

# Network news



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Editorial

## Towards a new EU development model?

**T**he legislative framework for the reform of cohesion policy for 2007-2013, aimed at reducing the "wealth gap" in an enlarged EU, presents few surprises and raises both concerns and hopes for NGOs.

As the Member States enter into negotiations on the new package, they know these will be long and difficult particularly as regards budgetary implications. Yet resources must be in line with the task - and the task is not a small one.

The opportunity must be seized in these negotiations to push for an EU model of development which strives to put the inclusion of its entire people at the heart of its policies. A model which promotes partnership, addresses social cohesion not merely as an issue of employment, and delivers at the closest level to its beneficiaries.

The new proposals are encouraging in this respect: the importance of the funds in promoting social cohesion and inclusion is restated; a new notion of partnership is developed which is theoretically much welcome, but whose implementation remains to be tested; the remit for the European Social Fund is broadened beyond strict labour market actions, and the Global Grants approach has been safeguarded.

EAPN remains concerned nonetheless at the loss of learning gained through the EQUAL initiative, mainstreamed to a point of disappearance in the new regulations. As one of the key access points for NGOs to the Structural Funds, and a strong example of cross-the-board partnership development, EQUAL will leave behind it a gap which Member States must fill in.

*Patrizia Brandellero*

## FOCUS ON COHESION POLICY 2007-2013

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## The draft regulations for 2007-2013

In July 2004, the European Commission published the draft regulations for the new Structural Funds, covering the period 2007-2013. Each is reviewed here in turn, followed by some EAPN comments.

**T**hese regulations will govern how structural assistance is delivered for the seven year period 2007-2013. There is one lengthy general regulation, followed by short, specialised regulations.

### Five new regulations

**1. The general regulation:** The main regulation is lengthy, following the trend of concentrating the main details in one instrument, with shorter flanking instruments addressing the specificities of the individual funds.

The future generation of programmes will be grouped under three headings:

**Convergence** (Objective 1 – 78.54% of funds): This objective primarily concerns the less developed Member States and regions, whose per capita GDP is less than 75% of the Community average. The Commission also proposes that temporary support should apply under this priority to those regions where per capita GDP would have been below 75% of the Community average as calculated for the Union of 15.

**Regional competitiveness and employment** (Objective 2 – 17.22%): For cohesion policy outside the least developed Member States and regions, the Commission proposes a two-fold approach: first, through regional programmes financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), cohesion policy will help regions to anticipate and promote economic change in industrial, urban and rural areas by strengthening their competitiveness and attractiveness; second, through programmes financed by the European Social Fund (ESF), cohesion policy will help people to anticipate and to adapt to economic change, in line with the policy pri-

orities of the European Employment Strategy, by supporting policies aiming at full employment, quality and productivity at work, and social inclusion.

**European territorial cooperation** (Objective 3 – 3.94%): Building on the experience of the present INTERREG Initiative, the Commission proposes to create a new objective dedicated to further the harmonious and balanced integration of the territory of the Union by supporting cross-border co-operation.

Under the new regulation, each member state will prepare a 'national reference document', negotiated with the Commission, that will be the framework for the operational programmes. Each operational programme must specify the monitoring and evaluation systems to be set down, including the composition of the monitoring committee.

The Structural Funds shall indeed operate under the partnership principle. Partnership is defined as being between the government and the partners it designates, including "any other appropriate body representing civil society, environmental partners, NGOs and bodies responsible for promoting equality between men and women".

**2. The European Social Fund regulation (ESF):** Social inclusion is mentioned as a specific objective of the European Social Fund. The fund will be used to support the European Employment Strategy, including its objectives of reinforcing social inclusion and combating discrimination. The regulation is still focused on the labour market, employment and unemployment and refers several times to women and also to the social integration of migrants.

**3. European Regional Development Fund regulation (ERDF):** The main objective of this Fund is to contribute to the reinforcement of economic, social and territorial cohesion. The use of ERDF funding may contribute to promoting the integration of cross-border labour markets, local employment initiatives, equal opportunities, training and social inclusion. The regulation also addresses the urban dimension to the ERDF, that shall be used for participative, integrated strategies to tackle the high con-

### In a few words...

The **European Structural Funds** date back to the 1960s, but were not organised as a package until 1988. They were then grouped and distributed in multi-annual periods, called programming periods. These were 1989-93, 1994-9 and 2000-2006.

The Structural Funds support the majority by far of EU-funded actions in the Member States of the EU. Although they come from Brussels, from money raised by the EU, the spending of most Structural Fund money is negotiated between the European Commission and the governments. This is why, except in some rare cases, one does not 'apply to Brussels for Structural Funds'. The main exception is the Community Initiative Programmes, such as EQUAL (equality and social inclusion).

According to EAPN, the Structural Funds could and should be a major instrument in combating poverty and provide opportunities to NGOs. Hitherto, such opportunities have been limited. The Structural Funds have concerned themselves largely with regional economic development and the smoother functioning of the labour market, following a model of development which does little to confront the root causes of exclusion.

centration of economic, environmental and social problems affecting urban agglomerations.

**4. The cohesion fund and cross-border regulation:** The cohesion fund is for the benefit of the new member states, Greece, Portugal and Spain. It sets down the availability of the funds for transport and environmental projects. No specific provision is made for a monitoring committee.

**5. Rural regulation:** Finally, there is a rural regulation for the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), which reflects the reforms currently taking place in Community agriculture and rural development policy. The regulation is important for EAPN members concerned with poverty in the rural areas and the Community's approach to rural development policy. The regulation states very clearly that the principles of the LEADER programme must be continued into the new fund. The regulation also establishes a European network for rural development. In addition, each Member State is required to establish a national rural development network. As is the case with the general regulation, there is provision for a monitoring committee along the lines of social partnership.

#### What about EQUAL?

The regulations provide few surprises. The first comment is a negative one. No proposals have been put forward to take account of the ending of the EQUAL programme (see page 5), while the other Community Initiative Programmes INTERREG, URBAN and LEADER have been clearly and visibly mainstreamed.

However, there are many areas of the new regulations which EAPN can welcome. The designation of civic society and NGOs as partners is a breakthrough. Two cautions, though: it is up to member states to designate exactly which partners; and second, there could well be member state opposition to this definition in the Council of Ministers. For several years, EAPN looked for NGO involvement in the design, planning, implementation, monitoring and

access to the Structural Funds - and all these points are now conceded.

Contrary to some fears that there would be no such provision, global grants are envisaged in the general regulation and in the ESF regulation. They may be delivered through such organisations as local authorities, regional development bodies, or NGOs. Although they are not obligatory, there is a higher expectation that global grants be a norm.

#### An excessive labour market orientation?

A concern of the European NGOs has been the narrow remit of the European Social Fund and what groups like EAPN consider to be an excessive labour market orientation. The new ESF regulation still has a strong labour market focus. This time, the outer limits of the labour market are pushed back a little. The *Pathways to integration in employment* section is drawn in such a way as to list excluded groups (e.g. minorities, people with disabilities) and to encompass broader actions in the social economy, 'accompanying actions' and 'relevant social care and support services'.

Finally, these draft regulations have a long legislative journey to follow and will be buffeted by the European Parliament on one hand and the Council of Ministers on the other, where they are likely to be hotly contested. The approval process will take until well into 2005-06. Even if a strong social dimension survives reasonably intact, the quality of the outcomes will depend in significant measure on the ability of national NGOs to influence operations in each Member State.

*Based on briefing by Brian Harvey, Advisor to EAPN, August 2004*

The new ESF regulation still has a strong labour market focus

## FINANCIAL PERSPECTIVES 2007-2013

In the financial perspectives, the Commission outlines its proposals for European funding, budgets and priorities for 2007-2013, including the planned levels of spending on the Structural Funds.

The Commission has proposed that 1.24% of European Gross National Income be dedicated to European spending. This percentage has subsequently become the main point of contention, and the level of spending on the Structural Funds is probably the most contentious part of the overall financial perspective.

EAPN favours a higher, rather than a lower level of European spending and supports the 1.24% level as an absolute minimum. The European Structural Funds have considerable potential to reduce and alleviate poverty, so a substantial budget for the Structural Funds must be at the heart of the financial perspective. In addition, the commitments to social policy objectives in the financial perspective are short, bland and offer nothing new. Equally disappointing is the lack of commitment to reinforcing the role of NGOs.

See COM(2004) 101 final:  
[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/budget/furtherinfo/index\\_en.htm#framework](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/budget/furtherinfo/index_en.htm#framework)

EAPN response available at [www.eapn.org](http://www.eapn.org)

## Funds at the crossroads!

### EU budget for 2005

The Commission adopted in April its proposal for the EU preliminary draft budget for 2005, the first budget covering the expenditure for 25 Member States over the whole year.

The Commission proposal plans an expenditure volume of EUR 109.5 billion, which is equivalent to 1.03% of the gross national income of the EU-25. Total requirements for agriculture for the EU-25 come to EUR 50.7 billion (EUR 3.6 billion for the new Member States). **The Structural Funds are the second biggest spending area: out of a total of EUR 42.4 billion, EUR 7.7 billion will be allocated to the new Member States.**

In accordance with the budgetary procedure, the Council's first reading took place in July; Parliament's first reading was scheduled for October, and the second readings will be in November and December.

The general presentation of the budget is available on the following website: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/budget/furtherinfo/index\\_en.htm#budget](http://europa.eu.int/comm/budget/furtherinfo/index_en.htm#budget)

**B**y referring to the Lisbon Council's objective of "making Europe the most successful and competitive knowledge based economy in the world by 2010", as well as to the Nice and Gothenburg Councils, the European Commission has identified a crucial part of the policy context informing the draft Council regulation laying down general provisions on ERDF, ESF and the Cohesion Fund from 2007 to 2013. Yet, this mention of a "triangle" of Councils is at the same time both a source of encouragement and of concern. Encouragement, because the Nice Agenda does promote the Funds as a tool to tackle poverty; concern, because, throughout the remaining text of the various Regulations, references to Lisbon and Gothenburg fail to include Nice. Social inclusion is subsumed within the other policy imperatives.

This omission was repeated in a recent UK Government presentation to stakeholders of progress on negotiations over the Regulations. The achievements of Lisbon and Gothenburg were explicitly acknowledged, but those of Nice were not mentioned. When questioned by an NGO member of the audience, the government officials responded by suggesting that the social inclusion agenda should be "taken for granted".

The lesson we need to draw, as EAPN, is that the hard-fought gains to mainstream poverty issues into EU programmes must be protected and continually re-asserted. Whilst recognising that there has been some convergence of the employment and of the social inclusion agendas in recent considerations of the respective National Action Plans, we must beware that this is not at the expense of a clear attack on the conditions that subject 68 million EU citizens to poverty.

#### Beware Repatriation

The major threat to the Structural Funds being able to take on this challenge, is the lingering argument over the EU financial perspectives and budget for 2007-2013. Under the guise of simplification and devolv-

ing part of the Funds' present remit to Member State governments, there is a concerted effort by the would-be-net-contributors to reduce the size of the Funds being proposed by the Commission. In effect, this would lead to the abandonment of the 18% financial commitment to the Regional Competitiveness and Employment Objective.

This diminution of the Structural Funds will leave them as a limited palliative for the "poorest" member states, notably the 10 new member states. Such a minimalist position leaves the Funds with a marginalised role and recipient states will be ghettoised. The arrangement denies the EU role in challenging poverty as located in the midst of all member states and, thereby, ignores a central argument of the 3rd Cohesion Report, which underpins the Funds by emphasising the critical task of the European social model to confront inequality.

There is a concerted effort by the would-be-net-contributors to reduce the size of the Funds

Instead of the Structural Funds continuing to be part of the social glue bonding an EU of 25 member states, repatriation of the Funds will introduce a two-tier model and a weaker EU to root out the poverty and exclusion that is endemic in the modern state. As NGOs, we must argue strongly for resources adequate to the task and for inclusive Structural Funds' programmes that express a common commitment to action across all 25 EU member states.

#### Partnership

The significant progress beyond former regulations in the current drafts on recognising NGOs as stakeholders alongside the social partners is welcome. Given sceptical public opinion, the Funds do offer us an important example of an EU at work. NGO interventions will help to bring this message down to street level. Over the coming months, we need to ensure that the consultation process is open and accountable.

Beyond the drafting stages, NGOs need to be assertive in exploiting opportunities for technical assistance, capacity building and global grants that

will help to define the character of future programmes under the Structural Funds. We must ensure that any mainstreaming of the Community Initiatives properly recognises the targeting, innovation and transnationality characteristic of NGO-sponsored schemes.

The scope for partnership, under Agenda 2007, is daunting. Whilst we may be looking forward to sitting at new tables to design and deliver future programmes, we must also learn from previous experience where partnership has so often meant that NGOs were brought in: to make up numbers; to offer a token nod in the direction of local participation; and to be dropped at the first hint of reduced funding.

However, a determined mood of change is emanating from EU policy-making processes. In November 2003, the Report of the Employment Task Force, chaired by Wim Kok and entitled "Jobs, Jobs, Jobs - Creating More Employment in Europe", asserted: "To have an impact, National Action Plans need to have political legitimacy and the approach of several Member States of involving their national parliaments in the preparation of the NAPs, and consulting social partners and civil society, could become the norm throughout the EU."

In this same spirit, there are, indeed, positive opportunities in the proposed changes to the Structural Funds. We need to take them!

Ray Phillips

Co-ordinator of the EAPN Task Force on Structural Funds

## NGOs question EQUAL termination

**T**he EQUAL Community Initiative will not continue after 2006 as is the case with URBAN, INTEREG and LEADER. It is clear that lack of political will to support the Initiative has left the European Employment Strategy - for the first time in the last 10 years - without a Community Initiative with a clear focus on employment. The announced PROGRESS programme is not a continuation of EQUAL, but a conjunction of existing Community Programmes.

EQUAL has promoted new means of combating all forms of exclusion, discrimination and inequalities in connection with the labour market, based on partnership and striving for innovation, user involvement and focused transnational cooperation. Networking and mainstreaming are also primary objectives of the Initiative. EAPN, through its national and European members, has closely followed the progress made and commented on improvements.

The mid-term EU-wide evaluation report, published in March 2004, acknowledged that "There are important (...) obstacles to mainstreaming, notably

but not only due to insufficient communication between ESF and NAP teams at the national level, where most mainstreaming could take place" and recommended to "Reinforce the common understanding of the EQUAL principles, particularly empowerment (...), innovation (...), and mainstreaming."

Although administratively demanding for NGOs, overall EQUAL has improved their capacity, especially in working with diverse partnerships at both national and European levels, in building networks and uniting their 'voice' to influence policy making. It is for all these reasons that NGOs are strongly questioning the termination of the Initiative in 2006. One key issue is the budget reallocation of EQUAL funds after 2006. EQUAL has an overall budget of EUR 3,026 million (funded by ESF). Where will the relevant funds be allocated and how will they be used in the period 2007-2013?

Maria Marinakou

President of EAPN - Member of the EAPN Task force on Structural Funds

## EAPN RECENT PUBLICATIONS

- Position paper - *Review of the financial perspective 2007-2013 and its implications for European action against poverty*
- Position paper on the *Third Report on economic and social cohesion*
- Position paper on the *Mid-term Review of the Structural Funds*  
Network News No 99 - March/April 2003

All these publications are available on the new EAPN website [www.eapn.org](http://www.eapn.org)

## USEFUL LINKS

- Proposals for the new Structural Funds regulations 2007-2013:  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/sources/docoffic/official/regulation/newregl0713\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/regulation/newregl0713_en.htm)
- Regional Policy - Inforegio:  
[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/index\\_en.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/index_en.htm)
- The Structural Funds:  
[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/funds/prord/sf\\_en.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/funds/prord/sf_en.htm)
- The future of Cohesion Policy - Join the debate!:  
[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/debate/forum\\_en.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/debate/forum_en.htm)
- Information on European regions and regional development programmes:  
[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/country/gateway/index\\_en.cfm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/country/gateway/index_en.cfm)
- Commission's Regional Policy Directorate-General:  
[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/regional\\_policy/index\\_en.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/regional_policy/index_en.htm)
- European Social Fund 2000-2006:  
[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/esf2000/index-en.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/esf2000/index-en.htm)
- Community Initiative EQUAL:  
[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/equal/index\\_en.html](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/index_en.html)

A 'dissemination' conference on the results of EQUAL will be held in Warsaw on 26 and 27 November 2004. For more info:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/equal/index\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/index_en.html) (events)

## ***“We are learning by doing, but feel ready”***



*Mária Nádaždyová, Social attaché*



*László Flórián, responsible for Regional affairs*

Interview with Mária Nádaždyová, Social attaché, and László Flórián, responsible for Regional affairs,

Permanent Representation of Slovakia.

### **What's the general picture of the Structural Funds (SF) today in Slovakia?**

**LF:** Four operational programmes currently run in Slovakia, covering basic infrastructures, human resources, industry and services (SMEs), agricultural and rural development. The majority of the regions (8) is concerned. Whereas the Bratislava Region is not eligible for Objective 1, GDP levels in the two easternmost regions are at 36% of the EU average (45-47% for the whole of Slovakia). The general view in Slovakia is that the most important improvements have to be to basic infrastructures, such as transport, environment but also education.

### **What is Slovakia's position on the current negotiations on the financial perspectives and new regulations for the SF?**

**LF:** At present, Slovakia generally supports the proposals put forward by the Commission, on levels of funding for cohesion policy, but also on the new regulations. The Dutch Presidency hopes to close preliminary negotiations at the end of this year, which is a nice aim but very ambitious, particularly given the many diverging viewpoints.

**MN:** Slovakia supports the stated preference for more strategic management and simplification of rules. However, some of the draft regulations themselves do not always fulfil these aims as they are generally significantly longer and, e.g. draft ESF regulation, contain detailed rules on the scope of assistance.

### **How has your country experienced the transition from pre-accession funds to SF?**

**MN:** The levels of funding and the differences in methodology are huge. ESF in particular has been a key stepping stone in the introduction of the SF in our country.

**LF:** We are learning by doing, but feel ready on the administrative side. The regions, created only two and a half years ago are currently building up their

administrative capacity and are now involved in the implementation of EU programmes and take part in monitoring committees.

### **What partnerships have been developed with NGOs?**

**LF:** There are thousands of NGOs in Slovakia. It is sometimes difficult to know exactly whom to develop contacts with. Representative and active umbrella NGOs are needed. The Government has a strategic approach to NGOs, but since most are also involved in service provision, they often come with issues and demands that are too specific. Although their interest in developing partnerships is high, their possibilities are sometimes limited.

### **Will the SF help achieve both economic and social cohesion?**

**MN:** Our top priority is creating jobs, and this is also reflected in our NAP inclusion. The whole ESF should focus more on long-term unemployment and the integration of cross-border labour markets. Investing in life-long learning, education, research and development, is key in achieving the Lisbon objectives. We also believe that, in a country with 80% of rural territory, the programme for rural development is strategically important: we welcome the shift in focus from support to agriculture to supporting rural development increasing quality of life in these areas.

### **How is the Roma issue being picked up in the context of European integration?**

**MN:** The Roma population represents the group most at risk of poverty and exclusion in our country, and is clearly targeted in the NAP Inclusion. The most pressing issues for us are education, employment and housing, to facilitate mobility but also improve living conditions. We want to reduce risks, but don't expect to "solve" everything.

**LF:** The Roma issue is included in all operational programmes but even with the SF we can only open the possibility of improvement of their situation. I'm a bit pessimistic. It is very difficult to find a solution, also because it is not only a Slovak issue. We are also seeking initiatives from their side.

*Interview: P.B. – V.F*

## Has the Portuguese Social Model a future?

The discussion on the new frontiers of the Portuguese Social Model is these days one of the

most important issues the country is facing.

In fact, it is possible to identify all across the EU - and Portugal is in this respect a very significant example - a dominant discourse stating economic policies as preceding and determining social policies. The move towards the privatisation of basic public services and the withdrawal of the collective and public responsibility from essential fields of social policy such as education, health, housing and social security are warning signs in terms of equality and access to fundamental rights.

The consideration of a balanced relationship between employment, economic and social policies, together with the awareness of social protection as a productive factor and a driving force for development, is now under very serious pressure.

### A move towards privatisation

The progress that has been made in the last years is under threat of a returning to a "compassion" and charity approach in public policies as the main attitude of governing social expectations and rights.

Reduction in social security benefits (including sickness and unemployment allowances), lack of political will in the fight against poverty and exclusion (the changes introduced in the Minimum Income as a perfect example), the absence of specific measures to tackle rising unemployment (almost half a million people), are different faces of the same reality: the shift towards a strongly liberal approach to the social model.

We are now facing a strong move, politically driven and ideologically marked, where public responsibility appears as a basic and minimum safety network,

with the market becoming the main driving force. Under the sacred principles of free competition and circulation, what we see is a progressive and intensified move towards the privatisation of social protection systems.

This situation, all along with new and very strong challenges, among which we could easily identify the migration issue, child poverty and gender inequality, fully justify the urgent need to discuss the ways to overcome this adverse environment and what should be the role of civil society in this process.

### Mobilising for change

The economic and financial situation of the country is of course raising new difficulties and challenges. The choice in investments and the prioritisation of policies is for this reason a critical factor of progress and success. The answer to this pressure can not be found, however, in limiting rights or narrowing access to protection. On the contrary, it is by developing a strong and reliable protection system that Portugal will be capable of facing and overcoming the obstacles that this difficult environment is setting.

At the same time we must be sure that, while adopting different answers and models in the EU, this is something we have to face together. The reinforcement of European with national strategies to promote inclusion is probably the most effective way to combat poverty and inequality, which in Portugal are becoming more and more pressing. The combined forces of mobilized citizens all across Europe and within each one of its nations is one of the most important driving forces for change.

*Edmundo Martinho*  
Portuguese member of the EAPN Review Group on Social Inclusion

Public responsibility appears as a basic and minimum safety network

### EAPN PORTUGAL

The European Anti-Poverty Network Portugal is a network of groups or individuals whose main purpose is to fight poverty and social exclusion. EAPN Portugal was established as an NGO, and recognised since 1995 as a Development NGO by the Institute of Portuguese Cooperation. The main objectives of the Portuguese Network are basically the same as for EAPN.

### Key Areas of Action

- **Information:** EAPN Portugal works towards networking and social partnership. The exchange and dissemination of information is an essential component of our action.
- **Training:** EAPN Portugal is certified by the Institute for Innovation and Training (INOFOR) as a training agency.
- **Projects and Research:** EAPN Portugal is responsible for the design, development and evaluation of different national and transnational projects (more than 30 projects since 1993).

### Regional Networks

Since 1994 EAPN Portugal has started a process of decentralisation through the creation of Regional Networks. Twelve regional development centres work to poverty eradication in a local and regional basis: Aveiro, Beja, Braga, Castelo Branco, Coimbra, Évora, Faro, Guarda, Lisboa, Porto, Santarém, and Setúbal.

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## **“Give human dignity back its full importance”**

Interview with Jardim Moreira, President of EAPN Portugal.

**What are the big issues around poverty and social exclusion in Portugal that you personally are most concerned with?**

*I myself think that neoliberal capitalism minimises the importance of people, human dignity and rights. Portugal's economy is in a pretty poor way at the moment; we are (along with the rest of Europe) going through an economic crisis, made worse by the difficulty of complying with the European Union's convergence criteria.*

*Portugal has seen many businesses relocating either to Eastern Europe or Asia in recent years, which has increased unemployment, so that we now have nearly 500,000 people unemployed.*

*Also, we have an older population that is still growing, with all the problems that entails, not least for social protection, health care, and so on. Then there is the abandonment of the inner regions to deal with, which is partly due to an outdated and unprofitable agricultural sector. And there is a big crisis in the family: the nuclear family is giving way to new family structures, especially a growing number of lone parent families and people living alone. Also, educational levels are very low, and we still have one of the highest school drop-out rates in Europe (nearly 40% of Portuguese schoolchildren).*

*At the same time, social inequalities have worsened in Portugal, and the gap between rich and poor has widened (the last two years have seen a 4.4% rise in the number of millionaires, while nearly 22% of the population are living in poverty).*

*The questions we have to ask ourselves are: What sort of future do we want? Where is the People's Europe? I think we are facing a structural problem, that urgently needs addressing.*

**What do you see as the top national priority for addressing these issues?**

*Firstly, to know (and acknowledge) the real social situation that we find ourselves in, as well as its imbalances, re-state the human dignity of the individual and give it back its full importance, underline and uphold human rights in theory and practice. Then, try to wake up civil society to play its role in building a democratic society in Portugal.*

*But just as important is fighting to get poverty and social exclusion on the national political agenda, by getting people who are enduring poverty and social exclusion involved, and playing an active part in addressing their serious problems. The key thing here is to make the government give priority to turning the national action plan for inclusion (NAP Inclusion) into reality on the ground.*

**EAPN has existed in Portugal for 13 years. How do you see its role (based on the successes already achieved) and what are the main challenges for the years to come?**

*Thirteen years of EAPN working in Portugal brings me to believe that we have a big clash of ideas between EAPN's social objectives and national policies on poverty and social exclusion. So, EAPN's objectives need to go more towards getting concerted action going by NGOs that are concerned with poverty and exclusion; promoting networking and greater unity so as to help shape and change national policies.*



*Interview: Sergio Aires*

People have the right to influence and participate in the decisions that affect them

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