by matching demand, and addressing specific needs (children with disabilities, etc.)

The responsibility to provide childcare services lies with the Member States. The role of the EU is and should remain that of monitoring progress and promoting the exchange of experiences between the Member States. Appropriate measures should be envisaged by those countries that are at a standstill or even decreasing the provision of childcare facilities. Particular attention should be paid to areas where the provision of childcare is a serious problem.

The European Social Partners call on the Commission and the Member States to monitor progress on the basis of National Reform Plans as well as to make recommendations and to take action accordingly.

The European social partners also recall that they have already committed themselves to monitoring and assessing the developments carried out in the implementation of their Framework of Actions on Gender Equality, one priority being reconciliation between work, family and private life. In the framework of their yearly reporting exercise they will also pay attention to social partner activities that help promoting the availability of accessible and affordable childcare facilities of good quality.

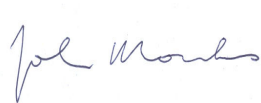
Finally, the European social partners will encourage the exchange of good practices and innovative experiences and the use of the ESF funding programme available at national level.

This joint letter on childcare is the first joint action as part of the European social partners' package on reconciliation of professional, private and family life

On 13 March 2008, the European social partners have presented their progress report on reconciliation of professional, private and family life to the Tripartite Social Summit.

In this report, a series of joint actions have been agreed upon including on maternity protection; parental leave; new forms of leave for fathers; new forms of leave and care for dependent persons; and working arrangements.

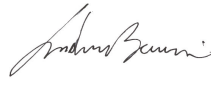
The joint letter on childcare is the first contribution of the European social partners' package on reconciliation. Other joint actions are currently being discussed and will follow in the coming months.



ETUC
John Monks
Secretary General



BUSINESSEUROPE
Philippe de Buck
Secretary General



UEAPME
Andréa Benassi
Secretary General



CEEP
Rainer Plassmann
Secretary General