

Providers of social services across the EU will be affected by the outcomes of policy discussions which are now being prepared in Brussels meeting rooms. Certain institutional and political developments – including the Lisbon Treaty's entry into force, but also the Monti Report on the Internal Market and the current review of EU legislation

on State Aids – will all affect how national governments can regulate and subsidise services in the public good.

On 26 and 27 October 2010, the Third Forum on Social Services of General interest (SSGIs) will play a pivotal role in shaping decision makers' views, and the representative bodies for the panoply of non-profit social services providers are already working intensively to ensure that their role is recognised and their interests are protected. Yesterday (July 13) a technical seminar was held, with representatives of national governments, European institutions, business and providers of SSGIs to have a preliminary exchange of views and try to frame the debate.

The tone of the seminar was very legalistic, and discussions centred on how to make corrections to the system currently in place. **Social services providers contest this narrow vision**. They are concerned that the traditional logic – which only takes account of public services providers on one hand and private for-profit ones on the other – will produce policies that ignore the needs of hundreds of thousands of local service providers.

To break the debate open they are affirming the specificities of social service providers, and

calling for these specificities to feed into a more nuanced policy approach that will protect the vital work that these actors do in our communities, notably in terms of social cohesion and services to those most in need.

On the other hand, it is important to tread carefully in order to avoid drawing the EU into elaborating clear definitions in an area which remains a national competence, since this too can restrict the action of service providers, and complicate their working environment. But ultimately there is a clear need for the particular situation of non-profit bodies to be understood so as not to let them be scuppered by rules designed with business in mind.

Following this seminar, the Informal Network of Social Services Providers (INSSP) - which draws together European platforms representing non-profit providers of services in fields such as aging, disability, homelessness, youth inclusion, education and training and many others - resolved to address a letter to the Belgian presidency of the EU outlining their concerns. The presidency has indicated its solidarity with the belief that the EU should place social concerns much more firmly on the agenda, ahead of economic ones, and the letter is intended to reinforce this conviction in view of the October Forum.

In the meantime, the INSSP will engage with national governments to establish the range of circumstances under which social services providers operate, to provide as nuanced a picture as possible to the Forum. CEDAG will also continue to liaise with its members in order to elaborate a common position on the review of State Aids insofar as SSGIs are affected. The Lisbon Treaty gives civil society the right to participate in decision making, and European NGOs are working to ensure that right is respected.