



12 February 2007

To: EU Ministers of Employment and Social Affairs

Refer: EPSCO Council February 2007: Time to step up a gear in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

Dear Minister

For the last 16 years, EAPN has been campaigning for a Social Europe, based on fundamental rights and the shared values of solidarity, equality and participation, capable of eradicating poverty and social exclusion and delivering social justice for all. To this end, EAPN members in the national networks and European Organisations have actively engaged in the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion, now subsumed within the Streamlined Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion, and in the revised Lisbon process, as well as monitoring the role of Structural Funds in promoting social inclusion.

EAPN members engaged enthusiastically in these processes believing that they were an expression of political commitment at the highest EU level to develop policies and actions in cooperation with all relevant actors, aimed at making a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty within the EU and the achievement of greater social cohesion. However, the reality, 6 years after the introduction of the Lisbon Strategy as viewed by EAPN members, is that **the level and intensity of poverty and inequality has increased in most countries, rights-based approaches are under pressure and confidence is declining in the ability of our political institutions to redistribute the wealth created by growth in order to safeguard social cohesion.** It is difficult to have hard statistical evidence to back up this view but what evidence does exist in terms of EUROSTAT, national statistics, numbers of working poor, or in the numbers of people accessing food banks or minimum income schemes, tends to confirm these views. It is also the case that the difficulties in gaining widespread acceptance for the Constitutional Treaty is in part connected to the perception that the EU is not contributing to safeguarding high levels of social standards.

"We are tired to talk and to see no results. The political world must engage itself. We want to see progress, we want results and concrete actions. We want to know what the EU does to solve poverty. The effort to come here is enormous for us. We take risks and want thus to be taken seriously by the politicians"

Participant 5th European Meeting of People living in poverty 2006

However, EAPN members are also convinced that this reality is not a reason to abandon the existing processes, but rather that it is **time to step up a gear in the fight against poverty** by putting it at the heart of the strategies. Only then will the words in the conclusions of the 2006 Spring Council that "*the Lisbon Strategy is at the service of social cohesion*" be seen to have real meaning. The basic needs for a good life for all are well documented in the report of the 5th European Meeting of People experiencing poverty and the proposals below draw conclusions from this meeting. EAPN calls on the EPSCO Council to give serious consideration to adopting the following conclusions:

- To acknowledge that **the level of poverty and social exclusion in EU Member States, including child poverty, is unacceptable** and that in order to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty efforts need to be reinforced at all levels, adopting a multi-dimensional approach based on fundamental rights which tackles the structural causes of poverty.
- To acknowledge that **effective and adequate minimum income schemes** are essential for human dignity and the development and maintenance of such schemes is vital for the fight against poverty.
- To recognise that the universal provision of **affordable and accessible services of general interest**, including access to decent housing and high quality social services, is key to tackling poverty and for maintaining a strong sense of social cohesion.
- To recognise that **positive activation approaches** which are designed in cooperation with the people for whom they are intended, offer the best possibility to ensure holistic approaches to integration and insertion, involving pathway approaches and pro-active measures to tackle discrimination.
- To recognise that **social economy and social enterprises** offer an important means for addressing social inclusion and for creating jobs, in particular for people who experience disadvantage in the labour market. Support for the promotion and development of the social economy, in particular within the future structural funds programmes, should be guaranteed.
- To recognise that **strong anti discrimination legislation** which is rigorously enforced and guarantees the right to work and equal access to services for all is essential in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. Particular attention needs to be given to the needs of asylum seekers, to migrants (including undocumented migrants) and to ethnic minorities (including Roma and Travellers) and to responding to the gender dimensions of poverty.
- To acknowledge that **stronger institutional mechanisms are needed at national and EU level**, including revisions to the internal Road Map and the revision of the Integrated Guidelines, in order to ensure that the Lisbon strategy contributes to social inclusion and the eradication of poverty (in other words to ensure that the so called 'feeding out' from Lisbon to the OMC on Social Protection and Social Inclusion, becomes a reality).

EAPN hopes that such conclusions will inform the **messages from the EPSCO council** for the Spring Council and will also be reflected in the final version of the **2007 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion**. EAPN also expects these conclusions to be actively pursued in the follow up and implementation of the **National Action Plans on Social Inclusion**, and in the debate and actions relating to **'Active Inclusion'** and **'Flexicurity'**. The follow up to the commitment made in the Social Agenda (2006 – 2010) that *"the European Social Fund will provide support for the Member States' policies to implement the guidelines and recommendations adopted under the European Employment Strategy (EES) and the objectives approved by the EU in the area of social inclusion"* will also be essential for making progress.

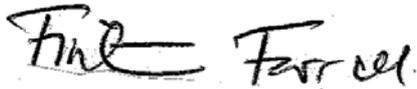
From the exchange between EAPN members, it is clear that there is a **wide variation across the Member States in the degree to which there is a serious effort to invest in active stakeholder involvement in order to create a truly Open Method of Coordination**. Given that this is the key method agreed by Heads of State and Government to promote the commitment to fight poverty and to achieve greater social cohesion, **the lack of visibility** for this process in most Member States represents a missed opportunity to bring the EU closer to the citizens. While there is some evidence that the impact of the 'streamlined' approach has succeeded in making social issues more visible in key EU level documents, the risk remains that this will lead to a **'reporting'** rather than a **"common active planning and implementation process"** across all Member States. While a 'name and shame' approach has been deemed to be unhelpful, the future Joint Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion must report more clearly on the extent to which Member States have sought to engage all relevant actors in the process, creating links to the local or regional level as appropriate, and linking the process to National Policy priorities and actions.

In order to keep the fight against poverty visible in the OMC process, **distinct National Action Plans for Inclusion must remain a key part of the OMC**. Approaches which **'empower'** people living in poverty to collectively engage in the development, implementation and evaluation of these National Action Plans must remain a central objective. In order to enhance the effectiveness of the National Action Plans and to build common understanding and approaches in the fight against poverty in an EU of 27 Member States, consideration should be given to the **introduction of an EU Poverty Programme** that would complement and reinforce the OMC.

EAPN follows carefully the discussions about the **'Constitutional Treaty'**. In principle EAPN welcomes the proposal to add a social protocol to the Treaty but we await to see the content of such a proposal. In any case, the addition of a social protocol should not be at the expense of improvements already gained in relation to social clauses included in the **'Constitutional Treaty'** including in part 3 of the document. **EAPN calls on the Social Affairs ministers to ensure that the advances made in relation to social clauses in the 'Constitutional Treaty' are safe guarded and strengthened** in the process of finding a way forward in relation to the Constitutional Treaty.

We hope that you will give due consideration to these views, and we await the outcome of your deliberations.

Yours faithfully,



Fintan Farrell
Director

Cc:

Commissioner Spidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities
Mr Jan Andersson, President of the Employment and Social Affairs Committee in the European Parliament
Ms Elise Willame, President of the Social Protection Committee
Mr Emilio Gabaglio, President of the Employment Committee

The following recent EAPN reports concerned with the Lisbon Strategy and the OMC on Social Protection and Social Inclusion can be downloaded from our website in English and French at: www.eapn.org:

- 1) [The 2006-8 National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion "What do they deliver for people in poverty"](#)
- 2) [Making Lisbon deliver for people experiencing poverty: the EAPN response to the 2006 Implementation Reports on the National Reform Programs.](#)
- 3) [EAPN response to the Annual Progress Report and to the draft Joint Employment Report](#)

Also available on the web site in 12 languages is the report of [the 5th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty.](#)