



interdiac

**Bratislava Declaration
on Diaconia and Social Exclusion
in the Central and Eastern European Region**

Bratislava 18.3.2010

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Introduction

This declaration is the result of a process of consultation and learning organised by interdiac and its members and partners in Central and Eastern Europe. The process has included basic research into diaconal practice and needs in the region as well as two years work with partners on identifying priorities for learning and development. This necessarily involved reflection on the aims and methodologies as well as the structures of Diaconia and the social action of the churches. It also involved an examination of the specific contextual challenges. This phase of work was integrated into a six month learning programme with the theme 'Diaconia, Participation and Social Inclusion' in which the participants, representing the rich diversity of the region, engaged in study and practice of this theme. The students from the interdiac programme and fifty five members and partners from fifteen countries, gathered in Bratislava 14th – 18th March 2010 to reflect on this theme. This declaration summarises some of the key points from this journey. Through it, interdiac and its members and partners issue **an invitation to join the process of developing responses to social exclusion in the region and beyond and to work towards societies and economies where exclusion is no longer tolerated.** On the basis of interdiac's experience we can see that this task will demand deep personal changes as well as change in the way our societies and the economy are organised. It also implies changes in Diaconia and the churches. It is our challenge to develop our concrete work with the people affected by processes of exclusion and with civil society to press for the changes so urgently needed.

Furthermore, the consultation was seen as a contribution from interdiac to the European year for combating poverty and social exclusion launched by the European Union. However, the consultation also comes at the symbolic moment of the 20th anniversary of the momentous systemic political and economic changes which have impacted every country in the region, the whole of Europe and beyond. It is a good time to take stock and from a Christian point of view to evaluate those changes from the perspective of those Jesus called 'the least', - those with least power and resources. We don't have the capacity to meet this challenge fully, but our work together has given us a unique vantage point since all the participants in the interdiac process have direct contact with marginalised and excluded groups. The approach of interdiac is therefore grounded in the practice of paid and unpaid workers and the experience of those who are excluded.

Contextual Challenges

Mentioning the 20th anniversary of the start of the so called transformation process in the region reminds us of the fact that one major challenge has been to build up Diaconia and the social action of the churches as well as to work for the establishment of civil society. We can see at this time that there is still a long journey ahead in this process. Civil society is still fragile in many places and Diaconia is not fully recognised

in most parts of the region. As well as this - and more importantly, the change process has brought many problems which were new to this region into existence such as unemployment and homelessness. Furthermore, some hidden problems have come to light, such as the way in which people with disabilities or with long term care dependency were treated under the previous system. This has presented a double challenge to Diaconia and Christian social action. Of course not all countries in the region have suffered the same degree of trauma from these changes and in some cases the welfare regime is quite well developed. In part this corresponds to the position of the different countries in the European and global economy, but also it relates to traditions which were established in the early part of the twentieth century and which have differently informed the transformation process.

As well as these processes, largely linked to the introduction of the free market and the rise of the new individualism, there have been other traumatic events in the region with which diaconal organisations, churches and non-governmental organisations (some with Christian motivation) have had to struggle. We would highlight the incidence of war and civil conflict in Europe in the last twenty years. These events have left a huge number of people and many communities dislocated and uprooted. As well as this, there have been other political events which have led to violence, repression and torture. It is clear that the consequences of these events and other ongoing threats remain an important challenge to social justice, human rights and Diaconia.

Secondly, in the last two years we have witnessed the huge impact of the financial crisis which, although it has its origins in the west, has direct impacts on people and communities worldwide. Many social gains which have been made over the years have been wiped out overnight. It is quite clear that, as a general rule, in this structural financial crisis the weaker persons, groups and countries have suffered the most. The crisis has, in a cruel way, revealed the dependency of the economy of many countries on external financial institutions and political powers.

The Vision of Diaconia and Christian Social Action

Diaconia is a comprehensive concept, rooted in personal life and in the congregational life of all Christians. It represents the calling to respond to 'the other' in their specific need. This is the basis of our work together, but in the interdiac process we have also been exploring the different expressions of Diaconia. For example Diaconia can be expressed in special diaconal organisations or non-governmental organisations founded by congregations or groups of Christians, It can be promoted and organised as a part of the life of the institutional church or of an appropriate ecumenical body and it may be expressed in an organisation which is founded by a church but independent of it. The precise form depends on history, context and ecclesiology.

Diaconia can be identified as an attitude to life which puts the commitment to Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit into action. It has a spiritual foundation and is rooted in the church, but works in co-operation with others who look for similar goals. Diaconia works to:

- serve people in their daily life as they face life crises and material or spiritual needs and to provide quality social and other services. Diaconia bases its work on the participation and empowerment of those it serves

- create a culture based on sharing, respect for diversity and participation
- build human community whilst respecting the human dignity of every person as made in the image of God
- take action in favour of justice and an end to oppression, with and on behalf of people in situations of economic, social injustice or otherwise in distress
- shape political and economic priorities and to create, with others, an active democracy which respects all dimensions of human rights.

In the interdiac programme we are working to realise these basic aims of Diaconia through raising awareness, training, research and development.

Present Challenges to Diaconia and Society in Central & Eastern Europe

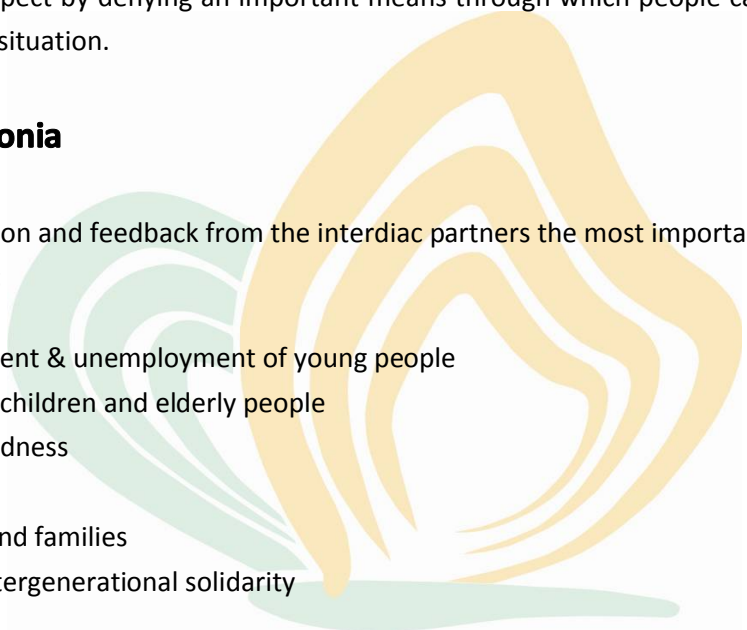
Participants in the interdiac consultation identified the consequences of the recent economic crisis as the biggest challenge in many, if not all contexts of the region. It is clear that some countries and groups have been affected more severely than others. Structural unemployment and the absence or inadequacy of unemployment benefits has plunged many families and whole communities into debt and poverty. On top of this many health and welfare services have been diminished or closed and the wages and conditions for many workers, including human service professionals have been reduced. In some case Diaconia has been very severely affected by the economic crisis. A part of the costs of this crisis are therefore being paid by the most vulnerable, who had no part in its cause and also by those who work directly with them.

Depending on the country, there are other pressing issues which have to be addressed by Diaconia and other social actors, including the prevalence of a ‘culture of wild capitalism’, which inhibits economic and social development. In some countries there is a political crisis resulting from abuse of power and corruption or from the monopolising of power in the hands of a small group. On top of this the long term impacts of war and civil conflict cast a long shadow over people and communities and produce ‘a continuous sinking feeling’ In many parts of the region, the lack of a functioning and valued civil society reinforces alienation and reduces self respect by denying an important means through which people can effectively take action for change in their situation.

Concrete Challenges Facing Diaconia

According to participants in the consultation and feedback from the interdiac partners the most important issues which they face day by day include:

- growing long term structural employment & unemployment of young people
- increasing poverty especially affecting children and elderly people
- increasing personal and family indebtedness
- growing domestic violence
- homelessness affecting more people and families
- breakdown of family structures and intergenerational solidarity
- alcohol and substance abuse
- AIDS/HIV awareness and treatment



- negative impacts on minorities
- problems of migration and conversely of returning migrants
- continuing issues faced by uprooted and displaced people
- growing neglect of human dignity and arrogance towards marginalised people and groups.

To address these issues there is a need to reflect on and develop new forms of diaconal practice. In the work of interdiac so far, including the research, study modules and in the Bratislava consultation we have identified the need for changes in diaconal practice. This includes supporting the process of developing an adequate analysis of the context on which to base methods of work. It means not simply analysing either the needs of one client or even one client group but a broader contextual analysis.

To meet the challenges highlighted above, Diaconia must not only work with persons and families but must become involved in building inclusive communities. This will imply a move from strategies of assistance to strategies of empowerment. The concentration on immediate material support needs to shift to a focus on work, employment and community economic development. It also means working to ensure that there are adequate minimum income systems for all and quality services that are accessible to those who need them. Finally it means Diaconia will not only be dealing with the issues faced by the victims of economic and social context but also working for change so that society does not produce victims.

Implications for Diaconia and Christian Social Action

The participants in the consultation recognised the need to develop their work in a wider context and to adopt new strategies to address social exclusion. One of the most important aspects expressed in the consultation was the need for Diaconia and Christian social action to be based on more thorough and competent analysis of the situation and context. In the past many actions have begun without careful analysis and this has led to ineffective short term actions, project failures or burn out. In some cases, donor agencies have 'driven' project development according to their priorities rather than local priorities. Diaconia needs to develop a strategy of working with and on behalf of people and communities who are excluded to create change at different levels from local to national to international. This implies openness and flexibility in responding to new and emerging needs or in developing new working methods. Diaconia and Christian social action should work for strategic working partnerships with civil society and the creation of dialogue between diaconal actors and state/political powers. Furthermore it means developing the capacity to work for changes in the society and economy as well as change in persons and communities. The profile and image of Diaconia and Christian social action in the region needs to be more effectively developed and communicated. Ecumenical and participatory work should be the norm and national and regional platforms for inter-church working, sharing experience and coalition building should be created.

As well as working out the implications for practice, the consultation also came to the conclusion that in order to combat and prevent social exclusion, there is a need for a new values driven perspective on society and the economy. From a Christian and value base we are critical of the present growth model based on individualistic consumerism, which has led to increasing inequality. This inevitably has produced more poverty and exclusion. The values base of this economic model erodes family and community life

which are the pillars on which a healthy society is built. Therefore Diaconia and other Christian social organisations should join with others to work towards an economy which is at the service of people.

Implications for interdiac

Interdiac together with its members and partners will work out the implications of the consultation and invites other diaconal and civil society organisations to join in the follow up process through:

Network Building:

- **Networking and the exchange of experience** to strengthen local national and international actions supported by research and analysis as well as by supporting initiatives such as job shadowing and using the web site and other internet based media.

Training and support for the development of paid and unpaid workers:

- Explore the possibilities for **linking training to volunteering** and for training those who will work with volunteers on the local level
- Continue to develop training based on the **participatory approach** to working with people and communities and a learner centred approach to training for reflective practice
- Develop training for those involved in **supervision of paid and unpaid** workers using the 'interdiac approach' to reflective practice and creating a structure and culture of mentoring and mutual support for workers in different localities

Training to support strategic development

- Consultation with partners on the **development strategies** of Diaconia and Christian social action in the region
- Develop training for **social and economic analysis**
- Promote local responses which link economic and social action in hard pressed urban and rural communities through training for **community economic development**
- Developing the skills and strategies to enable Diaconia to develop **participatory work on impacting public and political policy**
- **Support training** for such themes as team building, project development and management as well as for monitoring and evaluation and providing a link to relevant expert organisations in specific fields

Research and Development

- Develop the **research and development project on Diaconia in context** in the region, including comparative analysis and models of work and to link this project with university departments and using the results in training and the support of political action

Interdiac is committed to supporting its members and partners in the region to work towards societies and economies where no one is excluded and supporting participatory and empowering models of social engagement.

Interdiac invites churches, ecumenical organisations, educational institutes and other relevant organisations to join in following up this declaration.

International Academy for Diaconia and Social Action, Central and Eastern Europe, o.p.s. (interdiac)

interdiac is a new Academy which is rooted in central and eastern Europe. With partners in ten countries in the region, we are developing new **learning programmes, research & development and networking** to meet the needs of diaconal and social action in the region.

interdiac vision is to promote high quality education and to support life-long learning in an international context. We also support specific research, development and exchange projects which will strengthen diaconia and social action in the region. The interdiac vision of learning starts with the learners' own motivation and is grounded in diaconal values. This diaconal focus means that interdiac emphasises:

- The safeguarding and promotion of the human dignity of each person, considering the client as the subject (not the object) of social, diaconal or community development work.
- Skills and strategies to support the participation and empowerment of excluded and marginalised people.
- The need to fight against social exclusion, work for a multicultural society and influence social change in a positive direction.

interdiac educational activities

- interdiac is building up a new international bachelor degree programme in diaconal social and community development work
- interdiac has already offered an innovative five month accredited study programme "Social Inclusion, Participation and Diaconia"
- interdiac is creating a programme of linked mobile seminars & workshops in the region

interdiac founders

- Slezská Diakonie, Czech Republic
- The Foundation of Helsinki Deaconess Institute, Finland

interdiac supporting partner

- Diaconia University of Applied Sciences, Finland



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