

A European Social Union: why we need it, what it means

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Published in : Rivista Italiana di Politiche Pubbliche

JEL: social Europe, European solidarity, open coordination, social investment

Abstract

Arguments on 'social Europe' need to give an unequivocal answer to questions of *why*, *what*, and *how*. With regard to the question of *why*, which is the main focus of this paper, I argue that, whereas ten years ago the quest for an operational description of the European social model might have been dismissed as interesting but not strictly necessary, today it is no less than an existential conundrum for the Union. EMU must be complemented with a genuine European Social Union, for it to be sustainable in the long term. The answer to the question of *why* logically implies an answer to the question of *what*: a Social Union means that the EU would guide and support the substantive development of national welfare states, on the basis of general social standards and common objectives, leaving ways and means of social policy to Member States. That presupposes a sufficient degree of consensus on the goals of social policy. It also requires pan-European solidarity based on reciprocity in the relationships between the Member States. Pursuing the question of *what*, I briefly sketch some elements of the ensuing social agenda, with a focus on the notion of social investment. I also identify some of the urgencies in respect of the *how*, particularly the need to restore the unity between economic and social policy, and between short and long-term objectives, and how this would relate to the 'contractual approach' proposed by the President of the Council, Herman Van Rompuy.