

The New Normal?

Back in 2014 Barack Obama warned about the need to cast aside differences and prepare for an upcoming pandemic. Well, we were ill prepared for Covid 19 and many many people across the globe contracted the virus and as of early July almost 544,000 people have died.

Social isolation, social distancing, lockdowns, face masks travel restrictions, limits on social gatherings have become part of routine. As lockdown is lifted, as leisure and retail outlets open albeit in a more limited fashion, as health and other services return we are warned of the damage to economies, of the financial cost and to prepare for a new normal.



'New normal' however is being used almost as a way to quell any uncertainty brought about by the coronavirus. Welcome to a new world order. However framing this new normal in terms of where we were to deal with our current reality ignores the fact that 'normal' was not and is not working for a majority of society. So if Obama got it right in 2014 what flag is he waving now?

What is a danger is that we stay stuck in a new normal where unemployment rates stay high, people who have jobs see their incomes go up, businesses make big profits. But they're learned to do more with less, and so they don't hire.

Barack Obama, 2020

Across Europe we have seen a disparity of COVID-19 deaths among those people living in poor, overcrowded housing, those living in poverty, the most vulnerable in our communities a fact that exposes systemic health disparities. This 'new normal' ignores the lived experiences of migrant displacement and exacerbated structural inequalities, the difficulties homeless people experienced self-isolating and following health guidance. The drop in income for those now unemployed or not earning has forced more people into poverty and yet fostering a one-size-fits-all strategy only exacerbates the gap between 'have' and 'have not'.

The European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN) has recently published its assessment of the EU 2020 Country-Specific Recommendations (CSR). A key question is to see how far the CSRs would adapt to the impact of covid 19, put people first, and embed social rights with short-term support and long-term effective action to reduce poverty.

The full CSR recommendations can be found here;
https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-european-semester-country-specific-recommendations-commission-recommendations_en

And EAPN's assessment here;
<https://www.eapn.eu/eapn-assessment-of-the-2020-country-specific-recommendations-position-paper/>

EAPN key messages:

1. Important backing for emergency measures, but threat of austerity cuts to recoup deficits. Welcome challenges to aggressive tax planning but progressive tax justice is notably lacking.
2. Exit Strategies support green + digital transition but insufficient focus on 'inclusive transition', investing in social rights, welfare states and public services.
3. 14 MS received poverty CSRs highlighting impact of COVID on existing poverty with some useful measures but lacking an integrated antipoverty strategy.
4. Too many left behind! No CSRs for at-risk target groups, nor any concrete measures: particularly with respect to the homeless, Roma and ethnic minorities, migrants, families with children and people with disabilities.
5. Welcome focus on adequacy/coverage of minimum income with important call for progress towards social protection for all as a social right, regardless of employment status.
6. Insufficient guarantees with regard to access to essential services and to considering the social impact and cost of privatisation of public services.
7. Health and long-term care a new priority! – but needs a stronger focus on universal access, unmet needs, a rights-based approach, public service principles and public investment.
8. Employability and skills development still priorities for overcoming new challenges due to the COVID19 pandemic, but no mention of promoting inclusive labour markets or active inclusion.
9. Quality of work insufficiently prioritised and in-work poverty largely ignored, but more weight given to the role of Public Employment Services and social partners.
10. Education and training still primarily seen as labour market tools, despite some attention given to inclusiveness, quality, and vulnerable groups.
11. Inclusive and quality education is largely off the radar, and the strong link between disadvantaged socioeconomic background and poor educational outcomes is not included in the CSRs.
12. Continued improvements to social dialogue but much more needed on civil dialogue and the meaningful involvement of civil society organisations.

From these key messages we can surmise that the 'new normal' leaves much for those involved in community development across Europe. We set out 5 challenges in 2019, pre covid 19 and these remain as countries come out of lock down and shape a different future. All are still important challenges and from the European Country Specific recommendations none more so than the first and last.

- ✓ first, the persistence of poverty, social exclusion and growing inequality and the need to build more inclusive societies;
- ✓ second, the migration crisis and the need to ensure effective policies and programmes for integration and empowerment for migrants and refugees;
- ✓ third, the growth of racism and xenophobia and the need to more effectively ensure equality for all people and diverse groups in our societies and to recognise and celebrate difference and diversity;
- ✓ fourth, the democratic deficit at the heart of Europe where by those affected by issues feel they have no say in the policies and programmes that affect them; and
- ✓ fifth, the environmental crisis and the need to connect environmental and social justice in building a sustainable and fair future.