

European Parliament Informal Carers Interest Group

Informal Care and Corporate Social responsibility – a natural fit

**Virtual meeting of the European Parliament Informal Carers Interest Group
20 April, 14.00-15.30**

Meeting Report

Marisa Matias MEP welcomed participants and briefly introduced the Interest Group, which was set up in 2007.

The Group's mission is *to critically monitor and analyse EU policy development for its impact on carers and to propose and advocate concrete action to improve the day-to-day situation for Europe's many carers, working in close partnership with relevant stakeholders.*

She then introduced the context of the meeting, which would address how informal care and the needs of informal carers can be better matched with the concept and practice of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This concept also links in with the EU Work/Life Balance Directive and the upcoming EU Long Term Care Strategy.

Informal carers should be seen both as an integral and indispensable part of European care systems, as 80% of all long-term care in Europe is provided by family, friends and neighbours. Therefore, without recognising and catering for the vital role of the millions of carers across Europe it will prove extremely challenging to meet the growing care needs of an ageing population. Providing care without recognition or support can have a negative impact on the health, social and economic wellbeing of carers; this holds particularly true for working carers, trying and often struggling to combine work with their care responsibilities. Many working carers need to either decrease or leave their paid work to balance work and care. This can lead to financial difficulties: in the short-term (because of decreased income and out of pocket care expenses...) but also in the longer-term (because of loss of social security and pension rights). So, measures should be taken to enable and facilitate their crucial role. These measures should ensure a coherent and consistent approach to support informal carers across the EU. The EU Work/Life Balance Directive, adopted in 2019, is such a measure. This includes both compulsory measures (5 days care leave) as well as recommendation to take further measures (for example, compensation) and will be implemented by this summer; it is important to bear in mind that this is not just up to governments. Companies can play an important and indispensable role and the concept and practice of CSR can be an important vehicle for change. Therefore, the aims of the meeting were to:

- Make the business case for employers paying attention to carers.
- Explore the potential of the concept and practice of Corporate Social Responsibility and what companies can do to support and enable carers to care.
- Be informed of practical examples of carers and CSR
- Reflect on the implementation of the Work/life balance Directive across EU Member States.

Marisa Matias MEP then invited **Sirpa Pietikäinen MEP** to provide a brief overview of the latest developments in relation to the European Parliament's Own Initiative Report, of which she is co-Rapporteur.

Ms Pietikäinen MEP underlined the many different elements that come to play when thinking about care and care provision. COVID-19 has put the spotlight on the poor status of care delivery in the EU: care systems lack flexibility and are not equipped to respond appropriately and effectively to crisis. During the pandemic, older and disabled people were not sufficiently considered. Moreover, informal carers were largely forgotten, not only in practical terms such as availability of protective equipment but also in terms of the impact of lockdown on access to support and respite services (e.g., day care centres).

It has become clear that current systems are not equitable; services required should be accessible irrespective of age, health condition or location, but they are not.

The second point is that care services are still too 'institutionalised'; home and community based care needs to be boosted and EU-wide action is needed to ensure that this transformation takes place.

The third point relates to the need for much more resources for care systems and services.

In terms of specific support for informal care and carers, action in the various care sectors can help. For instance, improving childcare and care for older people would help informal carers to an extent. However, there is a need for EU action to specifically address informal care as this would clearly acknowledge its importance and give status to informal (of all ages); it would help to develop the required services and support required as well as the appropriate work/life balance.

Ms Pietikäinen MEP expressed her intention for the Parliament Report to push the Commission to move on all the points above. Other relevant issues relate to the need to put in place monitoring systems focusing on all aspects of care – formal, informal, community, institutional – to track what is happening and have a clear picture of where action would be most required.

Marisa Matias MEP then gave the floor to **Stecy Yghemonos (Director, Eurocarers)**, who first listed the benefits of supporting carers in the workforce, as found by a survey held by Carers UK as part of their Employers for Carers¹ initiative. These relate to.

- Increased staff morale and loyalty
- Staff retention
- Reduced sick leave and absenteeism
- Improved staff engagement
- Improved people management
- More effective team work
- Increased productivity
- Reduced recruitment and training costs
- Improved ability to attract talent
- Higher revenues,
- Lower operating costs,
- Improved quality of customer service and customer retention.
- Many other studies have found the same; the business case is easily made.

Stecy Yghemonos also reflected on the state a play of the transposition of the EU Work/Life Balance Directive. It is hoped that Member states can be encouraged to go beyond the rights introduced by the Directive, as part of the upcoming EU Care Strategy.

As a quick reminder, Mr Yghemonos explained that the Directive is part of EU efforts to address the gender employment gap; by extension, the objective was also to address the related gender pay and pension gaps.

In terms of informal carers, the Directive introduces a right to unpaid leave of 5 days per carer per year as well as right to request flexible working arrangements. While the care leave is compulsory, access to flexible working arrangements is not; this provision serves as an encouragement to Member States to introduce such measures.

The Directive is ground-breaking for two main reasons:

- it is the first time that the need to support informal carers is explicitly acknowledged in an EU legislative act and that new rights in minimum standards of relevance to carers are introduced at every level;
- the transposition of the Directive means that the concept of informal care must be introduced in the legislation across Member States - and in this case in employment legislation.

According to recent data from Eurofound, at least 44 million people have been involved in the provision of informal care in Europe. This is an underestimation as many carers do not view themselves as carers; and, as the survey focused on the population the age group between 18 and 64, the figures do not include young or older carers.

¹ <https://www.employersforcarers.org/>

So, 12% of the adult population are carers, with 7% being working carers. The Directive has a direct bearing on the latter; but what about the 5% of the population - at least 18 million people – that are not covered by the Directive?

The Directive's definition of informal carers is too narrow from the perspective of Eurocarers, i.e., '*a worker providing personal care or support to relative or to person who lives in the same household is the worker who needs support of significant care or support for a serious medical reason.*' Eurocarers advocates the use of a more comprehensive definition that goes beyond next of kind and co-habitants to include all people providing support and care on a voluntary basis (e.g., friends and neighbours). Carers who are not in employment should also be recognised and supported. This should be captured and addressed in the future Care Strategy.

As regards the right to a minimum of five days of leave per year the worker, one could wonder whether this suffices. How can this be enough to provide care for a loved one with a serious medical condition? However, it is important to underline that the Directive only lays down minimum requirements; EU countries are free to set higher standards than those defined. It is also the job of representative organisation such as Eurocarers to encourage national and regional decision makers to be more ambitious.

When it comes to flexible working arrangements (as another vital step to ensure better work life balance of carers), a growing number of employers have understood the added value of supporting working carers; helpful measures such as flexible working hours, provision of information and counselling at work, and measures to address carers' health and well being are being put in place. While these good practices are to be welcomed, these should be accessible to **all** working carers, e.g., also to those working with atypical or temporary contracts.

Eurocarers has kept a close eye on the transposition of the Directive²; many Member States now tick all the boxes listed in the Directive. However, when taking a closer look at the reality it becomes clear that much remains to be done. For instance, some countries have introduced criteria which will exclude many informal carers from the rights set out in the Directive, which will therefore fail to meet their needs.

For example, in Croatia where the definition of informal care only concerns the parents of children with disabilities, which excludes all other forms of informal care. Or the case of Bulgaria where care leave is only granted if no other unemployed (!) family member is available to care.

There are good examples as well, fortunately. In Belgium, for instance, the definition is in line with the one advocated by Eurocarers; in France support for carers is generous and accompanied by financial support. The Parliament and Commission should use these good practice examples when developing a Care Strategy which will promote change.

In conclusion, Stecy Yghemonos came forward with some further pointers to inspire an EU Care Strategy:

- Firstly, he re-emphasized the importance of the definition of informal care/informal carers as this will determine the right to support. A good legal definition of informal care is the foundation for the identification of carers, for the assessment of their needs and for the provision of adequate support measures.
- Secondly, he stated that informal care cannot only be approached as a barrier to (female) employment. Informal care will remain part of the long term care equation in the foreseeable future; not only because it will be impossible to replace informal care altogether, but also because caregiving – when adequately supported - is a driver of social cohesion and encouraging generational solidarity.
- Thirdly, the Directive should be seen as an unfinished journey. While many Member States do comply with the Directive on paper, many of the measures in place fail to live up to its ambition.
- Finally, the Directive should be seen as only one piece of the puzzle. Eurocarers and other stakeholders will keep pushing beyond the scope of the Directive and continue to encourage Member States to be more ambitious.

Marisa Matias MEP then gave the floor to **Jit Saini (Senior Vice President, Head of Medical Affairs EMEA, Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, D)**, to present his company's ways and means to enable carers to care, as a good practice example of CSR.

Mr Saini started by stating that supporting carers brings benefits to employers – but within his company, the positive impact on employees' well-being can clearly be witnessed too.

² a policy paper can be found at www.eurocarers.org

A physician by training, Mr Saini has seen the enormous contribution made by carers, and their struggle to combine work and care responsibilities. Therefore, he expressed his pride in being part of a company that recognises and values informal carers and which has put in place and keeps on developing practical measures to support and enable carers. Merck's philosophy is to 'walk the talk' in supporting its own employees that are caring for family members of loved ones in doing their day jobs. The actions that have been taken as a result of this philosophy reflect Merck's commitment to carers globally.

Before discussing Merck's Embracing Carers® programme – launched in 2017 with the purpose to improve improving carers' health and well-being while increasing awareness and support for them -, Mr Saini shared some of his company's research findings:

The 2021 Global Carer Well-Being Index – part of the Merck's Embracing Carers® Programme - has shown that 94% of carers in Europe believe their employers should offer more flexibility and support. Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, 3 in 4 informal carers feel more burnt out than ever before. Also, 65% said their emotional/mental health had worsened, with a majority (80%) saying that they had to sacrifice more of their own personal life. Moreover, 67% are concerned they will not be able to afford to provide proper care, with 59% being worried they will lose their job.

Clearly, action needs to be taken to improve the lives of carers and address their needs and expectations; Merck has done so in a variety of ways. Mr Saini provided some examples:

Training:

The 'Help no Hugs' programme, providing real-life stories of carers and the issues they encounter every day, from the US, Germany, China and Australia

A global mandatory e-learning programme, to raise awareness amongst managers and colleagues regarding the issues faced by carers. This has already been completed by 20000 employees worldwide

Support:

An Employee Assistance Programme, with a dedicated phone line and email address providing 24-7 support for employees and immediate family. The programme offers a broad range of services to address issues such as traumatic events, mental health, child and elder care, relationship challenges, and financial or legal problems. Most services are available virtually and many of the employees have used this programme to seek support and comfort.

A Peer-to-peer Support programme, 'Colleagues Supporting Colleagues (CSC), in the US, as well as a Global Employee Resource Group.

HR measures:

'Future Ways of Working' HR benefits offering providing managers and their employees with multiple opportunities and benefits to address their unique circumstances, from part-time or flex-time work to job-sharing, remote working opportunities, or extended or urgent leaves, to name a few.

In terms of the latter, Mr Saini underlines that Merck has already gone beyond what is required by the EU Work/life Balance Directive; Embracing Carers® initiative is fully rooted in its patient-directed company vision. Being patient-directed is part of all Merck's activities, also those related to the design and implementation of clinical trials in its various phases. Moving to a patient-directed vision has required an important mindset and behaviour shift within the company; but now, this approach can be considered part of Merck's DNA.

In conclusion, Mr Saini stated that Merck is looking forward to the publication of the EU Care Strategy, which he hopes will show political courage, contributing to putting in place the structural changes required to improve the situation of carers. Support for carers must come from all directions – from governments and public bodies but also from private sector companies.

Panel

Taking over the chair, **Luke Ming Flanagan MEP** briefly introduced the panel and the questions that had been sent to them beforehand to guide their intervention (see box at end of the report).

The first speaker, **Anna Kwiatkiewicz-Mory (Senior Adviser, Social Affairs Department, Business Europe)** briefly introduced her organisation as an EU-level industry federation and recognised social partner. The organisation has 35 direct member organisations (national business federations). Providing the perspective as a cross -

industry organisation rather than as a single company, her first point related to the fact that society is ageing which is resulting in an increasing need for long term care - but also for more diverse long time care, depending on the level of dependency of a person.

The second important point is that the working population is shrinking, resulting in workforce shortages; this is affecting all businesses across Europe.

From the perspective of Business Europe, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) should be left to the individual companies and businesses as they are the best placed to note what is needed in their local communities, what is expected by their employees and what kind of contribution would be meaningful and appreciated. They can also best judge what they can afford, especially if this is to be a long term commitment.

Rather than being part of CSR, support to informal carers is more related to human resources and practice.

Ms Kwiatkiewicz-Mory underlined that the employer's answer lies within their flexibility towards employees to accommodate their needs related to different situations. Remote working could be part of the solution. But the most important principle here is to have faith in employers: employers need to have the freedom to offer solutions possible for them to organise and that would be beneficial for employees. Many businesses across the EU offer tailor-made solutions that correspond well with the individual employee's choices and needs. Employers are keen on discussing this issue with workers' representatives and the most appropriate place for this discussion is the workplace.

The second speaker, **Licia Boccaletti (President, Anziani e Non Solo, IT)** presented her organisation as an NGO which implements specific initiatives to support informal carers. More specifically, in 2007, the organisation started to work on creating partnerships with large public and private companies to develop and implement programmes to support employees with caring responsibilities.

The customary practice in place in Italy when addressing work/life balance is the promotion of flexibility as well as providing economic support to purchase extra support services on the private-market. However, this does not suffice. Licia Boccaletti's organisation has therefore piloted several actions in other areas as well:

- Promoting self-identification and self-recognition of carers – this is not a given especially in countries where carers are not at the top of the policy agenda.
- Actions to offer psychological support, addressing mental health issues, by means of support groups. These sessions should ideally take place during working hours, finding time to dedicate time to this important topic.
- As awareness of the plights of working carers is low in Italy, it is crucial to invest some time in awareness raising initiatives, piloting employment and HR schemes to support working carers
- Most of the attention around work/life balance is childcare rather than on care in general. This needs to change too.
- Find ways partnerships between private and public social services can be most effective to effectuate change.

The third panellist, **Sebastian Fischer (Chief Executive, Voice of Carers across Lothian (VOCAL, UK Scotland)** presented his organisation as a regional organisation, based in Edinburgh, supporting 10.000 carers every year. The organisation has built up a network with some 50 employers, and one of its activities is to focus on inserting the principle of CSR in and beyond employment.

Mr Fischer started with a note of caution, i.e., not to allow CSR or other initiatives based on voluntary or philanthropic activities and principles to replace of public services, based on carers rights and entitlements. Rights-based services must be developed further and underpinned and complemented by CRS

He added that he was encouraged to hear about the remarkable carers' rights that have emerged across the EU and underlined that these need to be communicated more widely. He also informed the audience of an emerging German initiative; detailed work by a German government-initiated Advisory working on the extension of the right to a carers' leave ~~but~~ and also the right to payments for carer leaves, up to a total of 36 months. This is a highly positive development, which will see the light this year; it could function as a strong example of good practice and a driver for change across the EU.

Mr Fischer also informed the meeting of an initiative started by VOCAL and other Scottish carer organisations several years ago, based on the concept of 'respitality' – combining 'respite' and 'hospitality'. Some 10-20 hospitality, tourism and leisure companies were approached initially (and since then, many more) to persuade them to offer their services and venues to carers when not fully booked – free of charge. The response has been immensely positive and has enabled carers to have access to - indispensable - breaks that would not have been available otherwise.

Apart from having access to these companies' services and offerings it has provided VOCAL with the possibility to offer support with the internal employment practices of these hospitality providers. This has led to interesting 'win/win' partnerships between the private sector and the third sector organisations; the latter can provide a lot of support and knowledge to employers to help them make positive change internally.

The final panelist, **Myrsini Karakasoglou (Project Manager, CSR HELLAS)** stated that her organisation is the leading business association for CSR in Greece, which has addressed the topic of care from the work/life balance (WBL) perspective. CSR HELLAS has taken part in an EU funded project about the development and implementation of an educational program for businesses on four thematic areas of CSR, one of which was WBL. The training course on WBL focused on the concept of WBL, the relative EU policies to improve WBL, the EFR ('Entreprise Familiare Responsable' – Family Responsible Company) management model, and the concept of Schedule Flexibility.

Ms. Karakasoglou challenged the statistics from Eurofound from 2018 as presented by Stecy Yghemonos. She believes that there are many more carers than those statistics show as in Greece – and probably in other countries as well – it is part of the culture to care; many people would not self-identify as carers.

From her own experience with informal care provision, Ms. Karakasoglou believes that the EU Work/Life Balance Directive could definitely be improved – but it should be appreciated as a first step. To make improvements it will be crucial to continue to exchange best practice – like for instance, the Merck case study as presented earlier. Businesses have a significant role to play, even if there is no legal obligation to amend their practices.

Audience debate

Luke Ming Flanagan MEP then moderated the audience debate in which several points were emphasized:

- Caring should always be an individual choice rather than an obligation.
- People are not always aware of formal care options which could help improve their work/life balance.
- Informal care could be acknowledged and formalised, making use of schemes like – for instance – the 'ticket service' in Belgium
- Budgets are under pressure everywhere and social protection spending will need to be revisited in many ways.
- Is the drive towards more home working necessarily in the interest of carers? We have to be aware of unintended consequences of certain measures or practices. For some carers it will be beneficial, for other not. There is no one solution that fits all, given the diversity of carers as well as the changing 'care-pathway' and the different needs at the different stages of care provision.

Conclusions and close

Sirpa Pietikäinen MEP concluded the meeting, thanking all speakers and participants for their valuable input and inviting them to send materials and information. Clearly, the diversity of carers needs to be acknowledged and reflected in personalised care models. Good practice examples should be disseminated and exchanged. Lastly, the existing Work/Life Balance Directive should be extended. The Care Strategy might provide a useful 'hook' for doing so.

Guiding questions for panellists and discussion:

- What are the priorities of your organisation in relation to facilitating informal carers in the workplace?
- Is informal care already a part of the CSR activities/scope of your organisation?
- If yes, how? If not, are you planning to do so?
- The work/life balance directive can be seen as stimulus for CSR practice to combine care and work. What has the response of your organisation been to this Directive?
- Do you see possibilities to better introduce informal care into the realm of CSR? If so, how? If not, why not?
- What could your organisation contribute towards the development of a stronger CSR practice in relation to care provision?