

## **Interview with Amaia Inza, dean of the Faculty of Labour Relations and Social Work of the UPV/EHU**

### **1. Why is the Faculty of Labour Relations and Social Work of the UPV/EHU participating in an observatory on the fair distribution of wealth?**

The involvement of our Faculty in the ToShare Observatory derives from a specific diagnosis of the society in which we live. It is essential, from the university, to observe social change and include in our day-to-day work, debates on the impact of inequalities on various groups.

Let us remember that the fundamental instrument of social equalisation in European countries has been the welfare state, which reached its peak in the decades following the Second World War. It was a project for the universalisation of social rights. Its aim was to make more equal those groups that, due to their conditions of participation in the production chain, were at a disadvantage. It was based on an explicit ideological consensus for its maintenance and expansion.

Nowadays, both the extent of its coverage in the offer of protection and the very achievement of equality as an ideal in today's societies are being called into question. The post-industrial society based on the knowledge economy and the pressure on countries to adopt market-oriented measures are forcing them to reduce social policy expenditure. As a consequence, insurance measures based on a labour market typical of the heyday of the welfare state are being rethought. Increasingly, social policies will have to be justified as resources that benefit the economy and will be legitimised by their efficiency. The functionality, effectiveness and even the fairness of the criteria of universality based on the principle of social citizenship are being questioned, favouring a shift towards a residual, individualistic system based on the demonstration of need. Collective solutions are pushed aside in favour of the satisfaction of individual needs, and deregulation and privatisation are reinforced.

Moreover, the way in which neoliberalism drives globalising processes involves ambitious social engineering on a grand scale, and no reformist programme today stands a chance of success unless many of the changes brought about are understood to be irreversible. All this has legitimised an unequal system.

## **2. Why is the accumulation of wealth and the resulting inequality it generates a problem?**

Although social rights were expanded according to the criterion that as long as economic and social inequalities existed, a fair system could not be achieved, the universalisation of social rights is not currently a determining element for their legitimisation. The system can continue to provide precarious protection for citizens in the face of situations of vulnerability in the labour market.

All this in a context where the knowledge economy, which is seen as a creator of productivity and economic growth, demands a flexible and skilled workforce that can easily adapt to the constantly changing needs of the economy. Often, trends towards income inequalities and labour market instability mean that even the income achieved through employment is no longer sufficient to ensure a poverty-free existence.

In this context, the attempt to define social rights as guarantees of opportunities is much stronger. In addition, the role of individual responsibility for the achievement of well-being means that people's destiny is much more strongly linked to their position in the labour market.

The role of the welfare state will be redefined in the search for social productivity and as a dispenser of means to combat social exclusion, which would arise from persistent withdrawal from the labour market. Meanwhile, the individualisation of problems weakens the idea of collective protection in the face of common problems.

### **3. What are the proposed solutions?**

The above can be framed in a situation common to most European countries, where the shift is from policies framed in a universal approach of publicly provided benefits, designed to protect labour against the vicissitudes of the market and held firmly as social rights, to policies framed in a selective approach to the provision of provisions designed to promote labour force participation and individual responsibility. That is, given that society will not be able to prevent a number of people from being in precarious conditions at any given moment in their lives, the challenge will be to prevent this from becoming permanent, to trap the citizenry in such a way that all their opportunities may be affected.

This is the case, for example, of the strategy of social investment, promoted by the European Union, which seeks to actively mobilise the productive potential of citizens. The aim is to establish activation policies, replacing those that have to deal with the consequences when problematic situations erupt. Rather than relying on unconditional benefits, policies should be geared towards stimulating savings, the use of educational resources and other personal investment opportunities. This cultivation of human potential should replace redistribution after the fact as far as possible. This activation would allow individuals and families to maintain responsibility for their well-being through market income, rather than through passive benefits. It changes the definition of equality to anchor it more firmly in a liberal notion of equality of opportunity, and thus in a focus on future life chances.

The question is what happens to those people who cannot compete, who will remain in a vicious circle of precariousness and exclusion, as it refrains from taking into consideration and intervening in the processes that generate such borderline situations. A more liberal perspective on social investment, such as the latter, makes it difficult to channel the solidarity of redistribution instruments towards the most disadvantaged sectors.

For this reason, the proposals for an Unconditional Basic Income imply taking up and foregrounding the egalitarian idea that the protection of

citizens against the impacts of inequality is the task and responsibility of society as a whole