

6th

European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty



**Progress made,
future steps.**

Conference Report

Brussels, 4/5 May 2007





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The 6th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty: Conference Framework and Content

Creating ways to tackle poverty and social exclusion is a major task for responsible policy-making. For this reason, the Heads of State and Government, meeting at the Lisbon Summit in 2000, set as a goal for the European Union, to be achieved by 2010, “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. Achieving this goal requires an overall strategy aimed at (...) combating social exclusion”. To implement this ambitious goal, the German Council Presidency underlines the need for and the commonalities to be found in a broad European Social Model for the 21st Century which reacts in a suitable manner to all forms of poverty and social exclusion. In this process, all those concerned are to have a voice – also and particularly those whose social participation rights are restricted by their position at the margins of society. The European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty, which have been taking place in the first half of each year since 2001, are a major component in providing more participation at European level.

This year’s 6th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty took place on 4/5 May 2007 under the German EU Council Presidency in the Palais d’Egmont Conference Centre in Brussels. Regarding both content and organisation, the Meeting was prepared by an organisation committee made up of staff from the European Anti Poverty Network EAPN, representatives of the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, the German National Anti Poverty Conference, ATD Fourth World, FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations working with people who are homeless), the Belgian Government and a representative of the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia.

The Meeting itself was attended by about 220 people, including, with the exception of Romania, delegations of people experiencing poverty from all Member States of the European Union, as well as from Norway. The German EU Council Presidency was represented by Vice Chancellor and Federal Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Franz Müntefering and Parliamentary State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs Franz Thönnies. The Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities Vladimir Spidla attended for the European Commission. Many Member States sent representatives from Ministries of Social Affairs and from Permanent Representations, as well as sending members of the Social Protection Committee (SPC), of the European Parliament, and of the Council of Europe. Over and above this, the Meeting was attended by representatives of non-governmental organisations, the social partners and the academia.

The goal of the two-day conference was to take stock and to illustrate how the social situation of people experiencing poverty in the Member States of the European Union has developed since the Meetings started in 2001. Positive everyday experience reflected the significance of the participation of those concerned for the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The delegations drafted concrete statements in workshops on those challenges and priorities of social

integration which they consider to be the most urgent, and passed these on in their reports to the attending political representatives of the European institutions and the Member States.

In preparation of the conference, EAPN drafted a methodical guide for the national delegations and called on them to visualise their stocktake in three-dimensional objects. These objects made a central contribution towards the content of the conference. They were presented in the plenary over both days and permitted an intensive insight into the problems and perceptions of people experiencing poverty in the Member States. The objects made clear the requirements that are incumbent on the European Social Model. It was easy to see that the factors which lead to poverty and social exclusion are highly similar within the European Union, but that their concrete impact on people's participation and realisation opportunities may however vary considerably because of social security levels which can differ widely from one case to another.

Welcome and opening

The Meeting was introduced by both conference chairs Bishop Maria Jepsen and Prof. Dr. Ernst-Ulrich Huster, who in their joint welcoming speech once more emphasised the significance of the social dimension of Europe. Especially people who are affected by poverty and social exclusion need support and possibilities to participate here. The mandate however points beyond the conference, which is why the chairs reminded all those present of the unity of word and deed. German Vice Chancellor and Federal Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Franz Müntefering took up this aspect in his opening speech, and stressed that the fight against poverty and social exclusion was not only a matter of human sympathy, but that it lay in the well-understood interest of society as a whole. The State bears responsibility here for enabling individuals to help themselves. Access to fair work, realisation of educational opportunities and the provision of suitable housing are, from his point of view, the central foundations in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities Vladimir Spidla emphasised in his welcoming speech that policy-makers are called upon to take seriously the concerns and needs particularly of those people who live at the margins of society. The European Union can only bring about social integration if all citizens are included in the unification process. An effective policy to combat poverty and social exclusion must ensure access to employment which ensures livelihoods, equal opportunities for education and training, access to suitable healthcare protection, as well as to social goods and services as a whole. As the representative of the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Lauri Sivonen pointed to the inalienability of human rights and stated in his welcoming speech that poverty and social exclusion were an ongoing violation of human dignity. A policy against poverty and social exclusion must address all types of discrimination and had to ensure access to the right to participation for all. Between these two contributions, Virginie Poilvert, who was also a delegate to the 5th Meeting, gave a critical account from the perspective of those concerned of her experience at the previous year's Meeting. The Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty had been a major opportunity to have the voice of those concerned heard. It expanded knowledge of the manifestations of poverty and social exclusion in Europe by illustrating both the commonalities and the differences. The Meetings promoted solidarity between those concerned, and in this sense had also been a great encouragement for all who had taken an active part not to tire in their efforts to fight poverty and social exclusion.

Object presentation and workshops

On the first day under the title of "What we sought, where we stand" – Stocktake of the first five European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty, the objects from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Italy, France, Sweden, Malta, Greece, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg and the EAPN were presented and commented in the plenary. The participants then went on to discuss the difficulties and successes of social integration in

seven hosted workshops under the title “Packaging Together Strategies – Fostering dialogue – Enhancing Feedback – Setting sight on the future - Facilitating more participation and social cohesion” The results of the workshops were summarised in reports that were submitted to the plenary on the second day.

Discussion and exchange

The second day was introduced by the presentation of the objects from the delegations of the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom, as well as of the Social Protection Committee, the Belgian Ministry for Social Affairs and Public Health and the European Commission. The central results and conclusions from the workshops were then presented. These brief statements led over to the discussion between Jérôme Vignon, Head of the Directorate of Social Protection and Integration, Elise Willame, Chair of the European Social Protection Committee and Renzo Fior, President of Emmaus International, and the delegates. The problems and manifestations of poverty and social exclusion, as well as potential solutions for the European framework of action, were concentrated on here. The question of open-participation in the continuation of the European constitutional process played a central role, as did the call for further enhancement of participation elements at both European and national level.

Conclusion and outlook

The event was closed by final words from Franz Thönnies, Parliamentary State Secretary at the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Ludo Horemans, President of EAPN, as well as Davor Dominkus, Acting Director General for Social Affairs at the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia. As a representative of the Member States in the Social Protection Committee, Ms Willame presented a red megaphone to Mr Thönnies as the government representatives’ object. This object alludes to the fact that those concerned speak out loudly to the politically responsables, and at the same time it is a call to the representatives to speak audibly for the interests of those concerned. The megaphone was passed on by Mr Thönnies to Mr Dominkus as the representative of the upcoming EU Council Presidency.

Central statements of the conference

Important topics and discussion items of the conference are summarised in an overview presented below. They were drafted and presented by the delegations using three-dimensional objects, in workshops and discussion groups:

- The delegates found that prosperity is growing in the European Union. At the same time, they expressed their concern that the gap between poor and rich is becoming ever wider, and that this is not only the case in Europe. At the same time, it was observed that the matter of fair distribution plays a marginal role on the political agenda.
- Some delegates consider it an illusion that Lisbon Goal of making a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty by 2010 would be reached. On the contrary, they observe an increasing worsening in living conditions, particularly for people who live in poverty and social exclusion. They perceive the instruments of enabling social integration less as providing help to help themselves, than on the contrary as patronage and a reduction of their participation rights.
- The conference participants have major concerns as regards the further liberalisation and privatisation of public services. In their experience, such measures have socially marginalising impacts and make access to elementary services such as water or energy supply more difficult or more expensive.
- The participants consider child poverty, disadvantages faced by women, limited access to the education system, healthcare, high unemployment rates and homelessness and the lack of access to decent housing to be central exclusion risks which rear their heads to a greater or lesser degree in all Member States of the Union. In some cases, the social security systems provide no protection or only insufficient protection against such risks.
- Discrimination and racism are further major triggers leading to social exclusion. They affect a broad spectrum of groups of individuals, such as ethnic minorities (in particular Roma), people with disabilities, lone parents, older people, as well as migrants.
- Complaints were voiced that the manner in which asylum-seekers are treated in individual countries of the European Union cannot be reconciled with ensuring human dignity. Also the situation of people who have no valid documents, and of labour migrants, frequently breaches elementary fundamental rights.
- Old-age poverty plays a major role in the new Eastern European Member States in particular. The problem emerges here for instance that the social transfers and social services in the European Social Model frequently do not stand up to poverty.

- Although the governments and public administrations in many Member States of the European Union have now been made more aware of the topic of the participation of those concerned, the delegates still observe major shortcomings when it comes to concrete implementation. This applies to participation in legislative proceedings for example, but also in everyday administrative acts.
- Being right does not always mean receiving justice. The delegates report considerable problems in the enforcement of legal rights and call in this context for an obligation to be incumbent on public agencies to provide information.

The points highlighted above make it clear that successful social integration is a wish but not a reality for many people in Europe. The solution of social problems is hence a central test of the legitimacy of the entire European unification process. Social integration cannot be attained without consulting those concerned, who expect in turn to meet with respect, and the conditions for comprehensive social integration to be improved in an atmosphere of equality.

The European Union has undertaken to improve social cohesion within and between the individual Member States. The 6th Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty provided an opportunity for a specific insight into the impact of the Lisbon Strategy. Attention focussed not on politicians or academics, but on giving a voice to the ‘victims’ themselves as experts defending their own cause. It strengthened the exchange between those concerned, but also with policy-makers and the attendant representatives of institutions and associations as the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the network promoting the welfare and rights of children and young people (Eurochild), and has made networking possible. The conference also made it clear that this “Europe needs faces”, as the conference chair Bishop Maria Jepsen put it. It is the message to those concerned “You are someone! We are aware of you and respect you in your situation.” Behind this also lies the certainty that many state and private facilities, initiatives and helpers are already taking care of people who have fallen on hard times. The results of the Meeting express these insights, and furthermore identify manifestations of social exclusion which a social Europe can no longer afford to tolerate.

Introduced by a joint welcoming speech by both conference chairs, central statements of the Meeting’s individual agenda items are summarised. Should you require more information, you will find in the Annex a list of the participants, sorted by country of origin and function.

1. Joint welcoming speech by the conference chairs

The 2000 Lisbon Strategy, the European Anti Poverty Network, the European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty: It is good that they exist, but we wish that they were better known, and that they received more support from all sides and levels – and ultimately we hope that they will do themselves out of a job one day. Nonetheless, this is certainly not going to be possible any time soon, and probably never. The number of those who are poor, who live in abject poverty, is growing – there is no mistaking this. Take a walk through our cities and go onto the Internet and you will find confirmation of this phenomenon, which can be found all over Europe. This makes this Meeting all the more important, at which an exchange is to take place and encouragement is to be given, people are to meet who otherwise would be virtually unaware of one another. Here, men and women with different responsibilities and who are affected in different ways are able to listen to one another and develop perspectives against the poverty of the past, and the poverty which still threatens.

We are familiar with the topic of poverty in different ways. I, Maria Jepsen, have been Evangelical-Lutheran Bishop in Hamburg for 15 years, and I am committed there in particular to people who have no home or income, as well as to women who live in poverty. I, Ernst-Ulrich Huster, have been engaged in research for more than 25 years into questions related to poverty and social exclusion, working together in and with welfare associations and NGOs, but also with governmental bodies, as well as with the European Commission. We can feel the massive differences, but at the same time we are impressed by the considerable flexibility of poor people, how they manage with imagination and staying power, acting in solidarity – and we also experience the shocking opposite extreme of depression, paralysis and marginalisation.

The Bible is a guide for us, and here we read, firstly, that the poor will always be with us, whilst at the same time that there is a constant call not to push the poor to one side, not to exploit the poor, but to be merciful and just to the poor. We are measured by whether we respect poor people and make it possible for them to live in conditions that are fair. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Treaties of Rome on 25 March of this year, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) announced Five good wishes for the future of Europe. We quote from the third wish:

“The European Union needs more justice. Despite all the economic successes, almost 80 million people in the EU are still living on the poverty line, and one child in five is threatened by poverty. More than 17 million people in the EU are unemployed. The divide between poor and rich is getting wider and wider in many European countries. The Protestant churches in Europe want a European Union which brings its economic and social policies into a balance which is mutually supportive and which fights poverty and social demarcation in Europe more strongly than hitherto.”

To achieve this, we need two things: Firstly, everyone dealing with poverty and social exclusion must speak with one another, and listen to one another, discuss proposals together. Secondly, we must put our money where our mouth is; we must closely interlink the various activities, for instance of this conference, of the EAPN, of the European Commission, of the Member States’

governments, of the national poverty organisations, of the non-governmental organisations, as well as of other agencies, in precisely the way planned by the resolutions of Lisbon and subsequently of Nice. The resolution of the 2000 Lisbon European Council, namely to make Europe not only the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, but also to achieve greater social cohesion, must be implemented. We are only three-and-a-half years from the planned deadline. This is why this year's Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty takes on such significance: It is a matter of taking stock critically and of demonstrating what can and should be tackled as the next goals. The two goals may not be regarded as being only vaguely interconnected, or indeed not connected at all: The most dynamic economy and social cohesion must, rather, be interlinked. At the same time, it is emerging that this Europe is also responsible for something else: Migrants from poverty- and civil war-stricken regions of this world come to this Europe, with and without passports and residence permits. This Europe is a part of a global economic system which marginalises large sections of the world's population in social terms. Poverty and social exclusion in and beyond Europe are complex topics which may lead to polemics, but which also make it possible to seek strategies which take us further down the road. Let us try together to achieve the latter.

*Bishop Maria Jepsen
Prof. Dr. Ernst-Ulrich Huster
Northelbian Evangelical-Lutheran Church, Hamburg
Evangelical University of Applied Sciences
Rhineland/Westphalia-Lippe Bochum*

2. Opening speech and welcoming speeches

Opening speech • "Responsibility for the whole – Respect for the individual – For a Europe with a social face" – Franz Müntefering, Federal Minister of Labour and Social Affairs

Welcoming speech • Vladimir Spidla - EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities

Lauri Sivonen • Advisor - Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe

Experience report • Virginie Poilvert – Participant at the 5th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty

“EUROPE IS ONE OF THE RICHEST REGIONS ON EARTH.

IT SHOULD LEAVE NO ONE COLD THAT PEOPLE LIVE IN POVERTY HERE TOO.”

FRANZ MÜNTEFERING

The German Federal Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Franz Müntefering, placed a clear political mandate at the centre of his speech: “Policy-makers are responsible for the whole. And they must respect the individual.” Accordingly, the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the European Union is not only a matter of human sympathy, but it serves the well-understood interest of society as a whole. In political implementation, and despite the different traditions in the 27 Member States, Europe can invoke its jointly-held social values and ideas. For instance, the idea of the social welfare state, of the social market economy and of social partnership in its core applies in all parts of Europe. And: “We have a common image of human dignity and of a social society. This guides our actions and imposes an obligation on the policy arena.” One of the central challenges for European social policy in this field will be to shape the internal market as a social market and to reflect on economic, ecological and social questions as a whole. The motto of the German Council Presidency is, fittingly: “Joining forces for a social Europe – for a social world!”

Minister Müntefering stressed that national traditions were dominating factors in social policy. He therefore called for an intensive exchange of experience – “with more courage to aim for more concrete goals and with clear, transparent reporting on the progress made in the respective social fields”. The German Presidency is campaigning in this context for social policy guidelines to be adopted in the Revision of the Integrated Guidelines in 2008. This is not only about formulating “minimum standards, but also about social progress which we still have to reach for.”

A major task to be carried out by social policy – according to Minister Müntefering – is to set the stage for all people to have a space in which they can participate. From the viewpoint of Minister Müntefering, the following three concerns take on central significance for a policy of social integration:

- Education lays the foundation for a self-determined life. It is a human right, and hence forms a precursor to all considerations. Equal opportunities are contingent on equal educational opportunities being available from the outset so that people do not get caught in the spiral of being left without prospects and facing social exclusion, so that individual poverty trajectories can be interrupted as early as possible.

- Having work ensures not only people's livelihoods, but also means respect, recognition and – in an ideal case – a degree of self-realisation. Looked at from this point of view, the goal of full employment is equivalent to retaining the principle of societal integration. Having said this, there is a lack of jobs particularly in the field of low-skilled employment. Life-long learning and tailored skills are needed in order to improve employment opportunities. The German Council Presidency sums up the corresponding efforts under the term “good jobs”. This demand entails both more jobs, as well as fair wages, legal security, health protection at work, family-friendly jobs and sufficient further training opportunities.
- A third core prerequisite for the realisation of social participation rights is access to adequate housing for people in an environment that is worth living in.

Policy that takes people seriously cannot promise a quick fix in overcoming poverty and social exclusion. However: “Progress is possible!” – this is a standing commitment, and this is to be the orientation for (European) policy. Policy-makers may not resign themselves to the fact that there are people who are excluded from these three areas of life. To nurture social integration there is a need, on the one hand, for more responsibility and for a right to reliable state support on the other. The idea of the social welfare state to organise solidarity is more topical than ever according to the Minister, but it also needs more public spirit and private initiative.

“IF WE POLITICIANS WISH TO TAKE THE MEASURE OF YOUR NEEDS AND ASSESS WHAT IMPACT THE MEASURES TO TACKLE POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION ARE HAVING, WE MUST HEED WHAT YOU HAVE TO TELL US.”

VLADIMIR SPIDLA

The EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Vladimir Spidla, considers that everyday political dealings have some catching up to do when it comes to opportunities to better involve those directly concerned by poverty in the political process and to listen more closely to their needs. After all, responsible policy depends on precisely these voices of those concerned, for only if they are able to articulate and put forward their demands can (social) policy activities be tailored to them. The European Union has repeatedly addressed the problem of social integration in its 50-year history. It can be observed here that matters of social cohesion and integration are becoming increasingly urgent in a Union which is growing, and growing together, whilst they are also becoming more complex. The European Union reacted to this at the 1997 Amsterdam Summit and expanded the Community's competences in the field of social protection. On the basis of the knowledge that “The number of people living below the poverty line and in social exclusion in the Union is unacceptable”, the Heads of State and Government decided at the 2000 Lisbon Summit to effectively combat poverty and social exclusion by 2010 in all Member States.

If one looks at the results of the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion submitted by the European Commission in February 2007 one finds however that the poverty risk is still high in the European Union, at an average of 16 percent in 2004. At the same time, the figures show a considerable prosperity gap between and within the individual Member States –ut also a gender-specific spread of the poverty risks. The Joint Report also underlines the need to include all relevant civil-society stakeholders and social partners more in drafting national strategies in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The promotion of participation is a central element in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. This is not only about listening to those concerned, but also about involving them in the policy process in a suitable manner.

Commissioner Spidla stated that, not least because of the Open Method of Coordination for Social Protection and Social Inclusion (OMC), a nuanced reporting system has been created within the European Union which has at its disposal considerable quantitative material on trends in the social situation in Europe. However, there are still no qualitative studies describing and analysing people's circumstances in concrete terms. The experience of those concerned is not being systematically covered and processed. It is therefore important for these groups of individuals to be more involved than before in the discussions and investigations. The European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty underline this right of consultation of those concerned. As Commissioner Spidla said, they create a forum for an exchange between people experiencing poverty and policy-makers. The Meetings offer a stage to listen to, understand and gain information from one another. All in all, the Meetings have helped over the years to deepen the understanding of the multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion and to illustrate this on the basis of personal realities.

It has also become clear on the basis of this exchange of experience that an effective policy against poverty and social exclusion must relate to many dimensions which depend on and enhance one another. These include social policy remits, such as access to employment which ensures people's livelihoods, the security of equal education and training opportunities, access to suitable healthcare, as well as (barrier-free) access to social goods and services as a whole.

Commissioner Spidla pointed out that the European Union aims to strengthen social cohesion in the EU. It has a variety of tools at its disposal when it comes to implementation: including, the reports drafted in the scope of the OMC, the Structural Funds and the PROGRESS Community Programme, re-launched in 2007. Various Commission initiatives are targeted to draw attention to certain groups facing particular problems, such as by promoting projects to improve the job opportunities open to those people who are furthest removed from the labour market.

The year 2007 is the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All. To make sure that the European Union's motto of "Unity in diversity" (In varietate concordia) does not remain a paper tiger, it is a matter of clearly stressing the connections between a policy to promote equal opportunities and social integration. To this end, however, citizens must also be included in a sustainable way in the European integration process. In this sense, the 6th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty helps to promote the fight against poverty and social exclusion at all levels.

“HUMAN RIGHTS ARE NOT MERELY THE LUXURY OF A SMALL, PRIVILEGED ELITE. (...) POVERTY IS INHERENTLY AN ASSAULT TO HUMAN DIGNITY. BUT IT ALSO SERVES AS AN INSURMOUNTABLE HURDLE TO THE ENJOYMENT OF CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS.”

LAURI SIVONEN

As Advisor to the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Lauri Sivonen delivered the welcoming speech of the Council of Europe. In the view of the Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg, the 6th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty is a good opportunity to evaluate the progress made in respect of the Lisbon Strategy. The focus is on the question of what has been achieved in Europe and whether the Union is on course to reach its goals until 2010.

A lot of ground has been covered since the first Meeting in 2001, when the question arose as to how those concerned could make their own contribution towards the implementation and assessment of the Lisbon Strategy. Since then, these Meetings have taken place at annual intervals – reason enough to find that they have become a major, fruitful contribution to the implementation of European policy against poverty and social exclusion. At the same time, the Meetings make clear the Union’s ambition that action against poverty and social exclusion should always be developed in cooperation with those concerned and with those who represent their interests.

The Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion, which was presented by Commissioner Spidla on 20 February 2007, however also shows that many people remain marginalised in the midst of prosperous Europe. 16% of European men and women live in poverty and 10% in unemployed households. And although an increasing public awareness of matters related to social exclusion can be observed, many poor people remain stigmatised and disadvantaged.

As a human rights organisation, the Council of Europe also addresses matters concerned with poverty and social exclusion. The Council of Europe has adopted two important conventions to secure fundamental rights, in the shape of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, for civil and political rights, and the European Social Charter, for social and economic rights. One of the most important goals pursued by the Council of Europe here is to safeguard social rights.

Human rights are not a privilege of individual population groups. Social and economic rights support freedom and civil rights – and vice versa! People who live in poverty and social exclusion are denied access to these rights. People who have to fight every day to survive cannot partake in public life.

One of this Meeting's goals is – according to Sivonen – to attract attention to examples of successful integration. On 23 March 2007, the Council of Europe, in cooperation with the European Commission, presented a new European Discussion Platform for ethical initiatives to combat poverty and social exclusion in a spirit of solidarity. This project is special in that it consistently seeks to involve those concerned and not to primarily provide aid to them via institutions.

Xenophobia and racism are central European topics today. The example of the Roma shows how racism and xenophobia can be linked to forms of extreme poverty. Roma are victims of discrimination in many fields, be it in the educational or healthcare system, on the labour market or in access to social services. A further cause for concern is the topic of child poverty. Poverty and social exclusion can have a direct impact on the mental and physical health of children and on their educational opportunities.

Summing up, Sivonen stated that poverty always entails the exclusion of those concerned from their rights. A policy targeting poverty and social exclusion must hence ensure access for all to a society's participation rights. This includes, equally, the right to education and a right to training and work, to suitable housing and to social (healthcare) services. The approach of fighting poverty via the implementation of human rights aims to enable people to exercise their rights to the full!

“THESE MEETINGS ENABLE US TO ENCOUNTER ONE ANOTHER AND TO GAIN STRENGTH FROM THIS ENCOUNTER IN ORDER TO COMMUNICATE TO OTHER PEOPLE EXPERIENCING POVERTY THE IDEA OF PARTICIPATION. FOR OUR DELEGATION IT WAS LIKE TAKING A BREATH FROM AN OXYGEN BOTTLE!”

VIRGINIE POILVERT

Having been a member of the French delegation to the 5th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty, Virginie Poilvert reported on her experience and impressions. She combined this retrospective with her expectations for this conference. The previous year's Meeting had been a major opportunity to bring about a public awareness. It offered to people experiencing poverty the opportunity to go into action for themselves and for others. Here, the participants are in a long tradition in the fight against poverty and social exclusion, also making it clear that changes firstly need time, and secondly that they can only be achieved in cooperation with many other players. The Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty are an important tool for this.

Virginie Poilvert reported that the complex social situation in the European Union has been made

clear to the participants via the many illustrations of real circumstances, as have the differences which exist as to the degree of social security. Being poor in Europe does not mean being equally poor! The difficulties which people have to overcome differ widely. In this manner, the Meeting also provided an opportunity to reflect on personal experiences of poverty.

In her view, the Brussels Meetings were a good opportunity to increase the participation of those concerned. The delegates found, firstly, a forum in which to exchange views and to engage in solidarity, whilst secondly they felt themselves to be taken more seriously by policy-makers. Participation in these meetings has also had a concrete impact in France. For instance, the implementation of regional and transnational meetings had been held in cooperation with social funding organisations. The goal of these meetings is for social workers and people experiencing poverty to get to know one another in order to develop forms of concrete involvement. It is a matter of attracting the attention of political decision-makers so that they understand that there are answers to the social problems. Another direct consequence of the 5th European Meeting had been the formation of the “La parole du citoyen” (The Citizen’s Voice) association, bringing together both people directly affected by poverty and social workers.

With regard to this year’s Meeting, Virginie Poilvert expressed the hope that there would be an opportunity to take stock and to discuss the further steps that had to be taken. The Lisbon Strategy aims to make vital progress in the fight against poverty by 2010. The question is which developments are seen here in the States of the European Union. Virginie Poilvert referred to the above mentioned central approaches in the fight against poverty and social exclusion: Access to the labour market, to a dignified income and to housing, the integration of migrants, the participation of those concerned, etc. She stressed the importance of continuing to strive towards this goal in order to bring about social Europe for the benefit of its citizens. The Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty were an opportunity to come together here, to exchange information and escape one’s own passivity. In the face of all this, it must not however be forgotten that exchange must be followed by action on the ground – otherwise it’s all just hot air.



3. “What we sought, where we stand” The symbolic objects presented at the meeting

Under the title “What we sought, where we stand” twenty five delegations, the European Commission, the Social Protection Committee, the Belgian Federal Ministry on Social Integration, as well as the EAPN, summarized their experience from the previous five Meetings and visualised the results in three-dimensional objects. Linked to this was the question of how the inclusion of people experiencing poverty impacts on the process of social integration. The presentations are grouped by fields of action, and their central statements are described below. Some presentations fall into various groups since they have focussed on different topics.

Poverty and participation



The presentations from Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, the United Kingdom and Portugal made it clear in different ways how poverty can be used as a synonym for a society which has lost its balance. This applies regardless of the different prosperity levels, such as those existing between France and Bulgaria. Poverty and the experience of social exclusion are relative with regard to the prosperity of the society at hand, which is why the different circumstances encountered by those concerned in the individual countries are difficult to compare with one another in statistical terms. If however one focuses one's view on people, one sees via the presentations that the concrete experience of poverty and social exclusion, and the concomitant lack of participation and realisation opportunities, are as universal as the underlying social distribution conflicts and political controversies.

The Bulgarian delegation expressed by presenting meaningless objects (a cup without a bottom, a plastic cigarette) that people in poverty feel excluded from participation in the life of society by virtue of isolation and stigmatisation. Poverty is perceived as a loss of meaning.

However, dealing with the fight against poverty and social exclusion is not only a question of how individuals can be better integrated into society. It is also a matter of the political debate on how the resources of a society as a whole should be distributed. Is it socially just – as the Bulgarian delegation asks – if the government spends money on defence equipment whilst at the same time many pensioners do not receive a pension that they can live on?

The Cypriot delegation took up this thought and wondered how the participation of people experiencing poverty in the political process can be further strengthened. Also or perhaps indeed particularly in a country where poverty is more of a marginal phenomenon, the problem arises of the political lobby of social minorities. Whilst in Bulgaria everyone knows about the social exclusion of old people, there was still lobby work to be done in Cyprus for those concerned in order to bring them into the collective consciousness. As was shown by the contribution from

Cyprus, there are two particularly pressing problems here: Firstly, the difficulties encountered in finding funding covenants for social projects within the country, but also from the European Union, and secondly the slow rate of change being achieved for the people.

A society which aims to find its balance must accept people with an experience of poverty and social exclusion as full members. It must respect their rights and increase their participation. The presentation of the French delegation showed how an awareness can be created of the fight against poverty and social exclusion with small steps. Here, the Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty have had an impact at national and regional level. For instance, a number of self-organised initiatives have now come about in which those concerned can draw attention to their situations and actively invoke their participation rights. The message here is not to let oneself get trapped in isolation. Participation needs political and societal conditions which are open to participation, but at least as important is the willingness of the individual to take an active part in the implementation of the fundamental values of “liberty, equality, participation” symbolised in the French object. After all, it is only through permanent grassroots pressure that the political process will open up for those concerned.

The United Kingdom delegation also considered the participation rights of people experiencing poverty to be disadvantaged in many ways. In their view, the promise of social participation can be portrayed as a door in front of which various barriers are placed. Racism, all types of discrimination, a lack of job opportunities, restricted access to social and cultural services, all lead to people experiencing poverty increasingly living in a parallel world to the majority society. Here, the UK example also shows that greater participation is possible. For instance, the group indicated that qualitative surveys among those concerned, and the drafting of the National Action Plans against poverty and social exclusion in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy, have certainly led to greater participation on the part of those concerned.



The example of the delegation from Portugal also stands for how greater participation can be organised, for instance in the field of work with the elderly. Employment and leisure activities are being developed for elderly people with disadvantages in the project entitled “Enabling participation” – partly in cooperation with local firms. The delegation’s object – a porcelain plate painted with a flower manufactured during the project – symbolises here how elderly people, because of their experience and skills, can

turn something apparently useless into art. Another nine microprojects have been able to reach additional target groups such as children, juveniles or the mentally ill. The activities show how participation can be realised in situ. There is however a long way to go; networks must be built up and spaces for participation created. It proves to be repeatedly difficult here to transfer examples of good practice from a temporary model phase into long-term regular practice.

Poverty and the breakdown in solidarity



Poverty and social exclusion represents a break down in solidarity between people, not only within society as a whole, but also at times within the groups of people experiencing poverty. They are pushed into the sidelines, either deliberately or unconsciously. These people disappear from view, and there is no automatic mechanism leading to those concerned uniting and articulating their needs. The mental and physical strains of everyday life are frequently too great; what is lacking in many cases is not only the opportunity, but also the strength to stand up for their own rights. The delegations from Italy, Austria, Spain, Germany and Slovenia concentrated on this problem.

“Once upon a time there was a sad small child. His eyes looked out on a world which seemed to be too big. In his childhood, he experienced the meaning of pain. He expected nothing of his life” – is how the presentation of the Italian delegation began, about a small boy who throughout his entire life only experienced a lack of solidarity and (social) isolation. One day, this child meets many other people on a marketplace who are also at the margins of society. But there is a change underway because the people suddenly become aware that they have strength in numbers – they unite and start to speak with one voice.

The feeling of exclusion and of individual helplessness is also visualised by the contribution from Austria. A dice symbolises the different sides of poverty and social exclusion. The individual sides only touch at the edges – meaning that each individual or group is ultimately alone with their own worries and needs. And the dice makes clear something else, namely that no matter how one turns the dice, the observer can always only see one side of it. As selective as this perception by society is, as coincidental are ultimately the social assistance and support services. We are fortunate if our dice comes up. This group can attract attention and obtain assistance. The others remain in the shadows – and also partly only touch one another at the edges, thus they remain ultimately isolated on their own sides without being able to establish contact.

These thoughts can also be found once more in the contribution of the Spanish delegation. Highly-coloured balloons symbolise the topics which enable people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to stand up for their own interests once more. Networking, participation on the part of those concerned, empathy, attention and help to help oneself are symbols for the Spanish delegation which can show the way to deal with the solution of social problems in a spirit of partnership.

A loaf of bread visualises for the German delegation the ability of a society to show solidarity and to have all partake of joint prosperity. Bread is its symbol—it can be easily broken and stills the hunger of all in equal measure. Transferred to the Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty, the delegation also sees signs that it is possible to counter the breaking down of solidarity. Thus, the presence of decision-makers has increased over the years, so that the Meetings are also being increasingly taken note of and taken seriously beyond the participants themselves. The German National Poverty Conference had been able to organise a similar conference in Germany in the past year, and hence also to enhance the participation of those concerned at national level. As important as such activities may be for the fight against poverty and social exclusion, one may not forget the issue of distribution between the poor and the rich, and hence the search for a more just economic and social system – at least according to the appeal going out from the German delegation.

The Slovenian delegation added to this thought by stating that the fight against poverty and social exclusion could only be won in a joint international effort. Each state has its own problems and hoped-for solutions. Social problems however did not stop short of borders in the common House of Europe. For this reason, the European Union must take care that the Member States do not outsmart one another, but through cooperation and exchange must counter the international tendencies towards a break down in solidarity caused by Europeanization and globalisation.

The multidimensional nature of poverty



The contributions of the delegations from Poland, Hungary, Malta, Greece, the Netherlands, Denmark, Luxembourg and Sweden show the multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion. They demonstrate a broad spectrum of social exclusion risks and identify above all women, children and the homeless as target groups which are particularly affected. The Polish delegation found, with the cactus, a simple but also impressive symbol which stands both for the diversity of social exclusion and for the strength of will on the part of those concerned to change their situation. Even the concurrence of the most unfavourable conditions cannot stop this small plant surviving. And as the cactus needs water from time to time, also people living at the margins of society need special support to permit their abilities to flower.

In the context of the different poverty risks, the Hungarian delegation points to the health consequences, the restricted access to education and training and the inadequate barrier-free access to goods and (social) services. It was noted in Hungary that the situation is considerably worse in rural areas in many cases than in the cities. What is more, the state social services are not being adjusted in line with the pressure coming from the problems encountered.

A semi-inflated ball best describes the situation for the delegation from Malta. Here, the inflated part stands for the progress that has been made in the fight against poverty and social exclusion, whilst the other part symbolises upcoming challenges. The delegation stated that a lot is known about the multidimensional nature of poverty, but that this frequently only plays a minor role in the political process. Whilst the political arena is slowly opening to procedures which allow greater participation, for instance Parliament for the first time discussed a draft Bill together with the NGOs, there is nonetheless a lack of willingness on many parts to lend concrete form to knowledge about causal connections and possible solutions. For this reason, the delegation is calling for an increased awareness-creation effort, be it via further research projects on matters related to poverty, by funding additional NGOs, by making better use of the Structural Fund, or by entrenching social inclusion as a mainstreaming topic spanning all policy fields.

The Greek delegation endorses the Maltese list of demands with a message in a bottle. It is a symbol of the need of those concerned and at the same time a message to policy-makers. The bottle contains a demand to enter into a dialogue regarding a more just spread of society's prosperity and, in naming the relevant topical areas, highlights the entire spectrum of social exclusion: employment, old-age security, housing, health, free drinking water, an affordable energy supply, as well as education and access to culture.

The presentations however also include accounts of existing solutions to fight social exclusion. For instance, in the view of the Dutch delegation the government has achieved important successes in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. Its list also makes clear the multiple nature of the underlying problems. For instance, in the view of the delegation female unemployment has fallen, the approach to domestic violence has been recognised as a problem, fewer young school drop-outs are being recorded and access for people with disabilities to public services has also been improved. On the other hand, problems do remain. For instance, there is a shortage of affordable housing in the cities. And youth unemployment is still high. All in all, it is difficult to ascertain what contribution the Lisbon Strategy has made towards improving the social situation. There is however no doubt that it is leading to a better understanding of the multidimensional nature of the social exclusion risks and is keeping the debate on improving participation and realisation opportunities on the political agenda.

The Danish delegation drew particular attention with its object to the link between poverty and inadequate educational opportunities. A project was presented which successfully stabilises socially-disadvantaged young people to such a degree that they are able to assume responsibility for themselves once more. The juveniles are prepared for the labour market with a comprehensive care and counselling approach, and in this process learn to respect both themselves and others

once more. Hence, the project stresses by way of example how access to tailored educational opportunities can break through the spiral of poverty and social exclusion.

The delegation from Luxemburg focused in particular on the aspect of the health risks emanating from poverty. Its symbol is the shelf “Shalf” – a play on words made up of ‘share’ and ‘shelf’ – in which items of daily use are found, as in a shop window. On the basis of the estimation that poverty is above all a relative problem in a rich country such as Luxembourg, the group nonetheless highlights a fundamental problem with the restricted access of people experiencing poverty to healthy food. A lack of funding on the one hand and a lack of knowledge of healthy eating on the other lead to unhealthy lifestyles, particularly with children who come from disadvantaged families. A social food store, like the one which is being run in Luxembourg, can be an initial step towards the practical implementation of the right to healthy food.

The Swedish delegation presented a concise summary of the individual impacts of the many manifestations of poverty. The exclusion risks, which are frequently accumulative, lead to a loss of drive and create amongst ‘victims’ a negative, frequently also guilt-laden self-image. Being dependent on social transfers and support promotes not only a feeling of dependency – it also robs those concerned in many cases of the freedom to decide on their life planning. Poverty and social exclusion lead to social isolation, participation in the life of society is only possible to a very restricted degree. This leads to a feeling of uselessness. The routines and activities are missing which lend a structure to people’s daily life. Access to healthcare is frequently restricted, and this is all the more important given that a life in poverty entails particular physical and mental strains. Poverty and social exclusion can be humiliating if those concerned are not treated with respect and human decency, if decisions are made about them instead of with them – in a nutshell, if participation is denied them.

Poverty and homelessness

A series of delegations addressed the problem of access to decent housing as one of the most elementary human needs. The presentations by the delegations from Belgium, the Czech Republic, Norway and Finland revealed that many people do not have a roof over their heads even in the highly-developed industrialised countries



of the European Union, or are forced to live in undignified housing conditions. The people in question are amongst the worst affected by poverty and social exclusion. Without a home to serve as a place providing protection and the opportunity to recuperate, access to comprehensive social participation is further than the moon. If also, as in the case of the Roma, xenophobia and racism are both the cause and the effect of exclusion, homelessness shows itself to be a Catch 22 situation made up of massive everyday violations of general human rights.



The Belgian delegation symbolised the human basic need for protection and security in a tent. The group derived from this a call to comply with the right of all people to suitable housing as a central fundamental condition of social participation. So that the tent can protect people, access to social services, in particular in the field of education and health, must be facilitated as well. In concrete terms, the delegation would like to see a more open discussion about how people's basic needs can be defined and by what rights and obligations they are to be complemented.

With its object, the Czech delegation also made a reference to the call for a fundamental right to a home. They used a modest house without a roof as a symbol of the fact that many houses in the Czech Republic are in bad condition. Here too, not having a roof over one's head is a symbol of a lack of security and of comfort. A mouse in the house points particularly to the conditions in which the Roma live, and above all women and children. According to the delegation's experience, many Roma literally have to live on what others leave, and live in undignified housing. Particularly the example of Roma women shows impressively how the lack of a home entails further social disadvantages and discrimination. For example, the delegates reported of sterilisation and forced abortions against the explicit will of the women.

The example from Finland showed how public attention to the topic can be successfully increased. An inconspicuous, but also mysterious symbol on a badge (a black flame) was sufficient for a group of volunteers to arouse curiosity and to get into a conversation with other people on the topic. The activists increased their authenticity by living one day per year as a homeless person. 850 experience reports of homeless people were collected and published in the context of another campaign. It has now been possible via this kind of public relations work to build a dense network which is also taken seriously by Finnish politicians. In the view of the delegation, a major problem however remains because the promises made by policy-makers frequently do not affect the real situations in which those concerned find themselves. The de-legation hence proposed a debate on how policy-makers can be more efficiently placed under an obligation to carry out their own promises by introducing concrete sanctioning mechanisms.

The Norwegian delegation also referred to these problems. In its view, it is not sufficient to continuously demand additional assistance for those concerned. It is key how, and to what degree and in which ways assistance is actually made available to homeless people. In many cases – according to the delegation – more human treatment on the part of authorities in line with the needs of those concerned would already be sufficient to avoid homelessness and other forms of social exclusion. All in all, there was a lack of integrated approaches spanning the individual policy areas. In this context, the group drew attention to another problem: The Norwegian Government has aimed to reduce homelessness by thirty percent, which sounds ambitious, but is seen as a major problem by the delegation since, in turn, seventy percent of those concerned remain unable to escape their circumstances.

Poverty and migration

In its contribution, the Irish delegation drew attention to the situation of migrants. Six areas were of particular significance to living conditions in its view. Firstly, the delegates referred to the insufficient financial support. Each adult asylum-seeker in Ireland was said to have a right to Euro 19.10 per week, whilst children received half this amount. As in other States of the European Union, those concerned were not permitted to work.



Meals were offered in canteens, but cultural or religious particularities were frequently not catered for. All in all, it was completely unclear how asylum-seekers in Ireland were to live a dignified life in these conditions. A second problem was the exploitation and restricted mobility of foreign labour. Many labour migrants only had restricted work permits, ultimately making workers highly dependent on their employers. Wage and employment standards were not complied with, and workers were kept in constant fear of losing their jobs and being deported. Employment – for other people the key to social participation – is being used to chain these people down! Migrants, thirdly, especially experience racism and discrimination, going as far as physical attacks. A special form of discrimination is, fourthly, the inadequate recognition of (formal) qualifications. Many migrants were hence being prevented from finding work that was suited to their qualifications. As a paradox of integration, whilst some were to undergo constant further qualification to improve their employability, others were being excluded from these opportunities to improve themselves. A fifth problem lay in the situation of so-called “undocumented migrants”, the number of whom is rising all over Europe. They were particularly affected by social exclusion and discrimination since they could not assert any rights or use social services due to the lack of a legal residence permit. And sixthly and finally, the restricted possibilities of family reunification are a problem of social exclusion. Asylum-seekers and labour migrants alike have no direct right to have their family members follow them. It may take years until the formal preconditions are met, which was a situation of considerable emotional strain for all concerned.

Participation rights as an encouragement for the future



The presentations from Lithuania and Latvia depicted almost poetically the hope of people experiencing poverty for improved circumstances. Particularly in the post communist transformation countries, people were experiencing gross social contrasts in some cases. Social transfers did not keep up with

the rising cost of living, social services which used to be free were today no longer affordable for the poor, or had been abolished altogether. In this situation the Latvian delegation presented a stylised flower breaking through a blanket of snow as a symbol of life. However, the flower has empty petals, since the life of people experiencing poverty is frequently a colourless, joyless existence. There is nevertheless hope that the prospects of a better life may come true by 2010.

For example, even the integration of Latvia into the European Union was completely inconceivable ten years ago. First steps have now been taken with the participation of NGOs, in the drafting of the National Action Plans against poverty and social exclusion, towards greater participation on the part of those concerned.

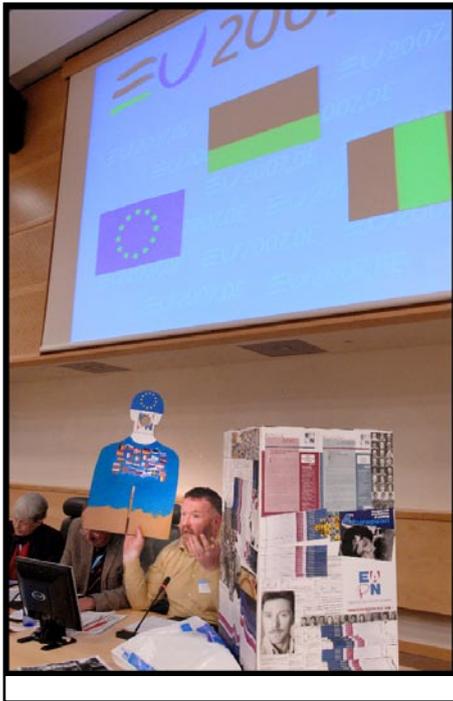
Poverty is also part of social reality for the Lithuanian delegation. Their own experience and the exchange at the Brussels Meetings expressed the fact that poverty and social exclusion feel different in reality than statistics and surveys can express. There were many grey areas and grey zones which in most cases could not be described in scientific terms. The mutual exchange of experience was hence indispensable in order to find a way out of poverty and social exclusion. The candle was a strong symbol of hope which above all stood for reinforced participation and help to help oneself: Symbolising people in poverty with the wick, and poverty itself with the wax, it takes a helping hand to light the candle. Once it has started to burn, however, the burning wick consumes the wax, and hence not only itself, but also poverty.

The fight against poverty as a political mandate



The presentations of the EAPN, the Social Protection Committee, the Belgian Federal Ministry on Social Integration, and the European Commission first of all made it clear that this form of exchange of opinion was also being taken seriously in these institutions and that it has led to intensive reflection on their own role in the overall process.

The object of the EAPN indicated on the different sides of a dice in what ways the six Meetings which have taken place in Brussels are significant for the participation of those concerned. Whilst only a limited number of people can be invited to each Meeting, experience however showed that an ever-growing number of people were involved in the preparations at national level. The events supported the building of bridges between those concerned on the one hand and society and the political arena on the other. What is more, follow-up events had now taken place in some Member States, and new initiatives had been taken by those concerned. The idea of the Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty was hence casting its waves further and further out. However, the social situation in situ in many cases was only changing hesitantly, and in some cases it was actually getting worse. The discussions on ways to fight poverty and social exclusion were also frequently carried out in a highly technocratic manner. Thus, the impression was created that the political sphere is ultimately turning in circles. The Meetings in Brussels and the object presented by EAPN made it clear that behind all the problems and challenges, of which the Member States give account in long reports, there were people who were willing and able to take their fate into their own hands.



The Social Protection Committee presented a red megaphone symbolising a dual obligation or function. Thus, the Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty on the one hand functioned as an amplifier. The voices of those concerned were combined and audible even in European bodies such as the Social Protection Committee. This also imposed on their members an obligation to become a loudspeaker in their immediate sphere of influence for the interests of the people concerned.

The Belgian Federal Ministry on Social Integration symbolised its role by means of a folding chair. It contained the obligation incumbent on the administration to make itself a part of the solution. Participation meant here treating people with respect, taking time for the interests of others. In this sense, also the venue in the Palais d'Egmont signified appreciation of those concerned. Direct participation must be ensured, so that those concerned sit at the table on an

equal footing. From such a point of view, the portable folding chair was also a symbol of the willingness to get together everywhere with all stakeholders.

The European Commission presented the model of a small circus, standing first and foremost for a certain lack of structure and daring feats. However, it was also a symbol of the art of organising a successful performance consisting of a large number of glamorous and not so glamorous elements with considerable talent for improvisation. The circus was a place of tolerance at which many different people met, and together with the audience brought about something special. The desire to go beyond oneself was also satisfied in a circus, as was the curiosity to step over boundaries. And sometimes the performance became like a balancing act. Put in a nutshell, the circus was a place where many wheels locked together, thus enabling people to do something together for other people.



4. The results of the workshops and of the plenary

Against the backdrop of the stocktake of the Meetings to date, the participants discussed in seven hosted workshops the challenges and focal topics of social integration, as well as the question of how the impact of the Meetings could be further increased in future. A comprehensive range of topics was discussed: opportunities to participate in education and training for children and juveniles, promotion of (active) integration by integration into the labour market, precarious employment, poverty of children, families and lone parents, overcoming long-term poverty and avoiding intergenerational poverty, fighting homelessness, integrating migrants and ethnic minorities, involving those concerned in assistance and counselling structures, as well as strengthening their active participation.

The results of the workshops were documented within the individual groups and summarised for a short report in the plenary. The reporting went over into the final plenary discussion. Here, Jérôme Vignon, Head of the Directorate of Social Protection and Integration, Elise Willame, Chairwoman of the Social Protection Committee, and Renzo Fior, President of Emmaus International, made themselves available for the discussion and for questions from the plenary.

The results of the workshops

Looking at the results of the workshop, the observer is reminded of the symbolism of the dice. Despite the many reports on approaches to improve the living conditions of people experiencing poverty, it is also made clear that there is a lack of across-the-board structures. It is noticeable that no participants in the workshops reported of an integrated national policy approach which served to guide the fight against poverty and social exclusion. Partial successes for certain groups are primarily achieved at local level, and a large number of projects and initiatives have been initiated, but these approaches do not form an overall strategy. Also the Open Method of Coordination, in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy, and the National Action Plans against poverty and social exclusion, have not demonstrated to most delegates a more coherent policy planning in or indeed between the individual Member States. What is more, one Member State is unaware of things that have been normal practice for some time in others. Nonetheless, the exchange proved to be stimulating; ideas and experience were exchanged, such as on how to reach individual target groups better.

Having said that, there is no mistaking the fact that, questions of poverty and social exclusion have taken up their place on the agenda at all political levels. The awareness is growing in the individual Member States that concrete assistance and greater participation are needed to enable people to live their lives on their own responsibility. From the point of view of those concerned, the largest obstacles in the fight against poverty and social exclusion are discrimination, stigmatisation, racism and xenophobia, but also the lack of political will and in some cases the de facto inability to re-distribute society's prosperity more efficiently by means of social transfers and social services. This makes it clear that this is a task for society as a whole which only all Member States can tackle together in the common House of Europe. Whilst the results from the workshops point to these structural problems, their demands and recommendations however also indicate - according to the participants - possible starting points for further developments.

Promoting all-embracing policy approaches to fight poverty

One delegate put it in a nutshell: No one wants to live in poverty, and no child will ever say that they want to be poor when they grow up. The social security systems in the individual Member States must therefore be made poverty-proof. This is not only a problem facing the new Central Eastern European Member States, in which in particular the situation for older people and also for ethnic minorities (above all the Roma communities) are developing along problematic lines. Also in other Member States with comparatively well-established social security systems, the social benefits (for instance for families and children) do not ensure that everyone lives above the poverty line after receiving social transfers and social services. Particularly dramatic here is the increase in the number of 'working poor'. Being poor despite being in work is the life perspective for many now. An all-embracing approach towards the fight against social exclusion hence includes the calls from the workshops for fair working conditions and payment, for decent minimum income schemes, for unrestricted access to training and education and health services, for suitable protection of children and families, as well as the reduction of discrimination and (gender-specific) disadvantages of all kinds. In order to achieve greater progress here, the delegates are demanding that questions of poverty and social exclusion must be integrated as mainstream topics into all policy areas.

People experiencing poverty frequently do not have a voice to draw public attention to their situation. The call for better access to education takes on two-fold significance in this context. On the one hand, as high as possible a level of education is an effective weapon against poverty, whilst on the other hand education can be used to spread more information on the situation of socially-marginalised people. On the whole, a comprehensive policy approach towards the fight against poverty and social exclusion can only be found if the participation of those concerned is taken seriously and further expanded. Acceptance is a central keyword on both sides, particularly in the debate on ways and means to achieve better social integration. In this sense, the Member States are called upon to consider here the expansion and development of new access paths. A number of ideas for different approaches on this (for people who are homeless, the elderly, etc.) have been described in individual workshops. However, participation means not only that those concerned can participate in the life of society, but this also entails a call on the political arena to acknowledge and tackle the realities faced by those concerned. The examples from the workshops show here that there is still much room for improvement in Member States.

The practice of good governance must be further expanded at all levels. The records of the workshops make it clear that a major problem of the fight against poverty lies less in the lack of a legislative foundation, and more in its grassroots implementation in concrete policy. We therefore see that laws are not complied with, or that administrative authorities apply a restrictive interpretation. Here, there is frequently a lack of a culture of good governance. Therefore, one workshop makes a rather fundamental call to adjust the law to people and not vice versa. This area also includes the shortcomings of which the participants reported in taking on international charters into national legislation. Closely linked to the practice of application of the law is, furthermore, ensuring access of all to a society's social and cultural services. Here too, the problem lies not only in the fact that there is a lack of corresponding services, but

that bureaucratic procedures act as a deterrent, which leads to people who are actually entitled to benefits waiving such benefits 'voluntarily' (grey area problem). The result of this is the call for an obligation incumbent on all authorities and agencies involved to provide information to those concerned. Legal certainty is a burden which is incumbent on authorities towards citizens. If rights have to be fought for in administrative procedures or in court, this marginalises people experiencing poverty in particular.

The participants at the Meeting consider a multidimensional policy approach spanning the individual policy fields for the fight against poverty and social exclusion to be indispensable, but at the same time they are in favour of direct, targeted promotion of certain population groups. Highest priority hence attaches to the special protection of women and children, to eliminating discrimination against migrants and ethnic minorities, as well as to effective measures against homelessness. It should be noted here that people are not to be passed from one project to the next, but that they should be enabled to comprehensively develop their abilities and knowledge in a sustainable process.

Requests at European level

The participants call on the European Union to examine its policy strategies more closely as to their negative impact on disadvantaged people. From the workshops comes the estimation that for instance the liberalisation of services frequently has a negative impact for people experiencing poverty, for instance in healthcare or in energy supply. A more precise analysis of the interactions is called for here. Against this background, a call also went up to continue the Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty in terms of an information platform. In order to give the Meetings an even more prominent position in the political landscape, it should be considered how the circle of participants can be usefully expanded. For instance, participants complained that no representative of the European Parliament was present, and suggested that employer representatives should also be invited in future.

A further concrete call to the European Union refers to taking up a stronger position in the discussion of poverty-proof minimum wages and minimum income as a European social standard. The question arises here, firstly, of the relationship between minimum wages and minimum income schemes capable of allowing people to live in dignity. On the other hand, the question arises of the definition of a European minimum wage and a European Minimum Income. The introduction of a basket of essential goods and services was named as a concrete suggestion, on the basis of which it would be possible to calculate adequate minimum income schemes and other social transfers in the Member States.

From the point of view of the conference participants, the European Union must step up its efforts to make the European Social Model more balanced and harmonised. The implementation of the Lisbon Strategy shows that the Open Method of Coordination does not entail an obligation to carry out concrete political action. Those concerned therefore consider it to be too voluntary in nature. There is also a call to the European Commission to be more vigilant than previously that the Member States consequently adopt in national law relevant conventions and directives

to fight poverty and social exclusion and to ensure human rights, and that they indeed apply these provisions. In the view of the delegations, an aid to this end could be to give the Charter of Fundamental Rights a fixed and binding place in the European Constitutional Treaty.

In the view of the Meeting's participants, it would also be welcome for the European Union's Structural Fund to be deployed more, and more sustainably, for the fight against poverty. A problem lay in the too short durations of individual projects. The obligation to submit at short intervals more and more innovative project proposals prevented the creation of a sustainable social infrastructure and the development of holistic, gradually developing funding approaches. This context included the indication that local and regional initiatives should receive more promotion.

The contributions from the panel

Jérôme Vignon, Head of the Directorate of Social Protection and Integration

Mr Vignon stressed in his contribution the significance of the European constitutional process. Without a binding legal basis, the European Union could not act on matters related to poverty and social exclusion. In this sense, the Treaty of Amsterdam, signed in 1997 and entered into force in 1999 was already a major step in the right direction, which however should be followed urgently by more steps with the common constitution.

Also the question as to the contribution of the European Commission to binding minimum social standards was closely interlinked with the question of the Union's legal framework conditions. The European Commission could not impose binding requirements on any Member State, even if this were to appear to be conducive to greater harmonisation of the European Social Model and to the fight against poverty and social exclusion. Agreed goals and their implementation lay within the remit of the Member States. In this sense, the accusation which is aimed at the European Commission that it is too passive in this field did not hold water. Having said that, the European Commission and the Social Protection Committee wished to work towards a situation in which the goals were given a clearer definition in the field of social protection and were implemented in a more binding fashion. Thus, access to decent levels of minimum income needs to be more unambiguously linked with the question of a minimum basket of essential goods and services to which citizens in Europe should have access.

In the view of Mr Vignon, the European Union can however also point to major successes. The European Union had the most comprehensive occupational safety and health system of all economic areas; social dialogue had been established. Many improvements had been made, in particular in the field of protection against discrimination. For instance, people within the Union now had the right to bring an action against discrimination, which could help in particular the Roma to improve their situation. In the context of the Social Fund there were specific programme lines to support work for and with migrants.

This weakened the accusation that the Lisbon Strategy only served to assert economic interests. It imposed an obligation on the Member States to draft strategies against poverty and

social exclusion, to increase the exchange and to improve the level of information available, and the comparability of this information, on living conditions in Europe. Finally, he stressed that a central role attached to the mobilisation of those concerned and to a revival of the constitutional process in order to enhance the social dimension of the EU.

Elise Willame, Chairwoman of the Social Protection Committee

According to Ms Willame, the Social Protection Committee is working towards giving people experiencing poverty and social exclusion better participation opportunities. The Lisbon Strategy and the goals derived from it already contained clear obligations incumbent on the Member States in this respect. Many of the unresolved questions that had been touched upon in the context of the 6th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty were included in these goals. In this sense, these topics were on the agenda of the European institutions and of the national governments. It was however a matter of ensuring that decision-makers at all levels actually proceeded to act in respect of the agreed goals.

As to the question of how the Lisbon Strategy could be implemented in a more effective manner, Ms Willame pointed to the need to further expand the participation of all concerned. This included the task of expanding the dialogue at all levels. And finally, cross-border meetings were in her view a major element for further action.

Participation however also meant taking people seriously. In this sense, Ms Willame took up the concern of the participants regarding the potential negative impact of the liberalisation of services, and took from this a mandate for the Social Protection Committee to obtain for itself a clearer picture of the social impact of its initiatives in future. At the same time, she assured the delegates that the Committee would continue to be a place for exchange and support for their concerns.

Renzo Fior, President of Emmaus International

In contradiction to the call frequently emerging at the Meeting for better state support for local initiatives and NGOs, Mr Fior took the view that, in order to safeguard their independence, the organisations should aim to gain independence, rather than obtaining funding covenants. The work of Emmaus also confirmed the experience reported by participants of the 6th Meeting. A central concern was considered to lie in people experiencing poverty and social exclusion regaining their dignity. To this end, it was also important for those concerned not to be placed in permanent dependence on social transfers because this would deprive them of the ability to live a self-determined life.

In Mr Fior's view, it is not realistic to expect the Lisbon goals to be achieved by 2010. Since, on the contrary, poverty and social exclusion were on the increase, it was unclear in his view how a major breakthrough was to be achieved in the coming three-and-a-half years. What is more, the principle of the market economy as the basis of the European Union is irreconcilable in his view with the claim to fully integrate all citizens. And finally, the policy of liberalisation and privatisation, particularly in the field of supply of public goods (energy, drinking water), brings

with its new manifestations of social exclusion.

Therefore, politicians were obliged to listen to people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. In this sense, the 6th Meeting, as well as the previous events, had been a major contribution towards promoting rights to have a voice.

5. Closing statements

Franz Thönnnes

Parliamentary State Secretary at the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs

Mr Thönnnes stressed that the 6th Meeting was characterised by constructive talks and discussions from which all participants were able to gain new impressions and perspectives. The event made it clear that the Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty did make a difference. Three aspects were particularly important in the view of Mr Thönnnes. Firstly, it had been possible to increase the involvement of people experiencing poverty in the political discussion and in the decision-making process at European and national level since 2001. Secondly, the picture of poverty and social exclusion was made more tangible and easier to understand by pointing to and reflecting on specific circumstances. And, thirdly, many examples showed that involving those concerned in the political process can have a positive impact on overcoming their situations and on solving problems. This could be very clearly observed in the many local, regional and national fora in which the participation of those concerned takes place.

The motto of the German Council Presidency was “Joining forces for a social Europe – for a social world”. It would only be possible to create trust and acceptance for a social Europe if it was plausible for people that this Europe offers an outlook for all citizens. Here, the Meeting showed that the experience of poverty was not an unchangeable fate to which those concerned were resigned. They showed considerable commitment and creativity every day, and they made their demands heard. Policy-makers and governments were obliged to listen to people experiencing poverty in order to obtain specific knowledge that they could use in their political activities and in order to take actions in favour of people experiencing poverty.

People experiencing poverty needed the help of the State and of society. This meant a combination of help to help themselves and reliable minimum standards of social protection. Such minimum standards included, first and foremost, meeting the needs of people who because of illness, disability or difficult circumstances, or indeed because of a low educational level, were too far removed from the requirements of the labour market. These however also included fair pay for work, a roof over one’s head, healthcare and access to education from a very young age.

Ludo Horemans

President of EAPN

In the view of Ludo Horemans, the Meeting has shown that the European Union is far away from reaching its goal of combating poverty and social exclusion. 2010 was just around the corner, and this meant that the fight must be continued with even greater intensity. His appeal was not to forget that poverty and social exclusion were an injustice which could not be tolerated in one of the richest parts of the world. Particularly at a European Meeting, the delegates should never lose sight of the fact that the issue of combating poverty and social exclusion took on a worldwide dimension. The elimination of poverty encompassed a large number of approaches. The vital element was not to forget that policies must be developed against poverty and not against the poor. Central topics of the fight against poverty here were decent minimum income schemes, fair wages, participation at all levels and in particular the participation of those directly concerned by poverty.

Davor Dominkuš

Acting Director General for Social Affairs at the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia

Mr Dominkuš lent expression to his conviction that all attending had experienced the Meeting as a personal enrichment. The in some cases highly-personal, powerful descriptions given by those concerned stressed the need to definitely continue fighting poverty and social exclusion. This was a matter above all of ensuring access to the areas of education, work, housing, healthcare and social and cultural services. The fight against poverty was one of the central political topics in Slovenia, in which the National Action Plan played a major role. The political approach to fight poverty and social exclusion comprised measures aiming to enable those concerned to help themselves, as well as preventive elements to prevent poverty and social exclusion coming about in the first place. The results of this approach could be seen in a positive trend in the poverty rate in Slovenia. In order to safeguard and refine the results, however, a constant dialogue was needed at national, regional and local levels. The 6th Meeting had served as a reminder of the importance attaching to the inclusion of those concerned in this respect. In this vein, the Slovenian Council Presidency would also take on an intensive role in continuing and designing the discussion process that had commenced, and would issue the invitations to the 7th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty.

Appendix 1: Conclusions of the German EU Presidency from the 6th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty presented to the Council for Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs on 30 and 31 May 2007

It is welcomed that the Spring Council has underlined the importance of the social dimension of Europe and has reinforced the willingness to strengthen the economic and social cohesion in Europe. It is likewise to be welcomed that the Spring Council has been in favour of taking increased account of the common social objectives in the framework of the Lisbon strategy and pointing out that the European Union can only be successful if, in addition to economic progress, adequate social protection for all is guaranteed. To this end, common minimum standards are to be developed and the instruments of the Open Method of Coordination are to be increasingly focussed on central issues.

It has been confirmed that the open dialogue between those affected by poverty and government representatives on the occasion of the European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty is important for shaping the Open Method of Coordination at the European level. The Sixth European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty notes that the participation of people affected by poverty in the Member States has improved since the establishment of these Meetings in 2001. The Meetings have intensified the exchange between people experiencing poverty from all Member Countries and launched learning processes. This contributed to the building and reinforcement of forms of participation and networking by those affected by exclusion in the Member States, leading to small steps of progress being made particularly at the local levels. As a result, the basis for more intensive political and civic participation of the people concerned has been strengthened.

But it is also to be noted that there are wide variances as regards the alliance of people affected by poverty and their integration by governments in national processes which still needs to be improved in some Member States. The German EU Presidency therefore underlines the need for increasing the efforts to involve all stakeholders and calls on the Member States to incorporate to a greater extent the results and conclusions of the Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty into their work. To ensure an intensive and continuous dialogue it is suggested that, between Meetings, the delegates keep contact to the members of the EU Parliament at national levels. Furthermore, it is suggested to increasingly practice the principle of changing perspectives and, in the framework of official visits, look at projects of social integration.

At the same time, the discussions at the Sixth Meeting on future-oriented further development of the conferences and increasing their objective orientation have made clear that in future discussions should concentrate on concrete priorities.

As regards policies in the area of social integration, the focus should be put on the following:

- Countermeasures must be taken against any form of exclusion and discrimination – either economic or social – and all persons must be guaranteed a life in dignity. The strengthening of social cohesion is the foundation of the European social model.
- The labour market must be designed in such a way that also persons with the greatest distance from the labour market are given the chance of economic participation. All possibilities serving to actively integrate into the society also those persons who are most excluded, must therefore be used. An adequate minimum income for all is to be ensured without neglecting the principle that work must pay. At the same time, the persons concerned should be offered a balanced system of supportive measures in terms of an activating labour market policy as well as the access to high-quality services. In this context, the access of all to education and training is a priority.
- The European social model must be further developed by common minimum standards and the gradual implementation of common goals in the field of employment, social protection and social integration. This also includes sufficiently securing the livelihoods of persons who are incapable of gainful employment as well as ensuring that all people have a roof over their head and guaranteeing their access to all public health and care services. It is also necessary that migrants are treated decently in the respective host countries and that their social integration is supported.
- Resolute commitment to the reduction of child poverty is required. The most important objective is to prevent that children are left behind in social integration at an early age and are therefore deprived of opportunities. Therefore, efforts for the integration of parents, especially of single parents, into the labour market must be increased and care for children also under the age of three must be improved in order to guarantee equal educational opportunities for all and to prevent the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next.
- In order to achieve decisive progress in combating poverty and social exclusion, it is necessary to include all responsible persons and stakeholders at national and European levels into the process. As far as the design, implementation and observation of measures and the evaluation regarding their results, their benefits and their sustainability are concerned, an essential prerequisite is the contribution of all levels of government, the civil society, research and the persons affected. The definition of national targets can support this process.

Appendix 2:

The participants

AUSTRIA

Ms KORTSCHIKOVA Llubov	Omega
Mr. SCHÜTTE Michael	Augustin Street paper
Ms HIPTMAIR Sylvia	Österreichische Plattform für Alleinerziehende
Mr. GACH Peter	SHG
Ms GURTNER Christine	Vereine Pe-le

BELGIUM

Mr. TILQUIN Franck	New Solidarities
Ms TONNEAU Nicole	Belgian Network against Poverty
Mr. ROSIERS Paul	Belgian Network against Poverty
Ms STEPMAN Patricia	Belgian Network against Poverty
Mr. RENAULT Michaël	Belgian Networks against Poverty

BULGARIA

Mr. MINEV Douhomir	EAPN Bulgaria
Mr. YOSIFOV Boris	EAPN Bulgaria
Mr. NIKOLOV Aleksandar	EAPN Bulgaria
Mr. MINKOV Tzvetan	Union of Pensioners

CZECH REPUBLIC

Ms ZUROVCOVA-SEVCIKOVA Hana	Obcanske Struzeni Vzajemné souziti
Ms HOLUBOVA Sona	Obcanske Struzeni Vzajemné souziti
Ms GOLOVA Bohdana	Novy Prostor
Ms VIOLOVA Barbora	Obcanske Struzeni Vzajemné souziti
Ms SMARHOVYCOVA Jolana	Obcanske Struzeni Vzajemné souziti

CYPRUS

Ms KAZANZIS Ninetta	EAPN Cyprus
Ms APOSTOLIDOU Frosso	Pancyprian Single Parent Association
Mr. TSIAKLIS Kyros	United Cypriot Pensioner's Association
Ms KOUFOU Andri	EAPN Cyprus

DENMARK

Ms VEJBO Dorthe	Kofoeds School
Ms ANNALISE Bay France	Sand
Ms METTE Jensen	Kofoeds School
Mr. HOLMGREN René	Sand

ESTONIA

Ms TEDER Pille	Tallinn Child Support Centre
----------------	------------------------------

FINLAND

Mr. HONKONEN Antti	Finnish association of Healthy Lifestyles
M HUOTARI Kai	EAPN Finland
Ms SINNENMAA Kati	Finnshi Association for Healthy Lifestyle
Ms KOSONEN Maria	Espoon Olarin Seurakunta
Ms MULARI Aila	Midas Touch Contact Center

FRANCE

Ms COLINET Geneviève	EAPN France
Ms CATTELOTTE Sophie	Tous pour un
Mr. PECCAVET Jeremy	Armée du Salut
Mr. PARIS Jean-Claude	Alerte - la parole du citoyen
Ms POILVERT Virginie	La parole du citoyen

GERMANY

Ms BIEHN Erika	EAPN Germany
Mr. KADIOFSKY Peter	Hilfe Im Norlend
Mr. SCHMIEDL Robert	Region Erwerbslosenaussschus Göttingen
Mr. JECKEL Wolfgang	Bundes Betroffenen initiative
Ms SCHMIDT Dorothée	VAMV Single parents organisation
Mr. SCHRÖTER Jens	Bag-Shi

GREECE

Ms PAPAGIANOGLOU Liza	EAPN Greece
Ms SIDIROPOULOS Odysseas	Pampontian association «ARGO»
Ms SARANTOPOULOU Kyriakoula	Daily center «Ariadni»
Ms PECHLIVANIDOU Elena Margarita	Pah-nhellenic Association of Members of One parents families
Ms PAPAGIANOGLOU Elisavet	EAPN Greece

HUNGARY

Mr. BEKE Marton	Hungarian Anti Poverty Network
Ms GYIMESINE FRENYO Borbála	Hungarian Anti Poverty Network
Mr. SCHWOLCZ Istváan	Hungarian Anti Poverty Network
Mr. BIRI Imre	Hungarian Anti Poverty Network
Ms RUGYAINÉ MAJOR Eva	Hungarian Anti Poverty Network

IRELAND

Ms LYNCH Kay	NorthsideCommunity Law Centre & EAPN Ireland
Ms MBUGUA HENRY Salome	Migrant women's Network
Mr. DHALA Egidie	Centre integration education of migrants
Mr. BHATNAGAR Rajat	Rendez-vous Restaurant
Ms GERMAN Maria Lourdes	Migrants Rights Centre Ireland

ITALY

Ms MANZARI Laura	Associazione Europa
Mr ARSENE Ciprian	
Ms BIBLYV Oksana	Casa Editrice Ottopagine
Ms MATERA Rosa	Associazione Europa
Ms IMBIMBO Fiorella	Ass. Amici di Piazza Grande
Mr. BATTAGLIA Giuseppe	Il Pioppo b

LATVIA

Ms ALERE Elina	SKALBES Eapn Latvia
Ms DANCE Gunta	DZILE Centre for psychological aid & education
Ms KRAGE Edite	Support centre for NGO's of Northern Kurzeme

LITHUANIA

Mr. ZALTAUSKAS Martinas	EAPN Lithuania
Ms ZURAVLIOVA Olga	Information & Support Centre
Ms URBONIENE Elena	EAPN Lithuania
Ms JAZUKEVICIUTE Jurate	EAPN Lithuania

LUXEMBURG

Ms GALLO Marianne	EAPN Luxembourg
Ms MEYERS Mary-Anne	
Mr. OLK Tom	Interactions Faubourg
Mr. REDIN Toto	Interactions Faubourg

MALTA

Ms GAUCI Dolores	Richmond Foundation
Ms SAID Dianne	Richmond Foundation
Ms MICALLEF Bridget	Richmond Foundation
Ms VELLA Helen	Richmond Foundation

NETHERLANDS

Ms SMEEKES Alida	EAPN Netherlands
Mr. TE BRAKE Henk	Raad Sociale Zaken
Mr. VAN OSTAYEN Rien	Raad Sociale Zaken
Ms VAN VLIET Marjo	Raad Vlaardingen
Ms VAN SAMBEECK Maria	EAPN Netherlands

NORWAY

Ms KARLSEN Eva	Welfare Alliance
Ms FRAGAAT Liv Airin	Total rehab
Ms JOHNSEN Anne Beate	Welfare Alliance
Mr. SOLVANG Rolf	SON Offenders organisation
Mr. ODLAND Terje	Welfare Alliance

POLAND

Ms WALCZYK Dagmara	Barka Foundation for Mutual help
Mr. SZCZERBA Stanislaw	
Mr. POTOCKO Dariusz	SIW Barka Association
Ms SZAFRANSKA RATAJCZAK Irena	Social Cooperative RIKSZA
Mr. SMURA Janusz	Shelter for Homeless people
Ms PIOTROWSKA Kornelia	Centre of Social Integration

PORTUGAL

Ms PACHECO Vanda	Center for Social studies
Mr. M. PEREIRA NUNES Paulo	Fundação para o Desenvolvimento da Zona Historica do Porto
Ms COELHO Helena	Asso Desenvolvimento Bem-estar Social Cruz da Picada
Ms FERNANDO Silva	Association des aveugles
Ms AMORIM Ana	Association des Aveugles

SLOVAKIA

Ms MACAKOVA Slavka	Center for sustainable development
--------------------	------------------------------------

SLOVENIA

Mr. NOUHOUM Ibrahim	Humanitas
Mr BAJEC Anton	Institute for Parenthood & Family
Mr ATT Ivan	

SPAIN

Ms OSETE Cristina	Emmaus
Mr. TORRES BETANCOURT Jamilis	
Ms MORON CUESTA Soraya	
Mr. ASENSIO GARCIA Jorge	
M AGUSTIN Gil	Ruiz
Mr. GUILLEN RODRIGUEZ	Rogelio

SWEDEN

Mr. JORGENSEN Johannes	EAPN Sweden
Mr. ANDERSSON Kent	EAPN Sweden
Mr. ANDERSSON Thomas	EAPN Sweden
Mr. LUOMA-PANTI Nehry Erik	EAPN Sweden
Mr. LINDQUIST Peter	EAPN Sweden

UNITED KINGDOM

Ms RAMADAN Nazek	Migrant & Refugee Empowerment
Ms AL- ABEEDI Amal	MRC Anti poverty group
Mr. ISMAIL Abdi	MRC Anti poverty group
Mr. MANAHIL Ahmed	MRC Anti poverty group
Ms BAILEY Patricia	ATD Fourth World
Mr. NEVILLE Seamus	ATD Fourth World

FACILITATORS

Ms SMEEKES Anouschka	EAPN Nederland
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Ms GORIS Josée	PPS Social Integration, Belgium
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Ms DIERCKX Danielle	University of Antwerp, Belgium
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Ms CESARINI SFORZA Letizia	CILAP EAPN Italy
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Ms GERONDAL Micheline	EAPN

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Ms KUCK-SCHNEEMELCHER Daniela	Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
Ms SELL Daniela	Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
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Dr KOPPERNOCK Martin	Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
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Dr CHRISTEN Torsten	Permanent representation
Mr. KLITSCHER Stephan	Permanent representation
Mr. JOBELIUS Sebastian	Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
Mr. DEISCHL Romeo	Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
Ms WILDING Lilly	Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs

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Mr. SAINT-DENIS Antoine	DG Employment & Social Affairs
Ms PARASKEVAS Marie-Anne	DG Employment & Social Affairs
Mr. CALANDRINO Michele	DG Employment & Social Affairs
Ms HÖFS Silke	Trainee EU Commission
Mr SAHA David	Trainee EU Commission

GUESTS

Ms WILLAME Elise	Director General SPF Sécurité sociale- SPC, Chair
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Mr. FIOR Renzo	Emmaüs International
Mr. ANDERSON Jan	Chair, Committee on Employment and Social Affairs- European Parliament
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Ms SEARA SOTO Delmira	Permanent Representation Spain
Ms RABAU Muriel	Permanent Representation Belgium
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Mr. SEPPELIN Markus	Ministry for Social Affairs & Health, Finland
Ms GREGORCOVA Silvia	Ministry of Labour, social affairs & family, Slovak Republic
Mr. CENDELJ Ivan	Ministry of Labour, social affairs & family, Slovak Republic
Ms WEINANDY Brigitte	Ministry of Family and Social Integration, Luxemburg
Mr. OLBRICH Eduard	Federal Ministry for Social Affairs & Consumer Protection, Austria
Ms FITZGERALD Niamh	Department of Social & Family Affairs, Ireland
Ms MICALLEF Therese	Ministry of the Family and Social Solidarity, Malta
Mr. ERDELYI Akos	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Hungary
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Ms SZARAZ Krisztina	European Parliament, Hungary
Mr. SCHWARZ Thomas	European Agency for Fundamental Rights
Ms KING Brenda	President EESC Section Employment, Social Affairs & Citizenship
Mr. VAN GEERTSOM Julien	Président, PPS Social Integration, Belgium
Mr. LOURDELLE Henri	ETUC European Trade Unions
Mr. TEUSCHER Tobias	Commission des droits de la femme & de l'égalité des chances
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Ms HÄRTWIG Anja	Eurochild
Ms DI PUPPO Roshan	Social Platform, Director
Mr. DEVOS Jacques	Emmaüs International
Mr. GUENTNER Simon	Eurocities
Ms WELFORD Sarah	Organising Committee, ATD Fourth World

SLOVENIAN MINISTRY

Mr. DOMINKUS Davor	Ministry of Labour, Family & Social affairs, Slovenia
Ms OSLAJ Danica	Ministry of Labour, Family & Social affairs, Slovenia
Prof. Dr. HUSTER Ernst-Ulrich	Protestant University of Applied Sciences - Bochum
Bishop JEPSEN Maria	Northelbian Evangelical-Luttheran Church

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Dr BOECKH Jürgen	Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik
------------------	---

ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

Dr ZINIEL Gerlinde	EU Foundation Improvement of Living & Work conditions
Dr JOHANSSON Hakan	Växjö University, Sweden
Mr. FRAZER Hugh	National University of Ireland, Maynooth
Mr. MARLIER Eric	CEPS/INSTEAD Research Institute (Lux)

COORDINATION

Ms GERONDAL Micheline	Coordinator of the 6th Europ. Meeting
-----------------------	---------------------------------------

EAPN

Mr. HOREMANS Ludo	Organising Committee EAPN President
Mr. FARRELL Fintan	Organising Committee EAPN Director
Ms GUEUDET Audrey	EAPN, Information officer

CARTOONISTS

Mr VINCKE Bob	Cartoonist
Mr. DE BOLLE Emiel	Cartoonist

PHOTOGRAPHER

Mr. DAKOUA Raymond	Photographer
--------------------	--------------

TV SWEDEN

Mr. PILTZ Mattias	TV Sweden
Ms RANTALA Janne	TV Sweden

VOLUNTEERS

Mr. VERECKEN Nicolas	Volunteer
MS JONES Sian	EAPN, Policy Officer
Ms FAZI Elodie	EAPN, Policy Officer
Ms CHAMPEIX Claire	EAPN, Policy Officer
Ms NOLMANS Cynthia	EAPN Office Manager
Ms FLEMAL Coralie	EAPN Secretary
Mr. LEMMENS Philippe	EAPN Financial Officer



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Rapporteur: Dr. **Jürgen Boeckh** • Coordinator: **Micheline GERONDAL**

Photographer: **Raymond DAKUA** • Cartoons: **Bob VINCKE & Emiel DE BOLLE**

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