

## **EAPN Conference**

### **Is Europe 2020 Delivering on Poverty?**

Brussels, 28 September 2012

João SEABRA's Speech

Good morning everyone.

First of all, I would like to thank EAPN for the invitation to attend this conference and the opportunity to address all the participants.

However, I would like to say that I would rather not be here. It would mean that poverty no longer existed and that policy measures had successfully met their target: the eradication of poverty. Unfortunately, that is not the case! I'm here today to tell you just the opposite: not only there aren't policies to combat poverty but measures to combat the economic crises have not done more than increasing the insecurity, the precariousness of most citizens and therefore increased poverty. Even worse, it seems to me that the European Union and its leaders see all of what's happening in a passive and quiet manner, stubbornly insisting on the same "recipes": not listening and ignoring the voice of those who are experiencing poverty in their daily lives.

My country - Portugal - is an example of this. The austerity measures negotiated with the Troika (the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank) instead of rescuing the country and its citizens from an extremely difficult economic situation - for which surely contributed citizens not living in poverty - lead us all to an ever greater uncertainty and vulnerability. Poverty has increased and now affects new social groups. People who lived in poverty before the crisis are now more exposed. Who was vulnerable (and this means a considerable part of the Portuguese population) lives in an imminent risk of poverty. Unemployment affects everyone and everything. The social emergency government measures, besides not doing more than assisting those in worse situations are a "blanket" which is becoming shorter day after day, covering fewer people. Social organizations are facing major difficulties to answer all requests, being too many of them at risk of economic collapse.

Myself, at the end of this month, I will be unemployed since the Municipality for which I work as an intercultural mediator is facing an alarming financial reality, having to make choices that do not include this kind of social intervention - a luxury in the current times. In

these circumstances I will quickly be join the group of people who fell in a total deprivation of financial resources that prevent them to meet the basic needs and that are excluded from essential goods and services such as food, housing and health. I'm talking to you of **hunger** and **severe poverty**. Death is already for some people the **only** solution. And to confirm this, there is for example the huge increase in suicide figures, in Portugal (although official statistics are not showing this tragedy).

The “medication” that is being given to us is killing the “patients”. Everyone realizes this. What no one realizes is how governments continue to pretend that this is the best solution. Even worse: **the only solution!** Social cohesion is increasingly at risk and the European Union is fading, opening space for divisions and accusations between countries and citizens that undermine its main founding purpose: **peace**.

I have no fear or doubt in saying that what is at stake is democracy itself. And when democracy is concerned, Europe should have learned with the past what can happen...

That is why, as Portuguese, Roma and European citizen I would like to call on the following:

- Better governance is urgently needed. The governments elected by the people, at the most different levels (local, national and European) have to realize that democracy does not end on the Election Day. It's absolutely crucial - particularly in a time like the one we are living in - to restore the dialogue, to find a mobilizing consensus with all parties and, above all, who was given the power to govern us, gives clear signs of a true commitment to fight poverty. Economic growth will not happen without this kind of consensus and even less with the impoverished populations, massively experiencing poverty and extreme privation.

- This better governance cannot ignore the voice of the most disadvantaged and of those who, precisely, have more to say about poverty and the solutions to tackle it. It is quite regrettable that the policies and strategies continue to be designed and implemented without the participation of key stakeholders.

- From the most pragmatic and short-term point of view, it is essential that the European Union gives a clear sign of strategic commitment in fighting poverty. That is why we call for the campaign promoted by EAPN which claims that at least 20% of the European Social Fund is allocated to social inclusion measures and to the fight against poverty. It is the minimum sign that the heads of governments and prime-ministers of the different Members States should give so their democratic credibility and legitimacy will not be fully in question.

- Finally, because I'm Portuguese but I'm also Roma, which means that I'm a member of a group that faces the most severe poverty situations in the European Union and that has worsened in recent years, I would like to take this opportunity to make an appeal in order

that the National Strategies for the Social Inclusion of Roma Communities are effectively implemented, investing on a stronger involvement of these communities, including in the evaluation and monitoring process.

We know that the challenges are too many and the timing is particularly tough. But it is equally important to realize **why** and **how** we got here. Who is responsible for this “chaos” and why; in a moment of severe austerity, the rich are getting richer and the poor getting poorer. In this context, beyond my previous calls, I would like to end with a question – which seems to me essential in this meeting: who is gaining with the austerity, after all?

Thank you.