

Network news



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE EUROPEAN ANTI POVERTY NETWORK

N°116 | JAN - FEB | 2006

Editorial

Giving ex-offenders a second chance

What is criminal justice for? Meting out punishment, obviously, but what else? The reason for locking an individual up is to give an ultimate and measured demonstration of society's disapproval of what is deemed to be a criminal act, to promote atonement - so far as possible - for the loss caused to the victims, and to reduce the risks of re-offending by giving offenders means for returning to the mainstream.

Sadly, from this point of view, prison can only be said to be a breeding ground that nurtures crime. Not just as a place where the processes of exclusion already at work (poverty, poor education, drug abuse, mental health problems, etc.) are amplified, but also because it can lead to chronic unemployment, homelessness and the loss of family ties.

To this extent, prison produces exclusion more than inclusion. It does not address society's needs for security, nor does it give ex-offenders a second chance. With no money, job or future prospects, ex-offenders can slide back into criminal behaviour.

The Council of Europe says that *"anyone deprived of liberty must be treated with respect and dignity"*. Apart from 21st century conditions of detention, that should include the possibility for prisoners to get training and advice that will give them practical preparation for their return to the community. A society that long ago rid itself of the "an eye for an eye" philosophy would grow in reputation by doing something about rehabilitating its prisoners.

V. Forest

WHAT FUTURE FOR EX-OFFENDERS?

CONTENTS

Prison and Exclusion

- A place for social rehabilitation or exclusion?.....2
- Prison figures for the EU.....2
- Prisoners and released offenders in their own words3
- Scandalous conditions of detention4
- Women and ethnic minorities, doubly marginalised4
- How to support (ex-) offenders : case studies5
- Prisoners' children5
- "All ex-offenders have the stigma of a criminal record"6
- Profile of the European Offender Employment Forum6

News from Austria

- Debunking socio-economic myths7
- Interesting project7
- Interview with Karin Heitzmann, an Austrian researcher on poverty8



EU AT

Prison figures for the EU

These are the latest figures of prisoners from the International Centre for Prisons Studies, Kings College London - <http://www.prisonstudies.org/>, in absolute figures and in population rate (per 100,000 of the population):

■ Austria:	8,700	(107)
■ Belgium:	9,245	(90)
■ Cyprus:	355	(41)
■ Czech Republic:	19,506	(190)
■ Denmark:	3,788	(71)
■ Estonia:	4,571	(317)
■ Finland:	3,719	73)
■ France:	55,028	(91)
■ Germany:	79,329	(97)
■ Greece:	8,760	(83)
■ Hungary:	16,543	(164)
■ Ireland:	3,417	(92)
■ Italy:	56,530	(98)
■ Malta:	278	(71)
■ Netherlands:	20,000	(127)
■ Latvia:	7,796	(325)
■ Lithuania:	8,063	(218)
■ Luxembourg:	655	(153)
■ Poland:	79,807	(206)
■ Portugal:	13,163	(122)
■ Slovakia:	8,891	(165)
■ Slovenia:	1,129	(57)
■ Spain:	60,896	(155)
■ Sweden:	7,332	(82)
■ United Kingdom:	84,918	(145)

Poland and the Baltic States have the highest prison population rates, i.e. above 200 prisoners per 100,000 of the population.

Prison - a place for social rehabilitation or exclusion?

The social exclusion of ex-offenders is a multidimensional phenomenon. A strong political commitment is needed if prisons are to prepare people for life back in society.

Many prisoners come into contact with the criminal justice and prison systems from a background of social exclusion: low educational levels, unemployment, health problems, drug dependency, etc. Imprisonment solves nothing: the problems are inextricably linked and build up, adding to the time served the near certainty of leaving more deeply excluded than before.

But possibilities do exist and are being tried out sporadically (see page 5) to help ex-offenders fit back into an acculturated society. At a time when the theme of insecurity is exploited for electoral ends, a real political will to tackle this issue still needs to emerge in Europe, to give prison back its function as a force for social rehabilitation.

Education

The longer the sentence, the more likely that a prisoner's skills will erode or become outdated. Also, prison training that is obviously unsuited to inmates' needs (e.g., mainly an "occupation") can reinforce the already very negative view that prisoners may have of "school" and learning. In fact, many prisoners have had a chequered school career, leaving them with few skills, even basic literacy ones.

But prison may also be an opportunity for some to get a needs assessment and training that they were unable to get outside; training that can hand them the means for returning to work and society, and rebuilding their self-esteem.

A Canadian study of ten years ago (1) found that participation in basic training could help reduce the re-offending rate by around 12% - a figure to be approached with caution... A more recent study (2) reports that within a group of ex-prison-

ers lacking basic educational skills, those who had not followed training in prison were three times more likely to return to prison than those that had.

Employment

In the United Kingdom, it is estimated that two-thirds of prisoners were unemployed on entering prison, and that three-quarters leave prison with no immediate prospects of employment (3).

For those who were in employment, entering prison clearly means losing their job and the income it brings. Rarely is there provision to help them preserve it for the term of even a very short sentence. In any event, few employers are keen on re-employing people with a criminal record.

Employers
are reluctant
to hire
"ex-cons"

For people most disengaged from the labour market experience before going to jail, the low-paid mundane work (cleaning, kitchen work, fetching and carrying, laundry work) that prison offers can create the impression that working on the right side of the law is pointless and not worth it, especially as these jobs are often disconnected from the reality of work outside the prison system.

But it does not have to be that way... Work in prison can be a way for some prisoners to gain experience and, with help from qualified personnel, get in touch with employers who are willing to hire them on release. But potential employers will still take a lot of convincing and encouraging to see ex-offenders as reliable workers. And some unscrupulous employers will always take on ex-offenders "off the books" on pittance-level wages, aware that a criminal record will stand in the way of their getting a proper job! Self-employment may be a quicker, practical solution for some ex-prisoners, but it is not for everyone and can end up in disillusionment...

Unemployed ex-offenders are a particularly vulnerable group in today's European Union, and their numbers, estimated at several million by the EOEf (see page 6), are steadily rising, worsened in recent years by more frequent use of imprisonment, especially remand in custody.

Housing

It is not just jobs, but housing that can be lost too, or, even worse, rent may still be payable if the landlord has not been notified of a jail sentence. The prisoner then falls into a spiral of debt, as rent arrears will build up despite no longer living there. Non-payment may result in the prisoner being evicted from his former home, and barred from the waiting lists for social housing.

In the worst-case scenario, an owner with no news of his tenant may repossess the premises and dispose of the prisoner's property, which is why some ex-prisoners can no longer find the documents (identity papers, certificates and diplomas) they need to get a job, benefit or social housing.

Many released prisoners therefore end up on the street or in homeless hostels. And unemployment makes it even harder to find stable accommodation, let alone those owners who refuse to let their property to an ex-prisoner or demand an unaffordable security deposit. Social housing then becomes the most obvious alternative, but even that is littered with obstacles, like the shortage of accommodation, and the lack of local political commitment to get ex-offenders back into mainstream society.

This makes it important to ensure - on entering prison, if possible - that he/she will be able to find somewhere decent to live on release. Specific advice and support should be provided in the prison itself.

Health

There is no denying the fact - drugs are everywhere in prisons. Even a previous non-user can soon develop a habit inside, and remain dependent after release unless treatment is offered in prison.

Many prisoners also have - or develop - mental health problems, which may be worsened by alcohol and drug abuse. Inactivity can exacerbate these problems, plunging them into a stupor and

making them incapable of thinking and acting for themselves. For some, however, prison is a first opportunity to be diagnosed, enabling them to put their ill-being into words, and offering them prospects for treatment that can make their life "more bearable".

Resources

Ensuring that they have a sufficient income to live a decent life is a prerequisite for ex-prisoners' rehabilitation. But debts incurred before entering prison may mount up while inside: rent arrears, loss of benefit, costs related to imprisonment, etc

Prison could do more to help prisoners break out of this spiral of the debt through advisory services and the work it can provide, provided it is good quality and decently paid.

Many released prisoners end up on the street

Family

Imprisonment can deal a fatal blow to a marriage and prisoner's relationships with their children (see sidebar p.5). It may result in many emotional, financial and health problems for family members. By contrast, removing a violent family member - e.g., where domestic violence is involved - may give partners and children a respite and opportunity to start afresh.

Where family and friends are still there on release, however, they are often the main way for an ex-offender to achieve rehabilitation, by providing immediate means of support, a roof and love. For the less fortunate, getting out may lead to a dead end, or, worse, re-offending and finally back to square one: prison.

Vincent Forest

(1) Correctional Services of Canada, *Can Educating Adult Offenders Counteract Recidivism? Research Report 22, 1992*. See: http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/rsrch/reports/r22/r22e_e.shtml

(2) D Clark, *Effective Regimes Measurement Research, Home Office (Prison Service internal management paper - unpublished), 2001*. See: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk>
re-offending by ex-prisoners, 2002 Report by the UK Social Exclusion Unit. See: <http://www.socialinclusion.gov.uk>

WORDS FROM BEHIND CLOSED DOORS...

"I've thought about it - doing a course, getting myself some skills. But the pay's better if I'm on the cleaning - so there's no choice really."

"The main thing is getting a job. I need something so I'm not just sat around doing nothing - and for money as well."

"I would get out and for the first few weeks I would ... try and get a job, but obviously with a criminal record, if you were honest and said, yes, I've got a criminal record, then, there's the door basically."

"I lost my house when I came here. How can I even think about starting again when I haven't got anywhere to go to?"

... AND FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

"When I came out I went back to same thing - you can get used to prison, the way of life."

"I'm going out worse than I came in - more debt, all my furniture gone, and no home. I don't know where I'm going to be sleeping three days from now."

"It wasn't just my criminal record, it was the fact that I was a drug addict for a lot of years. I just wasn't employable. My own family couldn't trust me. So how do you expect an employer to trust you?"

"I had been out of work for a long time because of my problem. Now I am working I feel that I can give more to the job and I am pleased to be trusted."

Sources: *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners, 2002 Report by the UK Social Exclusion Unit; Including prisoners and ex-offenders in employment and society, Report of an Integra Conference, Dublin, 1999.*

Doubly marginalised...

Women prisoners are a minority of the prison population and are often serving shorter sentences on average than their male counterparts. But their numbers are steadily rising in Member States' prisons.

Most have poor educational skills and little experience of employment, which may make their resettlement in the community more difficult without adequate provision of education while in prison. Mostly single, their children may be taken into care unless they have other family members to fall back on. With no legal advice provided in prison, many do not know how to go about getting their children back.

Minority ethnic groups are disproportionately represented in prisons compared to the general population - two to three times more in the United Kingdom, where they are also likely to be serving longer sentences than the general population (*).

Also, discrimination, racism and xenophobia can be rife within prisons, both among prison officers and other prisoners, which can result in verbal and physical abuse...

V.F.

(*) *Reducing Re-offending by ex-prisoners, 2002 Report by the UK Social Exclusion Unit*



Scandalous conditions of detention...

Conditions in some prisons are "incompatible" with human dignity. Not acceptable!

Paying one's debt to society is one thing, but what reasonable person could condone detention conditions that, in some of Europe's prisons, are "incompatible with respect for human dignity", as a Council of Europe report (1) emphasises?

Loss of liberty is meant to prompt the prisoner to change before his return into society, but it is clear that prison can produce offending behaviour and result in re-offending from the type of existence it forces on prisoners. Prison is often a place where organised criminal dealing goes on, and where violence and drugs reign supreme. It is also a place of social exclusion, harbouring those who were already excluded from society.

Impenetrable justice

Fewer than 3% of prisoners in French prisons are fraudsters, con merchants or swindlers. By far most offenders are there for theft, drug dealing, violence, breach of the aliens legislation, etc... Offences that are often rooted in poverty and a lack of rights.

The very way the criminal justice system works reinforces exclusion. Faced with an impenetrable legal system using unsettling jargon, defendants are left helpless, trapped often by saying the wrong thing. And when their lawyer speaks for them, they feel dispossessed of their own trial by the (incomprehensible) dialogue carried on between their defender and the judge. By further excluding the excluded, the justice system may give the mistaken impression of helping to address the sense of insecurity, but it does not cure the ills which, within prisons, keep inmates in wretched conditions which often lead them to offend again once released.

Chronic overcrowding

Prisons right across the European Union are chronically overcrowded. Observatoire

International des Prisons (OIP - a prison watch organisation) sounds a wake-up call in its 2005 report (2) about worsening prison conditions: sexual promiscuity, atrocious hygiene, run-down buildings. "Living conditions that shame this century", it underlines.

The Council of Europe also cites ill-treatment, inadequate prison facilities, the difficulty of getting to see a lawyer or doctor when on remand. "Detention on remand should be exceptional (...) Judicial supervision and alternatives to imprisonment should be preferred to imprisonment where short penalties are imposed (...). The alternative penalties which already exist include probation, community service orders, semi-liberty and electronic tagging", points out the Council of Europe report, recommending that "access to prisons should be facilitated for associations and organisations which are able to perform an educational role for prisoners and provide them with occupational training".

A priority?

On the face of it, prisons and prisoners are not getting the attention they should have, particularly in the National Action Plans on social inclusion. They rate not even a mention in the last Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion published in January 2005.

In France, the OIP reports a nearly 30% fall in employment opportunities over the past five years, and a 10-year low in training rates. But only by investing socially in their prisons will the Member States promote rehabilitation for ex-prisoners and reduce re-offending as a result.

V.F.

(1) *Situation of European prisons and pre-trial detention centres, Council of Europe, Doc. 10097, February 2004. See:*

<http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/doc04/FDOC10097.htm>

(2) *OIP, Report 2005: Les conditions de détention en France:*

How to support (ex-)offenders: case studies

Austria: training and support for ex-offenders

An EQUAL project in Austria is offering a combination of training and support for ex-offenders. Telfi (Tele-learning for imprisoned people) operates in six prisons, although it will be offered elsewhere. Telfi courses have been offered in Information Technology, German as a foreign language and English. Woodwork, metalwork, and literacy and numeracy courses have also been planned.

E-learning technology is integral to the delivery of the courses. This allows learners to work at their own pace, and as a result engages some of those who have not been engaged by traditional teaching methods. Courses are taught in small groups of six people with support from hard copy materials, a trainer who visits the prison once a week, and prison staff who have been trained as e-learning tutors.

To learn more about Telfi, http://www.telfi.at/index_eng.html

Source: EDEF European Crime and Employment briefing, August 2005, available at: <http://www.eodef.org/>

Italy: theatre for young inmates

When Teatro Kismet started to create drama spaces within prisons in the region of Bari, the young inmates were fairly evenly drawn from three groups: young Italian offenders, offenders from North Africa and Albanian boat people, many of whom were refugees rather than criminals. There was a clearly racist dominant prison culture, with the young Italians constantly trying to be moved to adult prisons full of hardened Italian criminals.

Kismet felt their work helped make a constructive input into greater tolerance and understanding between these groups. It has now a circuit of four (male and one female) prisons to which they tour the shows created with and involving inmates. Approximately 15 performances of each are given to a maximum audience of 60, with local schools and church organisations also invited. The city of Bari now treats this work almost like an established cultural institution. The theatre compa-

ny also promotes the work of writers in prisons.

Teatro Kismet: <http://www.teatrokismet.org/>

Netherlands: Penitentiary Institute Norgerhaven

Norgerhaven is a closed prison, holding up to 250 prisoners, which operates an 'open community', in which prisoners have free movement between 7.30 am and 9.30 pm. Prisoners are responsible for following their own programmes, such as arriving for work on time, and attending education and training.

The prison operates the 'Opt for Work' scheme, to achieve effective rehabilitation following detention. A plan is drawn up between the prisoner and their coach, which includes a combination of training, education, social issues and counselling. As part of this scheme, prisoners gain vocational qualifications in areas such as catering. If they are successful, the prisoner's coach and probation officer then try to secure a work placement for the prisoner upon release.

Source: 'Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners', 2002 Report by the UK Social Exclusion Unit

UK: Revolving Doors Agency – Link Worker Scheme

The Revolving Doors Agency set up this scheme to engage and support prisoners with mental health problems and improve links with community services that prisoners need on release. It operates in four prisons, working particularly with remand prisoners and those serving short sentences. It is targeted at prisoners who fall between the responsibilities of mainstream health, housing and social care agencies. Link workers meet with clients in prison to develop a co-ordinated plan for release and then continue this support in the community. The Agency has also run a number of training sessions to help officers identify and refer prisoners with mental health problems.

More information: http://www.revolving-doors.co.uk/link_worker.asp

PRISONERS' CHILDREN

In the European Union, hundreds of thousands of children a year are suddenly separated from an imprisoned parent. They have committed no offence, yet suffer the trauma of a parent's imprisonment. But preserving a family relationship is essential to their emotional health, and the prisoner's resettlement. If links are severed for a lengthy period, the child may become used to being cared for by other adults and refuse to see the imprisoned parent, who is then doubly excluded - by society and his/her children.

"Family criminality" is not a myth: it is estimated that 30% of prisoners' children in France will one day end up in prison. Preserving family links is essential to break this vicious cycle, but it is not enough - families need help in coping, and particularly to avoid school failure and cope with the sudden loss of income.

Prisoners' families can rapidly sink into poverty as lawyer's fees, the costs of imprisonment and visiting are added to the loss of income from the prisoner. The first things to go are health care and spending on the children. And if the lone parent cannot cope and is unable to call on family members, the children may well end up in care or fostered.

V.F.



Mike Stewart,

Director of the «Centrum of the Economic & Social Inclusion»

EOEF's profile

The European Offender Employment Forum has been in existence in various forms for over twenty years now. EOEF members are concerned with offender/employment issues in each Member State of the European Union. Their purpose is to contribute to a reduction in offending by promoting the social (re-)integration of offenders through employment and training.

In pursuit of its mission, EOEF:

- Identify, exchange and promote good practice approaches;
- Influence policy makers at national and European levels to improve the level and quality of employment and training services for offenders;
- Provide an information service for the use of its members across Europe;
- Promote and facilitate transnational partnerships between organisations providing employment and training services.

Membership is encouraged from public and private sector organisations as well as NGOs. Helping ex-offenders into employment can only be successful if there are effective partnerships between agencies in the criminal justice system, employers and NGOs to deliver the services.

More information at: <http://www.eoef.org>

“All ex-offenders have the stigma of a criminal record”

Interview with Mike Stewart, Director of the Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion, on behalf of the European Offender Employment Forum (EOEF).

EAPN: What are the main obstacles that prevent ex-offenders to reintegrate society, and in particular the labour market?

Mike Stewart: The problem often starts from an early age. Many offenders have low self esteem, a record of failure at school, low levels of skills and a history of short periods of employment. On top of this they are discriminated against because they have the stigma of a criminal record. Women and people from ethnic minorities are also often doubly discriminated against.

Once people become convicted of a crime they can start on a vicious cycle of repeat offending leading to deprivation and exclusion. The more that this occurs the more difficult it is for people to convince employers that they are worth employing. When this occurs the exclusion becomes worse and so on.

Are there specific marginalised groups who face more problems than others?

It is striking that in every country ethnic minority groups are over represented in the prison population. People who repeatedly commit crimes are far more likely to experience homelessness, mental health or drug problems. The proportion of women offenders is still relatively small but the numbers have increased significantly in recent years.

What kind of rehabilitation projects in the EU are supported by EOEF?

There are many different types of offender employment projects across the EU. Some are large scale managed by Prisons or Probation Services but the majority are small scale projects set up and managed by NGOs. In general the better resourced projects are in Northern Europe whilst organisations in Southern Europe and the newer Member States struggle to find the resources to run them.

Two examples illustrate how varied offender employ-

ment projects can be. In the UK PrisonPlus 2 is the largest ESF funded project in Europe. By December this year the project will have worked with a total of 48,000 offenders in 39 prison establishments. PATIM is a Spanish drug services agency developing social businesses as a means of employing recovering drug addicts as well contributing to the local economy.

What are the main consequences of non reintegration in society?

There are serious consequences for individuals, communities and the State. For individuals the stakes are very high. Unless they can find a route into employment they face a bleak future and a high risk of spending many years in prison with a much higher risk of homelessness, drugs and mental health problems.

For communities continuing crime has a very debilitating effect - at its worst in high crime areas it threatens the fabric of society and community cohesion. For States excluded people are more likely to offend. That costs a great deal of money in terms of the damage caused and also the cost of punishing them. In some communities crime represents a major threat to social order and cohesion.

How would you analyse the role of the NAPs Inclusion in this respect?

Potentially the NAPs have a very significant role to play. However in most NAPs very little attention has been paid to tackling the social exclusion of offenders. This is changing and it has been recognised that although not all excluded groups are offenders by any means offenders figure significantly in other priority groups such as ethnic minorities, women, people with low skills and long term unemployed people for example.

In an ideal world offenders should be included in broader plans to deal with the problems experienced by these other groups. The reality is however that offenders are often excluded from services because of their offending background and so need services designed specifically for them. Some Member States' NAPs have a broader approach - others need to follow.

Interview: V. Forest

Debunking socio-economic myths

In Austria, the development of blueprints for alternative models of society is being held back by an unshakable belief in certain socio-economic myths. The Anti-Poverty Conference (EAPN Austria) has set itself the aim of laying these myths to rest and paving the way for change.

"We can't afford this kind of thing any more"

Letting social problems slide is often excused away by the need to balance the state budget. It seems to be taken as read that one of the richest countries of the world has to make savings through cuts in measures to tackle poverty. At the same time, however, income and other taxes are also going down, reducing the resources that could be used for redistribution of wealth.

The plain fact is that the organization of the tax system and national spending priorities are not a matter of natural development, but what policy-makers decide. Another traditional fallacy used to excuse welfare benefit cuts is population change. So acute are the problems created by the ageing of society, we are told, that there is no choice but to dismantle the unemployment benefit, sickness and pension systems.

But a closer look at the facts shows that there are no reliable long term forecasts. More - policymakers also skate over the fact that major population change variables can be influenced for good or bad by policy mechanisms. The big winners from the current "demographic scare" are the employers, insurers, financial institutions and political leaders, who paint a bleak picture of the future to divert our attention from their current failures.

"Whatever creates jobs is good for society!"

More economic growth means more new jobs, and more jobs create more social security, is yet another myth that was already widespread in the late 18th century. But this ignores the fact that even profitable companies are laying people off, that

employment is unfairly distributed, and that growing numbers of people are forced to work in steadily worsening conditions. Meanwhile, work is being reduced to just a source of income, while voluntary mutual aid activities and the benefits of nature itself are completely eclipsed.

Finally, alternatives that play up redistribution and reevaluation of the concept of work (like minimum wage systems, working time reduction, better childcare) are deemed immaterial and classified as unachievable.

"Those who want to earn, can!"

Current poverty research explodes the myth of a level playing field for everyone who "really wants to" make a go of it. In Austria, social condition is essentially what shapes an individual's life course. A family's income will determine what sort of education they get, for example. Children of affluent families will become affluent parents, while those from poor families will raise their own families in poverty.

To get away from individuals' futures being dictated by social circumstance, the Austrian Anti-Poverty Conference (EAPN Austria) is calling for education and training to be based not on social class but on promotion of the individual, more support from school onwards and training courses with no obstacles to access.

Focusing on social alternatives

Dispelling the economic myths will finally leave the way clear for social alternatives. The Anti-Poverty Conference's "ABC minimum guarantee" (A for combined income support/jobseeker's allowance, B for guaranteed access to social services and public goods, and C for an employment policy focused on quality jobs) encapsulates the key elements of an effective fight against poverty, and delivers a powerful message that social alternatives are possible.

Michaela Moser

Austrian representative on the EAPN Executive Committee

INTERESTING PROJECTS

Step by Step is an Equal project run by NEUSTART, an Austrian organisation that deals with problems around criminality and its consequences. The project aims to increase the chances of released prisoners to (re-)enter the labour market. Prisoners get access to special educational programmes, promoting psycho-social abilities as well as expanding qualification, plus specific labour market training while they are still imprisoned. The general aim is to better prepare them for the critical life period after the release from custody and support them in adopting to a "normal", self-responsible everyday life. Contact: klaus.priechenfried@neustart.at

Equal Pay is not yet a reality for many women in Austria. The Network of Austrian Counselling Centres for Women and Girls runs the Equal project "KLARA" that focuses on influencing the public opinion - as well as employers and public institutions - towards a more just distribution of income between women and men. Contact: ep.klara@netzwerk-frauenberatung.at

Access to financial services: People experiencing poverty and social exclusion and especially over indebted people usually have limited or no access to financial services. Adequate and responsibly handled financial services are missing in most European countries. A European project, led by the umbrella organisation of the Austrian Debt Counselling Centres aims to develop new strategies to empower people with low income to better understand the implications of financial services and affairs and to handle their finances in the best possible way. Contact: project@asb-gmbh.at

“Researchers can help NGOs get their voice heard”

Dr. Karin Heitzmann is a teaching assistant, lecturer and researcher in economic and social policy at the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration, specialising in the voluntary sector and poverty.

EAPN: What are the big social challenges right now? And what strategies/policies would best help tackle poverty and social exclusion in Europe?

Dr. Karin Heitzmann: *The big social challenges in Europe are unemployment (especially for younger and ageing workers), low pay (in-work poverty), the widening income distribution gap in many countries, persistent forms of poverty and social exclusion, and low educational levels among large parts of society.*

The most effective short-term strategies/policies are investing in education and new jobs, and ensuring minimum benefits for all citizens. In the long run, we need to invest more in education, look again at the concept of paid work (by widening the narrow concept of “job” to include new types of employment) and guarantee basic social security (“Grundsicherung”) for all citizens.

How can researchers help with this?

To start with, researchers can “produce” transparency. Poverty and social exclusion are issues that often get scant public recognition. Afterwards, researchers can analyse the existing instruments and put forward new, effective measures.

What is the role of social NGOs? How can researchers and NGOs work together?

NGOs provide important services to disadvantaged groups. In many countries, they are the first port of call for people living in poverty. They are also a lobby for people experiencing poverty and exclusion, fighting for their rights in the public

arena. But, many NGOs are advocates for their particular “constituency”, i.e., a specified subgroup of disadvantaged persons. The risk is that some groups of people experiencing poverty and exclusion are not covered by the work done by NGOs (or do not get public benefit).

Cooperation between researchers and NGOs should be based on mutual understanding and openness. Researchers must be ready to take the pulse of the real world problems flagged up by the NGO experts, while NGOs should not see scientific analysis as sterile “ivory tower” thinking. My personal experience as a researcher in Austria has taught me the value of being informed by the thinking and knowledge of voluntary organisation experts, not least EAPN Austria. They know the social problems, and researchers can help them get their voice heard by backing up NGOs’ experiences with facts and figures. It is also important to involve people experiencing poverty in policy making processes, because they know best what their needs are.



What are your expectations from the Austrian Presidency?

I am not holding out too many hopes from the Austrian Presidency for improvements in tackling poverty and social exclusion. History tells us that a strong Commission President (like Jacques Delors in the 1980s and 1990s), and a strong European Parliament, can do more to develop the Union’s social dimension than the short-term presidencies of Member States.

How do you feel about moderating the 5th European meeting of people experiencing poverty?

I am honoured to be invited to chair the meeting. It will give me the opportunity to get close to people and problems, and that will help me stay in touch with the “real world” and the here-and-now challenges expressed by people in poverty themselves.

Interview: M. Moser

Anyone deprived of liberty must be treated with respect and dignity

N° 116
Jan - Feb 2006

printed in English and French
and also available in other languages
at www.eapn.org

Editor
F. Farrell

Responsible for publication
V. Forest

Rue du Congrès 37-41 Box 2
B-1000 Brussels
tel. 32 2 230 44 55
fax 32 2 230 97 33
E-mail: team@eapn.skynet.be
Internet: <http://www.eapn.org>

Contributors
C. Flémal

Bureau de dépôt
1600 Sint Pieters Leeuw 1

Network News aims to generate debates on specific themes. The views expressed are not necessarily those of EAPN. If you want to comment on the content of this issue, send an email to team@eapn.skynet.be



With the support
of the European Commission

Surf to us at...

WWW.eapn.org

EAPN | N°116 | 2006

8