5. Key concluding messages

Throughout 2015 and 2016, the European Commission introduced several changes in the European Semester process to enhance stakeholders’ ownership of the process. In this light, the Commission’s analysis of each Member State’s economic and social situation, the so-called country report, is now published two months before the Commission issues Country-specific Recommendations to each Member State. This two months period is used for meetings in Member States, which usually involve civil servants, social partners and NGOs. Despite this move towards greater dialogue, a lack of consultation with the social affairs departments of regional and local authorities has been identified by ESN’s Reference Group on the Semester. Taking into account that social policies have been increasingly decentralised to regional and local authorities in most Member States, this is an issue that should be addressed with a view to improving implementation and creating more ownership of the process.

There are several recurring themes that have emerged when analysing the 25 countries presented in this report, regardless of their social welfare systems. These are: the availability of childcare and the development of family-based approaches in child protection, youth, long-term unemployment, support for people with severe mental health problems and disabilities, housing problems and the impact of the refugee crisis on public services. This suggests that cross-country feedback and insights are vital. It also reinforces all the more EU-wide efforts to encourage mechanisms to promote better welfare systems and service provision, especially for vulnerable groups across Member States.

The fallout from the financial crisis remains significant for several countries. Where this is the case, the consequences for social services are not only serious but enduring, impacting families and vulnerable groups across the board. A central point is how much this risks becoming ‘the new normal’ and the danger that vital investment and innovation could be abandoned. Tension between national, regional and local administrations and systems continue in many - if not all - states. Restructuring, but mostly fiscal priorities, appear to dominate many strategies.

The availability of childcare for the most disadvantaged children varies significantly across countries. The report’s findings emphasise that quality, coverage and intensity of early childcare are still low in many Member States. Though progress has been recorded in terms of coverage, the cost of childcare is still high for poorer families, which impacts on parental employment and decisions as to whether children should be cared for at home. When it comes to child protection, there has been a significant move towards prevention; for instance, through the establishment of family support workers to prevent children from being taken into care. However, with a significant number of children still in institutions, further work is necessary to improve foster care for the most vulnerable children, in particular children with disabilities.

On employment, the impact of the crisis is still reverberating. Clearly, youth unemployment and long-term unemployment are a cause for considerable concern across Member States. However, many contributors to the report highlighted the issue of how ‘activation’ has become the norm, which is very significant for how employment policies and services are configured. The report findings suggest a need to develop broader social inclusion strategies along the lines of the concept of ‘social sustainability’, meaning that social policies should aim not only at including people in the labour market but at improving people’s overall quality of life. Minimum income schemes appear to feature prominently in some countries as a tool for mitigating poverty with some strong examples of how it might work.

The issue of supporting people with several mental health problems and with disabilities, especially those with complex or multiple disabilities, presents an enduring set of challenges, not least of which are poverty and deinstitutionalisation. Even where there is progress, at times if feels slow in many places. The report’s findings suggest it is important that this issue does not slide down the list of priorities as public budgets continue to come under threat.
Housing exclusion was referred to as an increasingly prominent issue. Problems related to housing are no longer limited to the most vulnerable groups, and increasingly concern more people from middle classes. With many urban areas identified as unaffordable and with difficulties in the social housing sector including overall stock, this is clearly a central theme that will be salient across the Member States in years to come.

The refugee crisis and its impact on public services have come to be a major consideration for several countries over the past year, and are apparent throughout the report. There seems to be a will in many places to try to provide the best care, support and training to promote refugees’ social integration. However, against a backdrop of strained resources, it is certainly a major challenge to be able to go forward in terms of service provision and social integration.

Despite these challenges, there is considerable innovation in every country notwithstanding constraints on budgets. And, it is worth highlighting that this continues to be the case. Alongside this, it is clear that the consistency of service provision and a focus on evidence-based practice are things that those working in the social services sector want to see more of. In addition, it is certainly something service users stand to gain from. Ensuring, and drawing upon, evidence and evaluation across the whole sector and throughout local, regional and national levels has been highlighted as a priority for all.