

## **The Good Society Debate: the next steps**

### **Introduction**

The FES London Office organised a Good Society workshop in July 2013 in order to introduce new key activities that are intended to form the core of a second stage of the Good Society debate in the future. The first phase started 5 years ago and included an opening paper by Andrea Nahles and Jon Cruddas as well as five large thematic online debates and major conferences on the topics of political economy, sustainability, equality, democracy and party organising. This work together with two major books in English and in German (published by Palgrave and by Suhrkamp) and another paper by Thorben Albrecht and Neal Lawson were the core products of the phase I of the Good Society Debate.

At the end of this process we have two major assets, which form the basis for the next phase. First, the political reform ideas we developed. The Good Society approach to the renewal of European social democracy was dubbed the most influential social democratic intellectual current in Europe by a team of researchers from Göttingen University. And second a large international network of thinkers and other associated people who have participated in the development of the Good Society approach over several years.

### **The Workshop**

The workshop focussed on three core areas that had been identified as key areas for further development. *First*, there is a need for more tailor-made ***national Good Society Debates*** that specifically take the wide variety of different national circumstances into account. The Good Society approach is not one single fixed message but moreover an ‘intellectual toolbox’ that provides analysis and political solutions that can and need to be adjusted to different national political circumstances. This characteristic is helpful in the current situation as the diagnosis of the first workshop session showed. We asked representatives from 14 European countries the following two questions: What are the priorities in the debate of social democracy in your country? In what way do you think these should influence the next steps of the Good Society Debate?

In summary there were three recurring themes (the full answers of the participants are available as a separate document):

1. **The identity crisis of social democracy:** five years into the global economic crisis many social democratic parties still lack a clear-cut identity and a firm political agenda defining what they stand for. In many countries there is only a subdued discussion of social democracy, in other countries a deep discussion is missing altogether.
2. **Political stability:** apart from the general lack of intellectual discussion in some countries the unstable political circumstances are a further factor preventing necessary debate and political renewal. In crisis countries such as Greece and Spain the general national plight is superseding any narrower party concerns and Hungary is fighting against the progressing erosion of its democratic system.
3. **Challenges in opposition and in government:** in many countries social democrats are facing challenges from previous government spells or even from current involvement. It is often the case that programmatic thinking processes are stifled by government participation. It therefore becomes obvious that social democrats are currently faced with severe programmatic challenges whether they are in government or opposition. This makes the task of a new rethinking process even more urgent.

The three recurring problems mentioned above show that more tailor-made work in different European countries needs to be done and that a rather narrow focus on winning elections is not good enough as social democratic parties are suffering in both government and opposition. Winning elections is a tool to put your political ideas into practise but if these ideas are poorly defined it is no wonder that even in government social democrats struggle to lead from the front. This suggests that there is no way around having deep soul-searching discussions about the future of social democracy which makes the absence of such debates in many countries all the more problematic.

The *second* part of the workshop addressed the *European dimension*. This has been an underdeveloped area of the Good Society Debate from the beginning and given the approaching European elections in May 2014, this is certainly a dimension that needs urgent attention. It became clear in the presentations as well as in the debate that there are two key points that need to be addressed:

1. **A European vision beyond the immediate crisis:** social democrats are too often caught between reacting to the European crisis and the need to develop a longer-term vision for European integration. There is a growing divide between deficit and

surplus countries, which is also reflected in social democratic parties. There is an urgent need to develop a positive social democratic case for European integration that can unite social democratic parties.

2. **Acting together:** the last European election campaign was dominated by national issues (also helped by the fact that there was no joint candidate). This will be different next year as there will be a leading social democratic candidate and, as the European crisis unfolded, there is a bigger than ever need to have - at least to some extent - a common message. The Good Society approach could be particularly useful in this area.

The *third* and last part of the workshop dealt with the attempt of the Good Society Debate to connect with other political and societal *discourses beyond Europe*. Marc Saxer, Director of the FES Thailand office, was present and we discussed in what way the Good Society Debate could connect with the Economy of Tomorrow project of the FES in Asia. We identified numerous areas where connecting discourses would be beneficial and by common consent it was decided that this should be pursued further. Commonalities exist to the concepts of “harmonious society” (East Asia) and Amartya Sen’s vision of a society which provides “full capabilities for all”. East Asian states have long been sceptical against liberalised markets, and insisted on a guiding role of the state in economic development. The build-up of welfare systems and progressive wage policies in China show that there are overlaps between the developmental and social democratic discourses. The social democratic ideal of balanced systems and demand-driven growth resonates well in Asia. Beyond Asia, other regions - in particular Latin America - were identified as potential partners in pursuing the global agenda of the future Good Society Debate.

### **Where do we go from here?**

Based on the achievements of part one of the Good Society Debate, the analysis of the three key topical areas presented above and the deliberations with participants at the conference, there were a number of key activities identified that could form the basis for the future Good Society Debate:

1. **The European election campaign:** The PES Deputy Secretary General Marije Laffeber was present at the London conference and we were invited to co-organise a joint meeting in Brussels together with the PES to bring input from the Good Society group straight into the deliberations for the PES election manifesto for 2014. It was too late to provide input for the PES fundamental programme but the election

manifesto process is a good opportunity to strengthen the connection between our intellectual work and practical social democratic politics in Europe. The meeting in Brussels is planned for November bringing together the “Good Society group” to discuss inputs for the PES manifesto process.

Apart from the meeting with the PES a European Good Society paper setting out a positive vision for Europe could also be a valuable contribution to the political debates and activities in the run-up to next year’s election.

2. **Pan-European activities:** Building on FES events that have already taken place across Europe in Hungary and in Portugal it would be useful to organise country-specific activities that could serve as a start to ‘customise’ the Good Society approach for different European countries. According to Patrick Eichler, one such event is already planned in the Czech Republic for this year’s autumn.

Apart from events, producing ‘national’ Good Society publications could also be part of the ‘customisation’ strategy. Similar to what has already been done in the UK and in Germany, some core Good Society texts could be translated into different languages and amended by texts referring specially to national issues. This would allow for further spreading the intellectual core of the Good Society Debate but also help to translate this core into relevant national politics.

3. **Global activities:** The main aim of future activities is to present the core ideas of the Good Society approach to progressive forces outside Europe and to investigate where the connective arguments between the different intellectual debates are. It would be important to further improve language and reach of the Good Society Debate. An example is the visit in South Korea and Japan of the editors of the recent German Good Society book, Christian Kellermann and Henning Meyer, organised by the local FES offices in October 2013. Henning Meyer will also participate in the Economy of Tomorrow Asia-Europe Dialogue on “Market and State” in Shanghai in November. After the tour it should be evaluated how the connections with Asia can be further improved and maintained and in whether linking up with other regions of the world could be equally useful.
4. **Broadening discursive alliances:** it was also suggested that more efforts should be made to build discursive alliances under the brand name ‘Good Society’. Apart from a more direct impact on social democratic politics the links to trade unions, NGOs and other social groups should be strengthened to reinforce the aspiration of working towards an inclusive Good Society. In addition to specific social groups it was

suggested to create wider support from influential thinkers that have already been associated with the Good Society (for instance Henning Mankell, who contributed to one of the online debates) or are likely to support it (Etzioni, Galbraith, Shiller, ...).

Broadening the social scope of the Good Society Debate is also important because in some European countries, and even more so beyond Europe's borders, there are only weak political structures that could organise and drive such an intellectual debate. In order to make a real discursive impact, one has to develop broader intellectual alliances with a variety of progressive forces. Online debates could be a helpful tool in this context.

5. **Presentation of the Good Society:** the way in which ideas are presented on the internet and on social media is an important part of pushing ideas out into the world. It was suggested that the online activities of the Good Society Debate should be rethought and improved, either as part of Social Europe Journal and/or with and own portal as access point – a sort of Good Society Observatory. It will have to be determined what specific functions such a new online strategy should fulfil and in what way it could support all the activities mentioned above. An improved web approach seems, however, crucial given the widening of the proposed activities.

Over the last years many more problems have emerged, which require further work and intelligent strategies. In the wake of the Eurozone crisis, the fundamental erosion of trust in the European unification project is certainly one of the most pressing issues. But also within European countries a lot of political work remains to be done. Linking and extending the supranational with the national dimension was and remains a key challenge for the future.

### Participants of the workshop, 12th July 2013

Country	First Name	Last Name	Affiliation
Croatia	Milan	Živković	Director of the political academy Novo društvo
Czech Republic	Patrik	Eichler	Member of the Board of the Masaryk Demokratische Akademie
Denmark	Kristian	Weise	Director of the think tank Cevea
Finland	Mikko	Majander	Director of the Kalevi Sorsa Foundation
France	Laurent	Bouvet	Professor of Political Science at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines
Germany	Thorben	Albrecht	Head of the Strategy and Policy Department of the SPD
Germany	Ernst	Hillebrand	Head of the Department for International Policy Analysis of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Germany	Christian	Kellermann	Deputy Head of Strategy of the SPD
Germany	Henning	Meyer	Senior Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics, editor of Social Europe Journal
Germany	Marc	Saxer	Director of the Thailand office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Germany	Ulrich	Storck	Director of the London office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Greece	Dionyssis	Dimitrakopoulos	Senior Lecturer in Politics, Department of Politics, Birkbeck College, University of London
Hungary	Gabor	Gyori	Freelance political analyst
Italy	Paolo	Borioni	Member of the scientific advisory board of Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini
Netherlands	Marije	Laffeber	Deputy Secretary General of the PES
Portugal	Maria João	Rodrigues	Professor at the Institute of European Studies, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Lisbon University Institute
Spain	Andrés	Ortega	Consultant, former Head of Policy, Prime Minister's Office
Sweden	Håkan	Bengtsson	CEO of Arenagruppen
UK	Robin	Wilson	Freelance researcher
UK	Martin	McIvor	Advisor to Rachel Reeves MP, Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury
UK	Neal	Lawson	Chair of Compass