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7<sup>th</sup> European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty, Brussels, 16 – 17 May 2008

# 4 Pillars in The Fight Against Poverty

Social services

Services of general interest

Housing

Minimum income





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## Background

The European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty were initiated by Belgium in 2001 and have been a fixture on the European Union agenda since 2003.

People experiencing poverty met in Brussels for the seventh time on 16 and 17 May 2008. 124 delegates – people experiencing poverty and social exclusion – from 26 countries took part in the meeting and the welcomed 90 guests from National Ministries, EU Institutions, NGOs, academics, and Trade Unions.

The Slovenian Presidency brought the idea that the Meeting should focus on four topics – social services, services of general interest, housing and minimum income – four key pillars in the fight against poverty that are interlinked like the pieces of a jigsaw.

Delegates prepared the 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting by asking the same three questions about each of the four topics (social services, services of general interest, housing and minimum income):

- What is working?
- What isn't working?
- How can things be improved?

After a plenary session to open the proceedings, delegates split up into seven workshops where their national preparatory groundwork was used as the basis for exchanges and discussions. The workshops closed with reports offering recommendations which were presented in a plenary report-back session. The proposals that came out of this focussed effort were then commented on and discussed.

This report first summarizes the main messages from the delegates to the meeting, then the outcomes of the preceding meetings, followed by the speeches at the opening session, a summary of the workshops with extracts from the national preparatory groundwork, the proposals and recommendations, plenary comments and discussion, and finally the closing speeches.

## Setting the context for the 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting

Ms **Vesna LESKOSEK** (Chair of the 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting), Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, welcomed the participants and contextualized the Meeting by summarizing the core issues of the four topics.

**Social services** implement the policies framed by governments at national or regional level. Policies enable or impede access to services and programmes, and physical accessibility is important in this, e.g., public transport, proximity of services, building design obstacles, etc. An important factor is social accessibility related to the different user groups. Another important aspect in terms of accessibility is the number of bureaucratic barriers preventing implementation. Bureaucratic barriers often reflect strategies for the reduction of social rights. Another factor is how people are treated: are they considered a social problem, stigmatised as inactive, unintelligent, unable to provide for themselves, and avoiding their responsibilities? Or are they encouraged to develop, expand their potentials? Do social services try to remove barriers to better inclusion in society, treat users with respect and maintain their dignity? Social services may be privatised, too, which often means that they are not accessible to everyone under the same conditions, and often put profit before people's dignity.

**Minimum income** is one of the main pillars in the fight against poverty, one which sets the standards of a dignified life. For this reason, there is wide-ranging debate on what constitutes a dignified life, and how it can be ensured. The rights to welfare benefits have been won by workers' struggle and so must be distributed properly. People who cannot, or can no longer, provide for themselves are entitled to these rights. This is often overlooked and it is a common refrain that people grow dependent on benefits and thus losing the motivation to look for work. Such debates may result in benefits being abolished or resources reduced to increase the pressure on people to look for work. But experience shows that reducing benefits actually increases poverty without increasing employment. Cultural and economic progress set higher standards for the dignified life to which everyone is entitled, regardless of whether it is achieved through work or not. People do not live in poverty from choice. The causes of poverty are to be sought in structural characteristics, which are themselves shaped by policies. There-

fore the State has an obligation to take responsibility for people having a decent existence. Implementation of the minimum income is an efficient instrument for this. It must also be stressed that growing groups of people like migrants, undocumented immigrants, the homeless and others without the right paperwork are being excluded from access to social services.

**Housing** is not just a matter of providing people with a roof but rather a home that guarantees security and stability. Home offers a private space in which to maintain dignity, recover strength, rest, pursue leisure activities, maintain social ties, and preserve the memory of the past through the possessions in it. All this contributes to security and keeps at bay the constant preoccupation with issues of basic existence. Having water, electricity and heating at one's disposal enables time and energy to be devoted to other things. Without these necessities, thinking about fundamental survival becomes a daily chore: how to keep clean, where to sleep, where to keep our personal belongings, where to find the energy to get through the day. Housing policies are therefore one of the key aspects in reducing poverty, for they enable us to put our energies into other things than where to find food, where to sleep and so on. Having a house enables us to think about finding a job, education, gaining skills and so on. Decades of experience have shown that the housing market as such does not provide decent housing to people living in, or close to, poverty. States should therefore manage housing policy in an awareness of the importance of 'home' in every person's life. States must ask themselves about the characteristics of decent housing provided to people living in the country.

**As evident from the groundwork preparation for the workshops, services of general interest** are, to some extent, a hidden pillar of poverty, for their effects are not sufficiently explored nor is there a general awareness of their importance. This under-awareness comes because the lack of electricity and water supplies is often confined to groups in rural and marginalised urban districts whose big problem is the lack of a roof and infrastructure. Recently, the problem has also appeared in run-down residential areas inhabited by immigrants, elderly people, Roma, homeless people and other excluded groups. Services of general interest include buses and trains which, in this age of flexible employment, are essential to finding and keeping a job. Very few people can hope to find work in their home town; and growing numbers have to commute

several hours daily to get to their work place. This is also an era when shops have tended to concentrate in shopping centres often far away from residential areas: public transport is essential to those living in city centres or remote suburbs, and even more so for those living in rural areas, who have difficulties in accessing services like healthcare and education.

All of these issues need wide discussion. The past Meetings have shown that we cannot expect to achieve results and changes immediately; it is important, however, that a dialogue should be established between people with real experience of poverty and programme and policy planners to help reduce inequalities. I am confident that this Meeting has helped to achieve that.

# Note Of The Slovenian Eu Presidency To The Council (Luxemburg, June 9 & 10, 2008)



The Slovenian Presidency, with the support of the European Commission, the Belgian Government and the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN), organized the seventh European Meeting of people experiencing poverty in Brussels on 16 and 17 May 2008.

124 delegates from 26 countries took part in the meeting as well as 90 guests from National Ministries, EU Institutions, NGOs, academics, and trade unions.

This year's meeting focused on four pillars in the fight against poverty: services of general interest, social services, housing and minimum income. The following are some of the key messages and recommendations stressed by the delegates to the seventh meeting:

**Services of general interest** (SGI) which are accessible and affordable are essential for a decent life and for the respect of fundamental rights. Many of the delegates expressed increasing difficulties with accessing such services. Energy Poverty was discussed as a particular example. Key concerns were raised about the impact of rising energy and other utility prices on people with low-incomes. Delegates spoke of the unacceptability of being forced to choose between food and heating. Key recommendations from the delegates included:

- Affordable access to energy and other basic services must be guaranteed as a fundamental right.
- Member States should guarantee affordable access for all to essential services through measures such as regulated pricing regimes, guaranteed access to a minimum package of services and the prohibition of cut-offs, etc.
- The proposed European Charter on Energy Consumers' Rights has to include social standards and be legally binding. The Charter has to be a tool to protect consumers.
- Energy Poverty must be recognized as a key problem on which the EU must take united and urgent action, particularly in the light of rising energy prices. This should include action on fair pricing and energy efficiency and be linked to ensuring an adequate minimum income.
- Understandable and accessible information has to be delivered through face-to-face services, rather than a reliance on electronic means which are discriminatory to those on low-incomes, but also in order to ensure free independent advice, and effective complaints procedures.

- The effect of liberalisation of the markets, including the impact of the Services Directive, has to be urgently evaluated to assess its social impact on people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.
- People experiencing poverty have to be involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies related to SGI if a true assessment is to be made of how far SGI and the current workings of the internal market are supporting social inclusion.

**Social services** are essential services which support the social inclusion of people in poverty and which have to be accessible, of good quality and guaranteed for all. The internal market's rights should not have priority over fundamental rights and should not interfere with the Member States duties to organise accessible social services which really deliver to the needs of their local communities. The right to social assistance is recognised in the charter of Fundamental Rights, but this right is gradually becoming more and more difficult to obtain due to discriminatory criteria, contracts and sanctions. Key recommendations from the delegates included:

- The right to access good quality social services must be guaranteed.
- Social services have to be affordable, of good quality and continuous, meeting the real and evolving needs of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion throughout their lives and changing circumstances.
- Everybody has the right to be treated equally, in a dignified manner and have access to social services without any discrimination.
- Information and advice must be made available to every person as an obligation, and in a form that is accessible to people on low-incomes, i.e. through local services.
- Access to affordable, quality health care and to housing has to be improved urgently.
- A European observatory on health and poverty should be created.
- The new approach to developing individual contracts between clients and providers of social services is causing concern amongst people in poverty. Action must be taken to ensure that these contracts are not discriminatory.

- The EU should establish quality standards that ensure that Member States guarantee affordable access to quality social services.
- National Governments have to guarantee that social services are effectively working well according to standards set at EU level.
- Social services have to be coordinated, implemented and evaluated at the local level.
- If human rights are to be respected, people experiencing poverty have to be structurally involved through participation mechanisms at all levels. Participatory models of policy development and implementation must be actively promoted and supported through EU and national funding mechanisms.

**Housing** and accommodation is a fundamental right which needs to be recognised by the EU. The delegates emphasised that housing is more than four walls and that people need a good environment with good services in order to live in dignity. The particular difficulties in relation to housing and shelter for homeless people, people with drug addictions or mental health problems were highlighted, as well as examples of successful housing projects addressing the needs of such groups run by non-governmental organisations and directly involving the people concerned.

Delegates were extremely concerned by the difficulties faced by migrants in relation to housing. It was also noted that people with disabilities have special needs in relation to housing in order to ensure their right to independent living. However, it was also pointed out that in many Member States the increasing cost of housing and the percentage of people's disposal income needed to pay for housing meant that difficulties in relation to housing were a problem for large sections of society. While it was recognised that housing is primarily a Member State competence, it was also felt that greater efforts needed to be made through cooperation at EU level to address the problems in access to housing. Key recommendations from the delegates included:

- The involvement of NGOs and the people directly concerned with housing problems is essential to address the real needs of homeless people and people with housing problems.
- Financial support to empower people experiencing homelessness to speak for themselves and to

assist NGOs to respond to housing problems is essential.

- Strategies and National Action Plans to address housing and homeless problems should be developed.
- Housing and homelessness should become a focus for a thematic year in the EU Inclusion strategy.
- The existence of Public and Social housing is an essential part of a successful strategy to address housing problems.
- European Structural Funds should better support access to affordable and sustainable housing.
- Member States should set targets for the percentage of disposable income that people should have to pay for their housing.
- Taxation policies should discourage leaving houses vacant and speculation in the housing market.
- Non discrimination in the access to housing is essential and EU legislation in this regard should be strengthened and its implementation strictly monitored.

**Minimum Income** schemes have to be available in all the EU Member States, and considered as a right, acknowledging that dignity actually costs money, as well as an essential investment for the future of our society. Key recommendations from the delegates included:

- Minimum income has to be considered as a dynamic tool, which can easily be used by people in need in order to change their lives.
- Minimum income is an investment to improve the inclusion of people, acknowledging that employment is not the only way to inclusion.
- The participants insist that progress is needed regarding information on and access to Minimum Income. Administrative procedures should be made more simple, more transparent, and more respectful of the dignity of the persons concerned (for example, by creating only one place to make the application, and avoiding people having to repeat their stories many times).
- Minimum income is not only about money, but also about access to medical care, culture... and other resources necessary for a dignified life.
- Minimum income should be linked to the real cost



of living, taking into account price increases, according to each country's standards, and in reference to what people know they actually need. Social NGOs have a particular role in facilitating a participatory approach for the definition of a 'basket of goods' necessary for a dignified life.

- The EU should be driving the recognition that Minimum Income is an asset and a resource, rather than only an expense, and should avoid stigmatising minimum income schemes as 'passive measures'.

The delegates stressed the need for these four pillars to be visible in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. They further stressed the need to engage with the media to give an accurate picture of what poverty really is and to break negative images of 'lazy people who don't want to work'. The delegates insisted that fostering the participation of people experiencing poverty is essential to overcoming these negative stereotypes and to recognising their intelligence and valuable experience, and their ability to contribute constructive proposals.

The delegates requested that evaluation tools should be developed in order to measure the progress between each Meeting. They also pointed to the need for an evaluation of the impact of the current EU inclusion strategy in preparation for the 2010 EU Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

## Proposals of the Presidency:

The Presidency supports the view that the participation of people experiencing poverty is essential and calls for greater efforts to be made to foster this participation.

The Presidency encourages Member States to consider the messages and recommendations expressed by the delegates to the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting, as appropriate, in their National Action Plans 2008 – 2011, in their National Reform Programmes and in the follow up to the active inclusion communication.

The Presidency encourages the Commission to take good account of the views expressed by the delegates to the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting in its work on services, in the principles to be drafted on active inclusion, in its follow up work on the Lisbon Strategy and on the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion, and in its proposals for the future Social Agenda.

The Presidency encourages all participants and guests of the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting to disseminate the results and experiences of this 7<sup>th</sup> meeting as widely as possible and to make greater efforts to show how the results of the meetings contribute to the exchange of knowledge and experience, the development of actions to combat poverty and social exclusion at all levels and the ongoing development of policies to eradicate poverty and social exclusion.

The Lisbon European Council (2000) agreed to implement a European strategy in order to "make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty in Europe by 2010"; one of the strategies adopted – tackling poverty and social exclusion – is key to going forward with this commitment and **must include all the stakeholders, including people who are experiencing poverty.**

The European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty tie into this approach and are clearly part of a process going forward. The cycle of follow-up and preparations is ongoing in each Member State.

## What can we take away from the preceding meetings?

2001 The Belgian Government leveraged its experience in participation since 1994 and capitalised on its Presidency of the European Union to launch the 1<sup>st</sup> European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty which reviewed four issues: **housing, health, training and incomes.**

The big conclusion of this first event was that people experiencing poverty had the **knowledge and expertise to analyse exclusion, and aimed to take part in society** and the decisions that affect their life.

2003 In 2002, the Belgian Government suggested a 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting – an initiative taken up by the Greek Presidency. EAPN was asked to prepare it, but time was short to carry out proper groundwork with the delegations. The topic was **"good participation practices"**. The preparations and workshops produced **models for participatory processes** and a **demand from the delegates: people experiencing poverty want to be able to talk face-to-face with policy-makers on policies that affect them.**

Responding to this demand, the Greek Presidency asked the June Council for the European Meetings to become a **recurrent process**, like the Social Inclusion Round Table.

2004 The topic chosen under the Irish Presidency reflected the demands that came out of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting, and focused on dialogue

between people experiencing poverty and policymakers under the title, **"Participation is a two way street"**. In a reversal of traditional roles, **the "authorities" now became regarded as "guests" of the people experiencing poverty**, and interfaced directly with the delegates in workshop discussions. The meeting concluded with an **open forum between people experiencing poverty and a panel of policy-makers.** A DVD made at the event provided a tool for extensive use by the EAPN national networks to build awareness among national and regional policy makers.

2005 The Luxembourg Presidency chose to explore **images and perceptions of poverty.** A bigger focus is put on media productions – patchworks, paintings and photographs – brought in by people experiencing poverty. These creative endeavours were collected together into an exhibition staged at the Glasgow Round Table. A catalogue of the works was published. The Luxembourg Presidency showed the depth of its involvement by taking a powerful message to the June Council of Ministers, **calling on all EU countries to organise the same kind of Meeting.**

Many EAPN national networks gradually began to set up similar kinds of meetings at national and/or regional level.

2006 Preparations under the Austrian Presidency encompassed all aspects of poverty and social exclusion around the topic **"How do we cope with everyday life?"** The groundwork done by the delegates revealed the **proactivity and energy of people experiencing poverty.** Each delegation of people experiencing poverty prepared a poster and presented it to the plenary session: it was an unforgettable highlight of the 5<sup>th</sup> Meeting. The posters were collected into an **exhibition** staged at the Finland Round Table, in the Commission building in April 2007, and at the first National Meeting of people experiencing poverty in the United Kingdom in July 2007. The 5<sup>th</sup> meeting evaluation revealed a need to take stock of the first five Meetings.



2007 The 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting, under the German Presidency, decided to channel this priority and chose as the topic, "Strengthening Progress, drafting next steps". It saw 130 delegates from 27 countries and 97 representatives of European and national authorities meeting on 4 and 5 May in Brussels. Delegates and guests gave the Meeting topic visual expression through symbolic objects. Without playing down the progress made on the social front, the delegates emphasized that the aim of eradicating poverty by 2010 is unrealistic when there are clear signs that poverty is spreading. The 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting clearly showed that participatory processes widen the prospects for and help increase workable **empowerment**. There was also found to be more joint work being done by associations and public authorities, and a demand for ongoing dialogue at national level.

Ms **Marjeta COTMAN**, *Minister for Labour, Family and Social Affairs, Slovenia*

First I would like to thank all the co-organisers, particularly the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), their Director, Mr Fintan Farrell, and his team, without whom this meeting could not have been held. I would also like to express my thanks to the European Commission for its involvement and financial support and the Belgian Government, which provided the venue, so enabling us to discuss poverty, which is an issue of great concern for us all.

I must admit that I would be much happier if we did not have to discuss poverty in Europe, where social security systems have been developed in recent decades. Unfortunately we must resign ourselves to the fact that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, poverty is not only still with us, but is even increasing.

I will not burden you with statistics, which are not very relevant to you or your families. In my opinion, one of our biggest tasks is to create conditions that will give everyone the opportunity of a decent, good quality life. Here we have to take account of common European values, like solidarity and cohesion, equal opportunities, fighting every form of discrimination, health and safety at work, inclusion of civil society and sustainable growth.

The main value is work. Not just work that brings earnings, but the work that contributes to human dignity and assures security. For that, integration into the labour market of all people capable of work is a crucial objective at the European level. But with that, we have to guarantee adequate social protection to those who cannot work.

Poverty and social exclusion are complex and multifaceted problems that concern both society and the individual. We must deal with them together. The experience gained in previous Meetings indicates that cooperation between representatives of national governments, the European Commission, NGOs, the social partners and other important players in fighting poverty is crucial in the exchange of experience with people experiencing poverty. Such cooperation is important for improving policies and practices that affect the everyday life of people experiencing poverty.

The recent discussions on the renewed Social Agenda confirm that social objectives must be incorporated

and observed in European policies. We must also ensure that these objectives win people's support.

We all want opportunities for the best lifelong personal development; we all need access to education, quality health care, social care and other services of general interest. And above all, we need solidarity: we need it when we are not able to take care of ourselves and society as a whole constantly needs it in order to exist and develop.

We know that the social objectives must be mainstreamed across all European policies. We need to create opportunities to maximize the development of individual potentials at all stages of life; we need to create access to education, quality care, social protection and services of general interest; for that, the European agenda must emphasize investment in appropriate infrastructure. Finally **solidarity** is essential, individually for those not able to take care of themselves and constantly for society as a whole to exist and develop.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting organised by the German Presidency last year already established that this kind of Meeting provides a new opportunity to engage with the implementation of the different processes and policies at EU level.

It is not politicians and academics that are the focus of interest, but people who know their problems best. Each word and each opinion is important towards ensuring the greatest possible social inclusion. Therefore, each person must express their opinion and contribute to a social Europe free of social exclusion!

This year's Meeting is entitled "**Four Pillars in the Fight against Poverty**". These pillars are: **social services, services of general interest, housing, and minimum income**.

Why these 4 pillars? Because last year's Meeting highlighted them as particularly burning issues. Therefore, these areas need our common contribution. Furthermore, they can be included in the current discussion on the internal market and liberalisation of services, and in that on setting a minimum income standard for the EU.

The efforts at EU level must strive to preserve the role of services of general interest and their importance for people. Also, we want to boost the quality and ac-



cessibility of social services, which will undoubtedly improve the quality of life of the EU's citizens.

This is one of the main objectives supported by the Slovenian Presidency, which places a special emphasis on social services. We support the European Commission's proposal for the establishment of a harmonious European framework of social services. We also advocate the agreement on the general principles of quality of social services of general interest at EU level.

We will be very interested to hear your opinions on the questions related to housing policy and minimum income.

We need your help to find appropriate solutions. I am convinced that, in the next two days, you will be active and successful, able to listen and to be heard and understood. I am persuaded that together we shall search for and find solutions to your everyday problems.

I hope your discussions will be productive.

Mr **Jérôme VIGNON**, *Director, Directorate Social Protection and Integration, European Commission*

**The issues of this new Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty and Exclusion.**

I have had the privilege of taking part in the previous Meetings on behalf of the European Commission, and I should like to focus on what they have brought to the European institutions, the European Parliament, Council of Ministers and Commission, to emphasize how productive this dialogue engaged annually since 2001 has been.

I should like to pay tribute to Belgium, represented today by its State Secretary for Poverty, Jean-Marc Delizée, because I am fully aware that Belgium was the moving force behind this original initiative of a real coming-together back in 2001, the advent of the European strategy to combat exclusion and poverty.

We know that nothing can be absolutely perfect. It is not easy to come from all corners of an increasingly vast Europe. It is not easy to prepare things so far in advance. But the commendable perseverance of the EAPN network and its organizers has made it possible, bigger, and more useful every time. And all the more credit to them in that last year, in 2007, I sensed a hint of frustration settling in.

**What have the Meetings brought to the Commission?**

They have had a real impact. First, it is you who are hosting the institutions which is an important symbolic image of the contribution that is to be made by people experiencing poverty.

Between 2001 and 2003, the Commission realized that participation was the key to the European strategy. In 2005, the symbolic importance of the image and perception of people experiencing poverty was pointed out. Since then, the "Progress" Programme has included a major focus on communication and image.

In 2006: reducing inequalities when society is growing increasingly pyramidal was a key message from the European meeting. After this conclusion, the Lisbon Strategy referred to social inclusion as an objective in and of itself. Social cohesion became an aim of the EU.

2008 will be about services working together effectively. Social cohesion is not uniquely about employment. All European Union policies must work together to make a cohesive Europe. I am sure that the messages from this meeting will have an impact on the on going development of this important topic of services including the question of adequate income.

Mr **Jean-Marc DELIZEE**, *State Secretary to the Fight against Poverty, Belgium*

I should first like to tell you what an honour it is for me to take part in this European Meeting. I do so with mixed feelings of humility and respect. Humility because, being in charge of the fight against poverty in Belgium, as elsewhere in Europe, is to feel very small in face of an immense challenge. It is about addressing this fundamental question: how do we reduce the inequalities that exist in Belgium, in Europe, and the world? How do we heal the divide in our society? How do we guarantee a secure existence and dignity for all?

Respect, because I can guess how great the effort is for some of you. I can guess that it cannot be easy for you to come here and bear witness, to explain the reality of your lives and say what you want. Respect because you have found the strength to do that.

In 2001, the Belgian Presidency of the European Union initiated and organized a 1<sup>st</sup> European Meeting to discuss poverty, taking a dialogue and partnership approach. This initiative was taken up by other States. I would

like to thank the policymakers who have gone forward down that road, especially my Slovenian colleague, Ms Cotman, for the organization of this 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting.

Belgium now has its first-ever State Secretary to the Fight against Poverty. The Belgian government aims to make it a major issue. There is a big challenge to be taken up, that demands action from all. A State Secretariat will give political visibility to the fight against poverty. My role is to coordinate and get things moving. Your work informs the thinking. What I mainly want to do is to listen to you, to hear what you want, your experiences, and your demands. We cannot get a solution without listening, exchange and dialogue. Policy is not made for people but with them, and by mobilising the energies of everyone at all levels, from the neighbourhood and the village right up to the European authorities.

In Lisbon, in 2000, the Heads of State and Government set themselves some very ambitious objectives, but we have got nowhere with them. We must together propose concrete measures in our respective States and reformulate the European aims for a cohesive society.

Ms **Salomé MBUGUA**, *delegate to the 6<sup>th</sup> European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty - 2007*

I should like to take this opportunity to thank the organisers of this important Meeting and also to hope that this type of gathering will be carried on.

I feel both privileged and honoured to be able to share with you my last year's experience.

When I was nominated in 2007 to participate in the 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting I was not sure what to expect. Four of the participants from Ireland met several times to prepare for the Meeting. Immigrants' experience of poverty had been chosen as the theme for Ireland, so the representatives had been selected from among the various migrant communities.

Six areas that impact on the lifestyle and living conditions of immigrants were agreed, and each participant was assigned one of the topics to research, namely:

1. €19.10 for adult asylum seekers
2. Restricted mobility
3. Family reunification
4. Racism and discrimination
5. Undocumented workers
6. Lack of recognition of qualifications

The four delegates worked with their respective groups to design images for the presentation. EAPN Ireland's support in this preparatory process was a great help and gratefully received: professional support and insight was very important to us.

The delegates left Ireland a day ahead of the Meeting. The delegates from all countries were asked to present the 3-dimensional objects they had designed to the opening session. When our turn came, I felt that the presence of four delegates from an ethnic minority background served as a challenge.

We had chosen to send delegates to the Meeting who had direct experience of the issues being discussed. It was a powerful and empowering experience. We felt that our presentation struck a chord with those present; we also believe that we learned much from the others, because it is important to hear about the diversity of peoples living in Europe, their experiences of poverty, exclusion and discrimination.

Our presentation also challenged the majority view of Ireland's recent economic success. We highlighted the role of migrants in this economic growth, and also the extent to which they remained invisible and living in poverty. It was important for us to have a voice, to represent ourselves and to be heard as equals.

The workshops gave us an opportunity to network, share experiences and frame strategies for moving forward. The facilitation was excellent, and we were able to input and to learn from other participants. The impact of networking cannot be overestimated, and creates a very conducive environment. Over the two days, I succeeded in meeting a large number of delegates with whom I have subsequently kept in contact. The presentations and inputs of other countries were highly enlightening, and a high level of creativity was displayed in the presentations.

The Meeting was very well run, and the chair was continually concerned to ensure that delegates were happy with things. On one occasion, the Irish delegation pointed out omissions in some of their inputs, and this was rectified. This kind of thing was important to us as a group of migrants, and showed that we were being taken seriously.

It was a positive experience. The only negative aspect was in getting visas: one of us had great difficulty, which served as a stark reminder of why we had come.



Seven workshops were held, bringing together:

- Delegates from 25 Member States and Norway, 90% of whom were people bringing their experiences of living in poverty.
- “Guests” representing different European and national institutions with responsibilities for action on poverty and social exclusion, European organizations and scientists.
- “Resource persons” from the Commission, European institutions, European NGOs, local government and social service providers.

This was an innovatory set-up designed to stimulate real exchanges.

Groundwork for each workshop was done in each Member State, and extracts from it - used to preface the workshop reports - were presented by each delegation to enable discussions to be engaged more quickly. A summary was written at the end of the workshops, and a set of proposals and recommendations was drawn up. The outcomes were reported back to the plenary session for comment and debate.

### Extracts from the preparatory groundwork

*Spain, Portugal, Norway, Malta, Slovenia, Cyprus, Finland, France, United Kingdom.*

#### What is working

- The good thing about the minimum income scheme is that it exists, but it does not solve poverty.
- The minimum income scheme is viewed as a means to something rather than just a cash benefit, so it is seen as quite fundamental to give credibility to the measure and ensure that it is turned into a right that can underpin the processes of eliminating family and individual poverty.
- The minimum income scheme is a passport to other rights (care, housing benefit, etc.) and optional assistance (transport, leisure, culture, etc.).
- The minimum income scheme is a stepping-stone in rebuilding people’s lives.

#### What isn’t working

- Access to the minimum income scheme is too often considered a privilege rather than a right.
- Minimum income allows you to survive, not to live.
- The procedures are beset by delays and red tape. Too many officials are involved. A single contact is needed.
- The public doubt the value of the minimum income scheme for tackling social exclusion. It is essential to persuade general public opinion that it is a valid way of combating poverty and social exclusion, and to invest in training for all parties involved in implementing the measure (social workers, public entities, civil society, etc.).
- Many social workers do not understand the point of the minimum income scheme and have a negative attitude towards claimants.
- The minimum income is often below the poverty threshold.
- Young people aged 18–25 have no entitlement to the minimum income.
- There is no clear information on the scheme or the qualifying criteria.
- Society’s attitude discriminates against and

stigmatizes minimum income claimants, leading to isolation and loss of self-esteem.

- Insecurity makes it hard to be a proper parent.
- Minimum income benefits vary too widely - they are a postcode lottery.

#### Workshop comments

- *The minimum income helped me rebuild my life, take time for me, get medical treatment.*
- *Minimum income entitles you to health care and culture, but you have to go and get them.*
- *90% of street homeless people do not know their rights.*
- *Living in poverty means living in shame.*
- *Attitudes towards the poor have hardened. Social security claimants are called workshy. But no study says that minimum income claimants are shiftless!*
- *However little time exclusion lasts for, you are excluded from everything.*
- *Homeless people are not good-for-nothings.*
- *If there were mass fraud, we would know about it.*
- *Young people aged 18–25 have no entitlement to anything.*
- *Foreigners, even with a visa, have great difficulty claiming the minimum income.*
- *Getting minimum income is an obstacle course.*
- *In-work poverty is rising. It is invisible poverty.*
- *Work is always valued more than life; that isn’t right.*
- *We don’t want to tell our story a thousand times over.*

#### Summary

The good thing about the minimum income scheme is that it exists, say the delegates - even though that is not yet the case everywhere in Europe. But the level is not high enough because it is not linked to the real costs of living. The minimum income is often below the poverty line, and should at least be equal to it. Those who cannot live by their labour should be able to live a decent life.

The qualifying conditions for the minimum income and the entitlements it creates differ in each State. It is sometimes a passport to related benefits. But accessing the minimum income is also beset by protracted procedures, repeated paperwork, delays and red tape. Not everyone knows about their right to claim a minimum income if they are in need.

1| Terminology used during the workshops has been kept as it was.



The minimum income scheme should be a dynamic tool that promotes inclusion. Work is not the only pathway to inclusion - it is also achieved through training, access to culture, health, and the valuing of non-commercial work.

People on the minimum income scheme feel stigmatized. They are accused of being workshy, shiftless and event cheats.

#### Proposals

- All EU Member States must implement a minimum income scheme.
- Poverty must be made visible via the Open Method of Coordination, without discrimination. It should:
  - Increase the forums for consultation and constructive dialogue with people experiencing poverty for framing, monitoring and evaluating public policies. Identify effective enablers and forums.
  - Support the European Commission's integrated approach and adopt the common principles on active inclusion that will be discussed in October 2008
  - Set up compliance audits, Euro barometers.
  - Use the concept of relative not absolute poverty, but expressed in the most practical possible terms.
  - Work on the link between the minimum income and the poverty line
  - Run a European campaign in 2010 on the need for a minimum income scheme in all countries
- Administrative procedures must be simplified to improve access to information by creating one-stop shops.
- The minimum income must be index-linked to real price inflation.
- The media must be involved in the fight against poverty and exclusion.

#### Recommendations

- Minimum income has to be considered as dynamic tool, which can easily be used by people in need in order to change their lives.
- Minimum income is an investment to improve inclusion of people, acknowledging that employment is not the only way to inclusion.

- Participants insist that progress is needed regarding information on and access to Minimum Income. Administrative processes should be made more simple, more transparent, and more respectful of the dignity of the persons concerned (for example, by creating only one place to introduce the application, and avoiding that people have to repeat their story many times)
- Minimum income is not only about money, but also access to medical care, culture and other resources necessary for a dignified life.
- Minimum income should be linked to the real cost of living, taking into account the prices increase, according to each country standards, and in reference to what people know they actually need. Social NGOs have a particular role in facilitating a participatory approach for the definition of a 'basket of goods' necessary for a dignified life.
- The EU should be driving the recognition that Minimum Income is an asset and a resource rather than an expense only and should avoid stigmatising minimum income schemes as 'passive measures'.



## Housing

### Extracts from the preparatory ground-work

*Spain, Poland, Norway, Malta, Italy, Denmark, Slovenia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Ireland, United Kingdom, Belgium*

#### What is working

- Some provinces have rent supplement schemes.
- The authorities are aware that there are housing problems. They are demonstrably concerned to put policies in place, but it is still too early to evaluate them.
- Some municipalities and regions are developing new local or regional housing policies tied to social inclusion for disadvantaged groups.
- People experiencing poverty get means-tested housing benefit.
- There is a state-financed housing development fund which provides low-interest loans and can also be used to renovate housing.
- Rents are government-controlled until 2010.
- Social housing is a priority for people on low incomes and large families.
- Home purchase loans are accessible.
- Voluntary organizations provide housing assistance.
- Public authorities have statutory power to compulsorily purchase vacant properties.
- There are housing benefit and assistance schemes, especially payment of rental guarantees by public social assistance centres.

#### What isn't working

- There are too few one-person homes. And the cheapest ones are never advertised in the "to let" columns.
- Social housing waiting lists are often very long.
- Even the cheapest homes are only accessible to middle-income families.
- The housing market in the new Member States is still in transition, with a wide variety of situations and undeclared sublets, which does not make the most vulnerable people's lives any easier. They are probably the hardest hit by this slow development ... insofar as there is any country where the housing market is transpar-

ent and benefits the poor!

- Hostel users have to pay an amount almost equivalent to the entire minimum income.
- Social housing is often too small and poorly-designed.
- Some towns have many vacant properties. What can be done to occupy them?
- Social housing is allocated on a points system. Applications to be put on the waiting list only get considered from 19 points or more.
- It makes no sense to put only those most out of touch with work and society on housing estates. These people have few opportunities to come across families and people with a different kind of life.
- 1200 evictions took place this year, at very short notice and using dubious legal practices.
- It is mainly prosperous areas where strong local and regional housing policies apply. There is no national housing policy.
- There is almost no social housing being built.
- Housing is very costly compared to incomes.
- Local councils are selling off their social housing stock, which is a worry for people.
- A black market in housing has grown up.
- People from the Traveller community have problems getting social housing.
- Few homes are disability-friendly, and they are also often a long way from the shops.
- Migrants have little or no access to social housing.
- Many families who live in private rented housing qualify for social housing.
- The rules are bent and some housing corporations try to make a profit.
- The housing code requires a two year trial period before a firm tenancy is granted. The final allocation criteria are neither clear nor independent.
- The vacant properties compulsory purchase legislation is not applied.

#### Workshop comments

- *Housing is not accessible to certain groups, including people with disabilities.*
- *There are not enough houses, and the cost of rent can force people into homelessness.*
- *Housing should never take up more than 30% of income.*
- *People experiencing poverty often cannot put up the rental guarantee*



- *Government does not protect the rights of Roma, Travellers and migrants; they are on housing waiting lists. The right to housing does not exist in practice.*
- *Families on low incomes cannot afford rents. The right to housing is an empty idea.*
- *Housing is not a right, it is just a commodity, a product.*
- *The housing problem has a direct impact on homelessness, but that does not show up in government reports.*
- *How can street homeless people get assistance from social services?*
- *Sub-standard housing costs less, but the standards are atrocious.*
- *You have to live in the country for 2 years in order to get into social housing. This has an appalling impact on migrant communities in particular*
- *Roma can be driven out of the city of Rome for not having enough money, and one eviction follows another. Water and electricity are cut off, we live in camps and the costs are paid, but we live like animals. People in Rome have been evicted from their homes today; Roma have no rights. We want to integrate into society, but aren't allowed to.*
- *Many voluntary organizations/groups have the experience, but few opportunities to share it. We have to try and get politicians to recognize the importance of these organizations and support them.*
- *To leave homelessness behind and get into housing, you first have to give up drugs and drink, for which you need support from social services and to take responsibility for yourself. But even after giving up drugs and even with housing, you still have the problem of not having a job, which can lead back into drug abuse.*
- *It is dangerous to suggest that homelessness is linked only to drug/alcohol abuse; it reduces it to a SINGLE profile and can lead to stereotyping.*
- *Homelessness is a problem even in highly-developed countries. It is a long-term problem at European level for which minimum standards are needed. Unless these standards are set, there will be no impact or sanction at European level.*
- *Housing used to be a state affair, now it is in the private sector. Only 3% of homes are social housing.*
- *The impression is that the State is not shouldering its responsibilities.*
- *The European Structural Funds are too limited: they can only help to counter the undesirable effects, not build new housing.*

## **Summary**

The delegates found that situations differ between countries, but also present many similarities. Housing is a big problem for everyone, but especially for people with a disability, ethnic minorities, and migrants including asylum seekers, single-parent families, Travellers, Roma and people on minimum incomes. Positive policies are to be found, but are not always put into practice where funds are not properly used.

Availability and affordability of rented housing is another big problem in most countries that in most cases leads to homelessness. Some governments are aware of the problem but try to cover up rather than solve homelessness.

Balance in the owner/tenant relationship is also an important issue.

The level and practical enforcement of housing rights differs from one country to the next, ranging from efforts to develop good practices to very sub-standard housing whose tenants have little hope of finding anything better or have to face eviction for non-payment of even very low rents.

There are also cases where basic rights do not seem to exist, and where human rights are flouted, as with the Roma in Italy. Roma often live in wretched conditions, without basic services (electricity, water). They also suffer discrimination in social housing and frequent evictions.

In some new Member States, the transition from a "political ancient regime" to the new one is working against social housing, which is dwindling and falling into the hands of the private - i.e., profit-making - sector.

Housing policy has to be looked at in the round. The causes of homelessness are complex and multifaceted: housing policies, lack of a job, life circumstances resulting from exclusion, e.g., drug abuse.

Housing is a fundamental right that must be guaranteed by the European Union.

If housing for all is to be guaranteed, the social housing stock must be increased. Rents must be government-controlled. A tenant cannot spend more than 30% of his income on housing. Governments must also establish a rental guarantee fund for people experiencing poverty.

Voluntary organizations provide housing support: they should be given more resources. Their work helps the most vulnerable to integrate into society. They often work in partnership with particular owners or the local authorities.

## **Proposals**

- The European Union must recognize the right to housing as a fundamental right.
- A sufficient housing supply must be guaranteed that addresses social needs.
- Housing must only take up maximum 30% of income.
- The price and quality of housing must be firmly linked.
- The European Union must put owners' and tenants' rights on an equal footing, which means clear contracts that spell out the rights, costs, etc., and must also be monitored, with a system of inspection and penalties.
- Governments must provide help for people to put up rental guarantees which should be repaid gradually.
- Tax levies must be calculated on the real rent.
- Effective support and services must be accessible for those in social housing and for the homeless. The services must be adapted to different groups' needs; they must be transparent and readily understandable by users.
- The policies formulated must be put into practice, financed and monitored. Penalties must be introduced if need be for cases where policies are not put into practice;
- Those affected by housing policies must be involved in the decisions that affect them at local level.
- The European Union must develop standards and focus attention on them, make them known.
- States must ensure a guaranteed percentage of social housing in the total rental stock.
- The European Union must adopt the Directive on discrimination in access to services, and include housing in it.
- Grassroots voluntary organizations must be given funding.

## **Recommendations**

- The involvement of NGOs and the people directly concerned with housing problems is essential to address the real needs of homeless people and people with housing problems.
- Financial support to empower people experiencing homelessness to speak for themselves and to assist NGOs to respond to housing problems is essential.
- Strategies and National Action Plans to address housing and homeless problems should be developed.
- Housing and homelessness should become a focus for a thematic year in the EU Inclusion strategy.
- The existence of Public and Social housing is an essential part of a successful strategy to address housing problems.
- European Structural Funds should better support access to affordable and sustainable housing.
- Member states should set targets for the percentage of disposable income that people should have to pay for their housing.
- Taxation policies should discourage leaving houses vacant and speculation in the housing market.
- Non discrimination in the access to housing is essential and EU legislation in this regard should be strengthened and its implementation strictly monitored.



## Social Services



### Extracts from the preparatory ground-work

*Spain, Portugal, Poland, Norway, Italy, Denmark, Slovenia, Cyprus, France, United Kingdom.*

#### What is working

- Investment has been made in **vocational training**, seen by disadvantaged groups as key to getting a good job and as combining the rights to decent pay and human dignity.
- Some active employment policies, especially official employment agency programmes, have successfully helped disadvantaged individuals to integrate into work and society and boosted their self-esteem.
- Some people who have had meetings with social workers over the years have observed **changes in their relations** with them. *"When you meet in other circumstances than an application for assistance, and speak out together against poverty and for individual dignity, the relationship changes. We are no longer seen as problems, but instead as human beings talking about problems".* Some social workers confirm this.
- Some people say that the development of NGO initiatives and projects has **increased the number of ways to leave poverty**. Those that have taken these ways do not always understand why others do not use them the same way. It is support from NGOs more than official agencies that people rate positively.
- Reform legislation (328/2000) on social services integration gives practical application to the **principle of participation** in the design, management and follow-up of the evaluation of social services.
- Social services already have or are drawing up Charters on **clients' rights**.
- Many social workers and operators are deeply committed and believe in their work.
- Single-parent families receive supplementary assistance. Low-income families and those with children get free childcare, nursery and out-of-school provision.
- All the socially supportive actions carried out by committed individuals are well-run. Some welfare sector workers can say when they do not know, and turn to the network/partnership.

- Many local initiatives work well, but are under-resourced.

#### What isn't working

- There is a huge **deficit** of social services, either in total provision to meet the country's needs, or in quality.
- **Accessing** quality health care **services** and public hospital waiting times are problems that particularly affect the elderly poor and those needing a continuum of care.
- **Access to** quality **vocational training** that leads to a decently-paid job is not assured: it is one of the biggest problems for young people, unemployed workers and those over 40. It is still very hard to find a decent job, made worse by big companies switching production abroad, and the collapse of some more traditional sectors of the economy.
- The vast majority of users are unhappy about the **quality of contact** with social workers who show little understanding of situations and little flexibility: *"They stick rigidly to the rule book".* People are less important than the letter of the law.
- There are issues about project funding: *"We know there is funding for anti-poverty projects. But we don't really see how it is all evaluated. There is clearly **no continuity**. Some projects stop, others start. Sometimes, the money comes in very late and has to be spent very quickly. Who thinks about all that? Who follows it up over time to ensure continuity? It sometimes seems that projects are run so that project promoters can fund their activities. The projects contribute nothing and the money goes down the drain".*
- Laws and regulations are not applied everywhere in the same way.
- Good practices are almost always based on projects, so they come to an end when the project does.
- Project financing depends on the good will of politicians/policymakers and the money available at the time.
- **Fragmentation of social services** makes it very hard to take holistic action.
- Too much paperwork is bad for case management, too much time spent in meetings. Social workers lack time to deal with people properly.
- **Users cannot easily get access to their files.** Social workers don't like being taught things.



- Administrative services do not take responsibility (loss of papers) and there is no redress for administrative mistakes that can have serious consequences.

#### Workshop comments

- *Social services are seen as services for the poor, which stigmatizes them.*
- *People are ashamed to go to social services.*
- *The emphasis in our country is on training rather than how social services perform.*
- *Many people are entitled to social services but don't know it. Citizenship is about knowing where to turn to.*
- *Vulnerable people are not looked at in the round.*
- *Social services are being privatised, which means money-oriented.*
- *Social workers do not respect people's dignity.*
- *In my country, there are no social services to help me. I am constantly having to call on my friends or family.*
- *There is more discrimination against women in social services.*
- *In my country, migrant workers do not have access to social services. They work off the books, live in substandard housing and their children do not attend school.*
- *Social services tend not to be very understanding. When I go there, I can clearly see them thinking, "What is he doing here? He doesn't need us". They think that because I am not dependant.*
- *Poverty is not an individual problem. The poor are not the cause of their problems. The question to be asked is not why a particular person is poor, but how to reduce poverty.*
- *18-to-25-year-olds have no entitlement to minimum income. But there is no age at which it is good to be poor.*

#### Summary

The workshop participants believe that social services are basic universal services to which everyone must have guaranteed access. They must look at the whole person, even if that person has different problems. That requires all services to be joined up and networked together. This approach must respect the individual.

There was a general consensus on the difficulty of accessing social services and information about rights.

Social services must remain a state responsibility, with statutory-based entitlement. There must also be sufficient and high quality provision. Privatising social services means subjecting them to economic and hence profitability criteria to the detriment of the service concept.

Social services in some Member States rely on empowerment, which seems to help strengthen service users. A good practice is to involve NGOs and public services in running social security programmes. So, it is important to involve people with experience of poverty in policies.

The big problem with the organization of social services is bureaucracy. Applicants have to fill out reams of paperwork to get any service whatever. People feel forced to play a role, put up a facade in order to access social services. On top of that, it is hard to bear what other people, family and friends think of you for using social services. The help provided by some services often comes with a contract which not only puts pressure on the user, but also puts the responsibility back on them.

Some states have decentralized social assistance responsibilities. Social welfare is devolved to local government, which creates differences between the rules. Also, the management of social welfare is increasingly farmed out to voluntary groups.

Entitlement is gradually turning into assistance. Rights that were automatically granted are turning into rights that have to be earned. Access to social services is increasingly conditional, contractual and sanction-based.

#### Proposals

- Social workers must follow in-service training to understand the mentalities of people applying for assistance.
- People experiencing poverty must be involved in classroom training of future social workers to change the image they have of poverty. Such training must put a realistic and positive focus on inclusion.
- Case files must be administratively centralized so that people are not shunted from pillar to post.
- Applicants must be fully informed about procedures to follow in putting together an application.

- There must be a single contact to coordinate the different services.
- A mediation service must be created to deal with disputes between service receivers and social workers.
- Service delivery can be improved by support jointly provided by a social worker and an administrative employee
- Social workers must be able to get the information needed for support.

#### Recommendations

- The right to access good quality social services must be guaranteed.
- Social services have to be affordable, of good quality and continuous, meeting the real and evolving needs of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion throughout their lives and changing circumstances.
- Everybody has the right to be treated equally, in a dignified manner and have access to social services without any discrimination.
- Information and advice must be made available to every person as an obligation, and in a form that is accessible to people on low-incomes, i.e. through local services.
- Access to affordable, quality health care and to housing has to be improved urgently.
- A European observatory on health and poverty should be created.
- The new approach to developing individual contracts between clients and providers of social services is causing concern amongst people in poverty. Action must be taken to ensure that these contracts are not discriminatory.
- The EU should establish quality standards that ensure that Member States guarantee affordable access to quality social services.
- National Governments have to guarantee that social services are effectively working well according to standards set at EU level.
- Social services have to be coordinated, implemented and evaluated at the local level.
- If human rights are to be respected, people experiencing poverty have to be structurally involved through participation mechanisms at all levels. Participatory models of policy development and

implementation must be actively promoted and supported through EU and national funding mechanisms.



### Extracts from the preparatory ground-work

Cyprus, Finland, United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Belgium

#### What is working

- The gas company has set up a fund to help lower income customers, but it is little-known.
- One energy supplier offers a guaranteed package for lower income customers.
- The Ministry for Employment and Social Affairs helps people on very low incomes with their winter heating costs.
- A social tariff has been established.
- There is a card prepayment meter scheme.
- A minimum service guarantee ensures a free supply of 100 kWh.
- Winter cut-offs are not allowed.

#### What isn't working

- Electricity is costly and "eats up" much of people's incomes.
- Water is not costly, but is in short supply, so people are starting to buy imported water, which upsets the balance.
- Services of general interest have been reformed. The results are disastrous. People have to reduce their use or are even excluded from the system.
- There is no system for monitoring and holding service providers accountable.
- Services of general interest produce poverty.
- Customers have little information with which to compare and choose suppliers.
- Some companies demand payment of a guarantee that some people cannot afford.
- Some tenants do not have individual meters.
- Bills are hard to understand.
- You are not automatically put on the social tariff, you have to apply. That involves a lot of red tape.
- Some people on low incomes do not qualify for protected customer status.
- You have to apply to go on a prepayment meter; they cannot be fitted preventively.
- Difficulties in making payments can mean running up unmanageable debts.
- Irregular immigrants cannot get gas/electricity (re)connected.

#### Workshop comments

- *Government says what it plans to do about the running of services of general interest, but bad practices actually produce concerning results.*
- *Energy supply is increasingly in private sector hands.*
- *The quality of services is going down.*
- *Those who cannot pay have no access to services.*
- *There is enough water in my country, so why is it so costly?*
- *How can you keep track of what you use when electricity meters are fitted 12 metres up?*
- *Roma who live in camps have no access to water. They have to live in mediaeval conditions. Children study by candlelight in the evening.*
- *Lawyers are afraid to defend people against big companies.*
- *You might have to pay an 800 euro guarantee; a poor person cannot pay 800 Euros.*
- *The income cap for minimum benefit is too high.*
- *Energy supplier sales people often canvass for new customers door-to-door in working class areas and spout all sorts of rubbish. You sign their contract, it's not cheaper and the new agreement does not cancel your old one, so you find yourself with two bills at month-end.*
- *People in severe difficulty can get a prepayment meter fitted. You pay for usage with a prepay card.*

#### Summary

The workshop participants concluded that privatization of the energy market had not brought costs down, but put them up. People experiencing poverty therefore face a choice between eating, taking care of themselves, or having an energy supply.

Service provider companies are not transparently run. Bills can be inordinately high, with no way of double-checking.

Selling practices are often aggressive, and people find themselves with two bills to pay at month end because the new supplier fails to notify the old one about the new agreement. It is up to the householder to cancel the contract, but people are not aware of this.

The gas and electricity market must be regulated. Privatization alone cannot explain the rise in costs. States bear some of the responsibility for failing to regulate the market or at least not framing policies to protect



the least well-off. Competition between suppliers in some States is bogus competition and consumers are not being protected. Prices are going up, but the quality of service is going down.

Access to services of general interest is a fundamental right.

The current power and water supply problems affect everyone, but people experiencing poverty are most affected by liberalization. They often live in poorly-insulated, an energy inefficient home, which increases their consumption. Social housing should be better insulated. Also, minimum incomes and some kinds of benefit are not enough to live on, merely survive. A social tariff carries fewer stigmas than a prepayment meter.

## Proposals

- Those responsible for this unwarranted privatization must be identified.
- A body needs to be set up with representatives from both sides - customers and owners.
- Customers must get better information.
- There must be an independent body to police service providers.
- The law must be changed.
- A discussion is needed on creating a minimum energy supply package.
- The right to energy is a fundamental social right.
- An ongoing, wide-ranging evaluation of energy market liberalization is needed.
- The drafting of the European Charter to protect energy consumers' rights must be finished and a directive must follow.
- Implementation of public service obligations must be made mandatory.
- Measures must be taken so that no more than 5% of household income goes on paying for energy.
- the following elements need to be taken into account:
  - ensure price monitoring and control
  - introduce a VAT system in which basic energy services are taxed at the lowest rate in the Member States
  - administrative simplification
  - regulated maximum social prices for lower income groups
  - measures to limit energy consumption.

- There must be a selling practices regulator.
- A mediation service must be created.

## Recommendations

- Affordable access to Energy and other basic services must be guaranteed as a fundamental right.
- Members States should guarantee affordable access for all to essential services through measures such as regulated pricing regimes, guaranteed access to a minimum package of services and prohibition of cut-offs etc.
- The proposed European Charter on Energy Consumer's Rights has to include social standards and be legally binding. The Charter has to be a tool to protect the consumers.
- Energy Poverty must be recognized as a key problem which the EU must take united and urgent action on, particularly in the light of rising energy prices. This should include action on fair pricing and energy efficiency and be linked to ensuring an adequate minimum income.
- Understandable and accessible information has to be delivered through face-to-face services, rather than a reliance on electronic means which are discriminatory to those on low-incomes, but also ensure free independent advice, and effective complaints procedures.
- The effect of liberalisation of the markets, including the impact of the Services Directive, has to be urgently evaluated to assess its social impact on people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.
- People experiencing poverty have to be involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies related to SGI if a true assessment is to be made of how far SGI and the current workings of the internal market are supporting social inclusion.

In the plenary session, the recommendations developed in the workshops (recorded in the previous chapter) were reported to the plenary and were commented on and responded to by Mr Jérôme Vignon from the Commission, Mr Ludo Horemans, President of EAPN, and Ms Elise Willame, Chairperson of the Social Protection Committee.

In addition to the specific recommendations under the four themes many delegates requested that evaluation tools be developed in order to measure the progress between each Meeting. While they accepted that participation by people experiencing poverty and developing effective action on poverty are long, slow-moving processes, they insisted that there should be objective criteria for evaluating the Meetings, so that each new Meeting can gauge what progress has been made in combating poverty.

They also pointed to the need for an evaluation of the impact of the current EU inclusion strategy in preparation for the 2010 EU Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Jérôme Vignon responded to the demand to check on what progress was being made between meetings. While he said that all involved could make more efforts to respond to this request he cautioned that this could become a routine, paper exercise. Important Reports such as the Joint Report on Poverty and Social Exclusion already exist and we must see such reports as the place where we see what follow up has been given to the recommendations from the meeting. We must also see that Commission proposals such as the proposals on Active Inclusion are in part a response to the messages from these meetings. We need to prevent more paper exercises but to see that the outcomes from the meetings are taken up in the key work of the Commission.

On the issue of **solidarity**, Mr Vignon observed that for a minimum income scheme to be effective it had to be sufficient, and also many people did not have access to it. For social services, there was also a problem of national redistribution. But in the current climate of financial austerity, the message of solidarity must be put across. The linkage between opportunities, access and solidarity is been considered by the Commission in the preparation of the next EU social policy agenda.

As to the contract approach which the delegates of-

ten experience as unbearable conditions been put on them to be able to receive social assistance, Jérôme Vignon said this was about personal responsibility. Some thought could be given with the Social Protection Committee on how to combine responsibility with freedom.

Concerning **the capacity to come up with sound ideas**, Mr Vignon said that participation was a requirement for the preparation of National Action Plans on Inclusion. That is where the suggestion box needs to be deployed and the types of ideas raised at this meeting have to be responded to.

The European Union has little influence over **housing and energy**, noted Jérôme Vignon. But it can have an indirect influence on policies. So demands on these things can be put to other Directorates General than Social Affairs.

Ludo Horemans, President of EAPN, thought the first thing to come out of the debates was the basic need for guaranteed rights. It had to be said that efforts have been made to get minimum income on the agenda at EU level. Some States today still have no minimum income schemes and in all Member States these schemes are inadequate. The importance of efficient and adequate minimum income schemes must be seen as an important investment.

The European Union Inclusion strategy has focused on child poverty, he added. So action is now needed to show that focussed approach of the strategy can bring positive results. Action is needed at the earliest point to break the vicious circle of poverty.

The social pillar has become detached from the Lisbon Strategy, this is the reality despite the nice words in the Council conclusions, and the social aspect must be on a par with the economic aspect if we are to have real progress. The efforts made through the Open Method of Coordination must be joined up to the key decisions and policy directions in the Lisbon strategy.

There is a difference between an economic contract and a social contract, said Mr Horemans. To often now we are relying on an economic contract for the delivery of essential services, this does not always match the needs of the people requiring these services. We must have more debate on the impact of liberalisation on the access to services of general interest for people experiencing poverty.



He concluded that consultation and dialog were essential to make progress.

Elise Willame, Chairperson of the Social Protection Committee, said the Committee was currently working on active inclusion, which links together three topics: minimum income, social services and activation. The demands voiced by this Meeting linked clearly to this debate on active inclusion. She insisted that as Chair of the Social Protection Committee she tries to ensure that the Committee takes account of the messages from the European Meetings. She encouraged delegates to speak further with their Social Protection Committee members about their ideas for how to make active inclusion work. She also said that the messages from the meetings are very timely in relation to the preparation of the National Action Plans on Inclusion 2008-2011 and that it is important that the delegates follow up their messages with the national administrations responsible for preparing these plans.

### Discussion

The comments elicited a wide range of reactions from the delegates. The point was emphasized that people get bogged down in poverty.

There was a further expression of disgust at the violence towards the Roma in Italy, illustrated by the camps set on fire in Naples by bands of youngsters. The delegates argued that this was symptomatic of the lack of a strong social policy. The Italian delegation called on Europe to make approaches towards the Italian government and speak out against this situation.

The plight of people suffering from rare diseases, especially in Malta, was also a matter of concern. One delegate pointed out that the minimum income was not enough to pay the minimum outgoings. In small villages, even if people want to work, they do so at a loss. Another delegate strenuously argued that water was not private property. Access to electricity and gas must be guaranteed and provided by the State.

Other responses cited the problems NGOs had in securing European funding, which should be paid directly to voluntary organizations. One recurrent question was, "Why does the EU not have more responsibility with regards to ensuring that each member state has an adequate housing policy?"

Some comments received short shrift: "Nice words about solidarity is becoming increasingly meaningless unless the Commission takes real steps to protect high level social standards such as insisting that each Member State fixes minimum assistance amounts." A demand was made that, "The European Union must give visibility to what it does to fight poverty and social exclusion". Some surprise was expressed about how successful the Lisbon strategy is when, "The strange thing is that there is still so much injustice in Europe."

Mr **Vladimir Špidla**, *European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities*

The debates held over the past two days show that poverty remains widespread in the European Union, but still appals us and stirs us to action to turn back the tide.

We live in so-called "affluent" countries, in a European Union which is part of the industrialized and developed world, with a per capita GDP above 23 000<sup>2</sup>. And yet, the European Union is still contending with a significant level of poverty. It is unacceptable that the threat of poverty should hang over 78 million people in the Union, so many individuals struggling with exclusion and marginalized in our society.

Solidarity is a key principle of the European Union. It is part of its essential purpose, in the same way that solidarity is one of the pillars of the European social model. There is no other option but to continue advancing towards a Europe of greater equality that leaves no-one by the wayside. By doing that, we shall also be working towards the priorities laid down by the Lisbon Strategy for more growth, more jobs and greater social cohesion.

The EU's leaders made a specific commitment to combat poverty in 2000, giving a strong demonstration of their resolve to tackle this scourge by 2010.

Commissioner Špidla made three forceful points:

- firstly, the **need for everyone to be involved** in tackling poverty, and for policymakers to heed everyone's opinion, especially that of the people affected;
- secondly, **action by the Union** to support the Member States so that we all move forward in the same direction to push back poverty;
- finally, he wanted to put the **focus on the most disadvantaged groups**, who are those most affected by poverty.

We are gathered here again for the seventh of these European Meetings. The years go by, but our message remains as robust: people experiencing poverty have the right to a voice and must be heeded.

The first of these meetings in 2001, giving a voice to those who are usually not heard, was a big breakthrough. In the past three years, we have added to that approach a dialogue between people experiencing poverty and key policy makers in the European Union. Seven years on, we have turned this practice into one of the tools that guides the decisions we take. I have to say that as a policy maker, I greatly value this dialog with people experiencing poverty. It is a vital reality-check. That is precisely why we are here today: so that policymakers, those who can tip the balance on reducing poverty, can hear what the people affected have to say.

Over the years, the Meetings have added weight to the idea that poverty must be tackled on several fronts at once. Employment and incomes are central issues, we are all agreed on that; but to leave poverty behind, we must combine these efforts with coordinated policies on education and training, housing, health care, access to social services, and more generally on integration.

In that respect, I think we have all been able to see that the organizers made the right choice in focusing on the four pieces of the jigsaw in the fight against poverty that are housing, minimum income, services of general interest and social services.

### **What the European Union is doing against poverty**

There are high expectations of what the European Union can do, and we must not betray them. The Member States remain chiefly responsible for tackling poverty but the European Union has a big role to play in supporting their actions.

We must make full use of our tools in this fight:

- first, the active inclusion strategy that we have put in place enables us to move forward with integration for those citizens who are most out of touch with work. We specifically leverage the European Social Fund to do that;
- the European Union also bolsters the Member States' efforts by coordinating their action on

<sup>2</sup> 2005 figures. Source: Eurostat.



poverty through what we call the Open Method of Coordination; this method offers the Member States a common framework for analysis and a platform for exchanges to compare and evaluate policy outcomes;

- the European Commission has also decided to make 2010 the “European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion”; with a budget of seventeen million Euros, this European Year will help make the public even more aware that poverty is a scourge that still blights the daily life of many Europeans.

These tools enable us to address today’s poverty. But our society is beset by major challenges that are showing up new social realities. I am thinking of globalization, demographic ageing, new technologies, and climate change.

The European Union must react. The Commission has taken the initiative: we are preparing a renewed Social Agenda, which will be presented before summer. This agenda will aim to help give all our fellow-citizens the right tools for firm and sustainable integration in our globalized and ever-changing world.

### Focus on the most vulnerable groups

It is essential that this general impetus should leave no-one by the wayside. Some groups - like people with disabilities, immigrants and ethnic minorities, starting with the Roma community - are more vulnerable to poverty than others.

These groups are the main focus of our action, through a threefold approach to tackling discrimination against them:

- first, through better access to services;
- then, through compliance with anti-discrimination laws, which we shall be keeping under particularly close review;
- finally, when considered necessary, through targeted methods; this would be the case for example with the Roma community, where poverty is endemic and prevalent (especially among Roma women); the Commission will also publish at the end of June a report on Community instruments to

promote inclusion for the Roma under the renewed Social Agenda.

### Conclusion

We must be clear about the fact that, our relative prosperity notwithstanding, the European Union cannot offer cast-iron guarantees against poverty.

If we are to make significant inroads into reducing poverty, we must launch a full-scale attack with all our means on this persistent phenomenon. All Member States must make it a priority and we must move forward in the same direction to achieve good results.

The European Union will continue to play its full part in this challenge. The renewed Social Agenda which we will be unveiling a few weeks hence will enable a further big step forward in this direction, and give a little more practical form to our resolve to stamp out this scourge.

Ms **Romana TOMC**, *State Secretary, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs, Slovenia*

This meeting would probably not have been possible without the activities and efforts of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN). I should like to express my thanks to them and, in particular, Mr Farrell, the Director of EAPN, and his team.

I should also like to express sincere thanks to the European Commission, to Commissioner Vladimir Špidla, to Mr Vignon, and to the representatives of the Belgian Government who provided the venue for this two-day meeting.

You have worked hard. You have exchanged experiences, sought answers and new solutions to improve your social position; you have also expressed your opinions and criticisms of some actions taken by EU Member States on the basis of National Action Plans to fight poverty and social exclusion.

We have had the opportunity to discuss these issues in workshops and in the “market place”, and to discuss matters directly with the people involved. It has been a positive experience for me.

In Slovenia, we are aware that the problem of poverty and social exclusion must be addressed in a serious and responsible manner. Despite our comparatively favourable figures in comparison with national averages, we are nonetheless aware that the position of people experiencing poverty represents an ongoing challenge. More than that: also at stake are the efforts and activities of the competent stakeholders and decision makers behind the strategies and specific measures that affect the everyday life and work of every member of our society and, in particular, of the most vulnerable groups and individuals. All too often we try to blame globalisation, technical progress and population ageing for our slow progress towards achieving our objectives. It may be true, in part. However, in view of the discussions over these two days, I have come to the conclusion that a great deal can still be achieved by improving policy and changing practices.

This year’s Meeting has focused on four subjects associated with fighting poverty: social services, services of general interest, housing policy and minimum income.

I am convinced that we will be able to incorporate the conclusions of your discussions over these two days into future policies and strategies to fight poverty and social exclusion.

In recent discussions on the renewed Social Agenda, we have been increasingly aware that social objectives must be incorporated into all EU policies. We need to create opportunities for the optimal development of individual potential at all stages of life. We need to facilitate access to education, high-quality healthcare, social protection and other services of general interest. Ultimately, we also need solidarity: for individuals, when they are not able to take care of themselves, and from society as a whole, constantly, in order to exist and develop.

At the end of this Meeting, I should like to express particular thanks to all those of you who took an active part in the workshops in order to contribute to a better standard of living and to the dignity of people experiencing poverty.

Mr **Martin HIRSCH**, *High-Commissioner for Active Solidarity against Poverty, France*

I should like to come back to a point made earlier about minimum income. You cannot have a decent

life without a minimum income. France introduced a minimum income scheme 20 years ago, and there are now 3 times as many claimants as we expected. Life remains difficult for these people, and those who do manage to access work earn little more than the minimum amount, even though they have added costs to pay, like child care and transport.

Until employment agencies start including minimum income claimants - because you do not have to be a registered jobseeker to claim minimum income - we will remain in a vicious circle. Employment agencies are there to get people back onto the labour market, but are not doing so because minimum income claimants cannot stay on it ad infinitum.

How can we change things to go from a minimum income scheme to something that is not the best available? How do we turn the minimum income scheme into something that leads on to a basic wage on the job market? This is a key question. Until we have solved this problem, we will not be able to increase the minimum income, because there are already too many people on it, and with a limited budget we have to try and bring down the number of people claiming minimum income if we want to increase the amount.

The challenge is more complex because there are two types of Member State: those that have a minimum income scheme and those that do not. And even those that do have a minimum income system need to reassess it if we want fewer people in poverty in the European Union, if we want to bring people back into the mainstream of society.

Together with the European Commission and Presidency, we must support relevant objectives and also ask people experiencing poverty to join with us: for it is you that will attain these objectives. We also have to ensure that work and solidarity go hand in hand and do not pull in opposite directions. We must look at the good practices, those that work, and try to reproduce them at the European level. What one group of citizens has succeeded in doing could be multiplied for hundreds of other in Europe. This and the future Meetings will be the forum in which we will take the pulse of what has been done and also where we will look ahead to improvements going forward.



Mr **Marian HOSEK**, *Deputy Minister for Social Policy, Social Services and Family Policy, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Czech Republic*

First of all, on behalf of the future Czech Presidency of the EU Council, let me thank the Slovenian Presidency, EAPN and the European Commission for the opportunity to address this 7th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty. I would like to express my admiration to the Slovenian Presidency for the brilliant organization of this event.

The European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty are a unique opportunity for discussion with people who experience poverty and social exclusion, those who help them to overcome their difficulties, and those who attempt to address these everyday problems through political decisions. For me personally, participation in this two-day Meeting has been an invaluable experience. Throughout the Meeting, I have carefully listened to your problems with finding a job which can sustain you, paying for housing, education, and free time activities for your children. I could go on, as the list of your concerns is long.

It is alarming that there are still more than 78 million people in Europe living below the poverty line. Of this number, 19 million are children. An efficient social protection system, and policies to prevent poverty, can help these people. At state and public administration levels, it is necessary to overcome the departmentalism which still persists among the instruments and policies dealing with poverty issues. A suitable combination of policies, focused simultaneously on prevention and stimulation to become economically active instead of living on welfare, should be found. At the European level, dialogue on the problems of poverty and social exclusion and support for cooperation among Member States to exchange time-tested policies are essential.

In 2007, a third of people who were asked the question "what are Europeans afraid of?" replied "unemployment". Crime, health care, rising prices, immigration and retirement pensions all elicited similar fears. The good news was that people were less afraid of unemployment than in previous years. Employment, mobility in the labour market and the active involvement of those most removed from the labour market are priorities for the next three presidencies - those of France, the Czech Republic and Sweden.

During its presidency, the Czech Republic will pursue a policy of social services in terms of active inclusion along with policies focusing on labour market integration and to guarantee a minimum income. With the ageing of the population, the significance and potential of social services will increase.

Social services, especially social prevention services, further reinforce the competence of those who use them, leading to social inclusion. They provide essential support that allows people to retain their dignity and to take part in the same social activities as others. In the Czech Republic we are undergoing a reform of social services aimed at creating a system of social services that responds to human needs and societal developments. We are careful to ensure that decisions about service delivery are made as close to the person as possible, meaning in the municipality where the person lives. During our presidency of the European Union, we will be aiming to share what progress we have achieved in the quality and availability of social services.

The fight against poverty and social exclusion is our common goal and must be visible. Therefore the upcoming three presidencies will try to finalise preparations for a decision from the European Council and Parliament to declare 2010 the European Year of the Fight against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the importance of this Meeting and to cordially invite you to the 8th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty, which will be held in Brussels in 2009 under the Czech EU Presidency.

Mr **Ludo Horemans**, *President of EAPN*

I should like to refer back to what Commissioner Špidla had to say on the pledge given in 2000 by the Heads of State and Government to "make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty" by 2010. We are two-thirds the way to the deadline set for this goal, and are getting ready to evaluate it, but we already know that the impact will not be as decisive as all that. Even the figures that can sometimes spin the realities show that we have made little progress.

2010 will be the European Year for Combating Poverty and mark the end of the Lisbon Strategy. It will be an opportunity to assess both the economic and social pillars of that strategy. It will be the time to get a new commitment from the Heads of State and Government with clearer objectives and goals to check what progress is being made year by year.

Before they make any fresh pledges, I would like the European institutions (the Commission, Council and Parliament) to undertake a proper, searching and wide-ranging evaluation of the previous period. We want to stress, and we are adamant, that the Lisbon Strategy must not be evaluated by the economic partners alone, but more broadly by all the actors concerned with that evaluation, which includes people experiencing poverty.

I hope that the renewed Social Agenda now in the works will give the opportunity and create the arena for that evaluation to be undertaken with all the actors.

I am not placing all these expectations on the European institutions alone. I believe that all of us as delegations to this European Meeting must also press our own governments to get this wide-ranging evaluation and a fresh commitment for the coming period.

# List of Participants



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