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SOCIAL SERVICES OF GENERAL INTEREST IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Social Services of General Interest in the European Union

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The influence of EU Community rules and legislation on the way social and health services operate in Member States has been increasing over recent years. This paper presents first results from a major study on this subject that the European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity has commissioned to a consortium led by the European Centre. The study will play the role of a pilot for a regular biannual reporting and dialogue tool of the European Commission on the situation of social services of general interest in the European Union, from 2007 on, which will report on economic and regulatory trends in social services, recent reforms, such as for improving quality of services, and its interplay with developments on the European Union level.

The paper will start with an overview on economic trends of social services and what is known about expenditure, financing, and employment of this sector in an international comparison. It will then have a focus of two aspects of the study: quality of services, and on how to identify and describe good practice examples in reforming social services for better service quality and outcomes in four of the five sectors analysed in depth during the study: long-term care, social integration and re-integration (with a focus on migrants), labour market services focusing on disadvantaged and disabled persons, and child care.

Quality in social services is not always up to the expectations of service users and of their families, and much can be learnt from the exchange of innovative practices between countries and public administrations. The paper analyses the challenges on how a European reporting system should be designed that can address these complex questions for a large range of services in a concise, reduced format, such as with the help of a limited set of indicators for measuring quality of services. Another focus will be on a the conceptual framework for identifying “good practice”, and on the notion of mutual learning between public administrations, which is another important element of the envisaged reporting system.