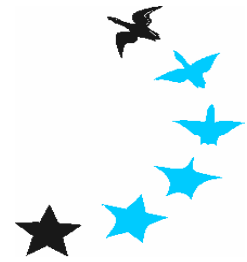


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**CEFEC Conference – Athens
2-8 October 2003**

**Panel discussion: “Social Firms in Europe and
the development of common strategies in the EU”**

MHE regrets not being able to attend this important conference.

1. Discrimination leads to Social Exclusion
Social exclusion is an offence against human dignity and fundamental human rights. Social exclusion and discrimination of people with mental health problems is a major and universal problem.
2. Discrimination in employment is one of the greatest problems in mental health.
3. MHE has always stressed the great importance of employment of people with mental health problems since it is a major tool to social integration.
4. In 2000, MHE conducted a European Study on “Social Inclusion – a challenge for the EU” and consulted groups of users and –users of MH services and representative organisations working in the field of rehabilitation.
Four key conclusions on employment were drawn:
 - Users should be involved in all stages of decision-making when it comes to employment, policies and regulations that concern people with mental health problems
 - Professionals should look for the empowerment of people with mental health problems. Social Firms are privileged partners for this.
 - The opportunity to re-enter the work-force should be part of any rehabilitation programme
 - Regular paid work should always be considered as the final goal, however sheltered work should be attractive and diversified and employees should get reasonable and fair wages for the work they are doing.
5. The European Union is showing growing interest for mental health issues and especially the link between mental health problems (illness) and social exclusion.

In Greece on 2-3 June the European Health Council decided to improve the treatment of mental illness and to put more emphasis on a patient-centred approach.

Recently, on 2-4 June 2003 at a meeting of the Ministers of Social Affairs and Employment in Luxembourg, the topic of mental illness and social exclusion was put on the agenda.

The Council adopted a conclusion on combating stigma and social exclusion in relation to mental health.

"Member States are invited to give specific attention to the impact and discrimination related problems due to mental illness and to the reduction of risks of social exclusion by taking concrete action in partnership with all stakeholders, and to collect good quality data on health, economic and social consequences of stigma due to mental illness.

The European Commission is invited to take into account this issue in all community policies and actions, while facilitating exchange of information and learning between Member States on policies on health protection, by combating stigma and discrimination of people with mental illness and promoting their social inclusion."

6. National Action Plans on Employment

Member States have to present their N.A.P.-Employment by October 2003. The EU has included several references to disability in the guidelines "promoting the integration and combating discrimination of disadvantaged people in the labour market".

7. Common strategy

Since employment is a key to social integration, the development of common strategies is obvious. The Mobilisation of a wide range of policies is necessary. Alongside employment policies, social protection and social security have a predominant role to play while other factors, such as housing, education, health, mobility, justice, leisure should also be acknowledged. Mainstreaming employment at both national and community level is relevant. Employment is the best safeguard against social exclusion. Promoting social economy through Social Firms and Co-operatives could lead to a society with greater social cohesion and less exclusion.