

# Social Convergence in the EU

A strategic dialogue meeting with People experiencing Poverty

14<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> November 2015

## *People experiencing poverty claiming a space to participate in the making and shaping the European pillar of social rights*

The 14<sup>th</sup> European Meeting of People experiencing Poverty (PeP) was organised in Brussels on 19 to 20 November 2015, by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) with support from the European Commission, the EAPN Fund and the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The 2015 meeting aimed at creating a space for delegations of people experiencing poverty from 30 countries to bring forward their input on policies to foster social convergence in Europe and thus create the opportunity for them to become makers and shapers of policies that affect their wellbeing. For more information see the webpage [www.voicesofpoverty-eu.net](http://www.voicesofpoverty-eu.net)

The testimonies of different participants to the meeting emphasized that three things are essential for alleviating poverty in Europe in the current economic and political context: **solidarity** towards people experiencing poverty, creating spaces for **participation** of people experiencing poverty to contribute their views and knowledge and **working together**.



*"I have lived in the street for 7 years, during which I appreciated getting help from people. They helped me find a new sense of life and I decide to take action and get involved in helping people... I really appreciate being here at this Meeting and listen to so many experiences form so many countries. I ask all of you to sit down at one table all together, because that is how we will fight together poverty. The sooner we start, the easier we will find solutions" **Evzen Vojkuvka, member of the Czech delegation***

Despite the harsh realities of their everyday lives, people experiencing poverty came together to support each other and to bring forward their ideas of what is needed to have a Europe closer to citizens. They stressed that in order to reduce the gap between Europe and its citizens, reports and technical exercises that often exclude people themselves are not enough, citizens have to be able to create and take up

spaces where they can engage in discussions on finding and implementing solutions to key issues that affect their lives. The areas in which people experiencing poverty would like to see significant social change achieved are **access to health and other essential services, access to decent work, adequate and accessible social protection and social assistance, affordable quality housing, and the right to be part of a meaningful context and being part of a community.**

# Key Proposal

#2015PEP

At the end of the two insightful and enriching days, people experiencing poverty put forward their own collective proposal for the structure of a social rights pillar:



- 1) Decent Life
- 2) Work-Life Balance
- 3) Work, Social Protection and Services (Housing)
- 4) Dignity and Skills
- 5) Social Rights
- 6) European Values

- 1) **European Values** – at the basis of the social rights pillar should be a set of European values having at their centre people and their wellbeing and not markets and profit. Solidarity is an important value and it implies collective action to tackle a shared problem. Increasing inequalities, the dominance of competitive ideology and divisive political discourses discourage solidarity towards people experiencing poverty. Therefore solidarity can only be strengthened by efforts to reduce inequalities, and by fostering participation at different levels that build habits of shared responsibility and mutual support.
- 2) **Social rights** – People experiencing poverty and marginalisation have the right to value and express their own identity as citizens and create spaces to express their opinions. Participation is a social right that people experiencing poverty should use to shape social policies not only as beneficiaries or consumers in pre-determined programmes but as citizens exercising rights to have a voice and to participate. Ensuring universal access to important social rights such as decent work, education, housing and healthcare is crucial in the fight against poverty and obtaining social justice.

- 3) **Dignity and skills** – People experiencing poverty should be seen as equal members of society who have the right to enjoy a dignified life. They want society and governments to acknowledge that poverty is a systemic problem and not a personal choice or responsibility. Their experience and knowledge of poverty should be valued and used in creating social policies to prevent and fight poverty. People who are in poverty or who manage to overcome exclusion or poverty often dedicate their energy and resources to support other people experiencing poverty by getting engaged in specific projects or doing advocacy work and their work should become more visible. Therefore through different groups, organisations and platforms, they want to become more visible and have long term stable dialogue with the political institutions in the work on preventing and fighting poverty. Adequate funding should be made available for this work.
- 4) **Work, Social Protection and Services** - Respect and implement the integrated approach that focuses on improving access to jobs, creating good social protection measures and provides access to essential services such as housing, healthcare and education.

Inclusive labour market giving access to decent jobs is essential to reduce poverty. Personal supports and structured interventions in areas and communities with large scale unemployment are needed to address the disadvantages they experience.

It is important to develop a solid package of social protection measures that are accessible throughout the whole life cycle. The importance of developing good quality adequate minimum income schemes was stressed: “people living on them should be able to live and not merely survive”.

Last but not least, enabling universal access to services such as housing, social and healthcare services, education and services such as public transport and energy supplies is essential. Increasing difficulties to access housing were highlighted by the participants at the meeting.

- 5) **Work-Life Balance** - Access to jobs is not enough, decent jobs should be created that allow all people and especially people at risk of poverty strike a balance between working life and private life. Increased conditionality around access to benefits and compulsory poor quality ‘community work schemes’ are the opposite of what is needed. People at risk of poverty should not feel trapped to accept or stay in jobs that put further pressure on their physical and mental well-being.
- 6) **Decent life** - The goal of all efforts must be to ensure that everybody has access to a decent life. We need to see evidence that this as the main goal of National Governments and it should be clear that their cooperation is aimed at building a social European Union.

