



# CEIF

Central European Interfaith Forum

## POVERTY AND INCOME INEQUALITY

Poverty and income inequality featured among the key topics at the Central European Interfaith Forum (CEIF 2016), which hosted more than 150 participants representing 20 nations, 3 continents, 7 world religions as well as other religious, spiritual or humanist traditions. The gathering took place in Nitra, Slovakia, on 25 July 2016. The alarming trends of nationalism, extremism and xenophobia in our societies, as well as the world's complex economic, social and political issues, require dialogue between the spiritual individuals, communities, authorities, and the guiding institutions of this world.

In order to thoroughly discuss the topic of poverty and to network the concerned individuals and institutions, the Forum featured a main panel entitled "Inner Roots of Poverty", a round table on poverty, a lively NGO Forum, as well as an Interfaith Meeting in Prayer and Thought which frequently referenced the issues of poverty and inequality.

In the Nitra Statement, the essential policy outcome of the conference, poverty is highlighted both directly and indirectly. In these darkening times, reads the Statement, dialogue is essential. True dialogue, however, must be conducted out of respect for the other. True dialogue must also be underpinned by knowledge. "Live and let live" is no longer sufficient in a Europe overwhelmed by migration and other challenges. Solidarity in action must be based on the principle "live and help live". The Nitra Statement can be accessed here: [ow.ly/31be303ha30](http://ow.ly/31be303ha30).

The discussion panel on "**Inner Roots of Poverty**" featured Professor **Vladimír Krčméry**, Rector of St Elizabeth University of Health and Social Sciences and Manager of RESOTY Re-socialization Community of Anton Srholec, **Jo Bothmer**, Co-founder of the European Anti-Poverty Network, **Anna Záborská**, Member of European Parliament, and **Federico Reho**, Researcher of the Martens Centre. Moderated by **Tomáš Horváth**, civic activist and teacher with Teach for Slovakia, the panel also featured contributions from leading members of the Slovak Anti-Poverty Network, **Slavomíra Mareková** and **Peter Seman**.

Panelists agreed that limited access to food, housing, justice and education are the key indicators of poverty, but poverty has many dimensions. Poverty is a moral problem perceived as such by all religions. Many Europeans have difficulty sympathising with refugees because they suffer their own "working poverty": they remain poor even though they work. Thus it is no less acute to pay the same attention to poor people living in our own countries and enter the battle to improve the quality of their lives.

The panel also agreed that growth, sustainability, and wisdom are necessary prerequisites for a successful solution to the problem of poverty. While combating poverty at the national level can have positive effects when policymakers work efficiently, the effort often becomes wasted in nations with high rates of corruption or rigid bureaucracies. In such situations, the engagement of individuals and local communities in helping the poor becomes irreplaceable, and undoubtedly, profoundly human.

Professor Krčméry shared his experience from a refugee camp where Slovak physicians work in an environment of absolute poverty. Rather than talking about our success, he pointed at our failures but noticed that a positive side of poverty is solidarity. Some people think that poverty is something that the poor deserve for their deeds or passivity; more appropriate, however, would be a reference to the Gospel story of a blind young man, who was born blind “in order that the deeds of God are demonstrated in him”.

Jo Bothmer, an experienced anti-poverty activist, claimed that poverty exists as a result of political and economic decisions. The lack of sufficient income affects children and closes their future. The ambition must be to have less people living in poverty. The key question, for him, is how to make poverty visible and how to engage in combating it. There are tens of thousands of international organizations: fighting poverty is like navigating a ministry, featuring fights between different groups and their strategies for eradicating poverty. Growth, sustainability, and wisdom are necessary prerequisites for a successful solution of the problem. The public needs to be shown a different picture of the poor man. The world is full of despair; often we need several tries to be successful in life. We need to create a platform where the poor can speak about their ideas, proposals, projects, and participate in the decision-making process. This would bring hope to the people on the edge in order for them to become full members of the society, self-confident citizens.

Anna Záborská presented a politician’s point of view. It is necessary to make a distinction between absolute and relative poverty. Limited access to food, justice and education are the key indicators of poverty. External poverty is a state of limited human rights and dignity. The Lisbon Strategy, with its Strategy 2020, planned to make the EU the most developed part of the world by 2010. Contrary to political planning, the year 2010 was proclaimed the Year of Poverty. Ethical approaches are best implemented at the individual level where real mercy can be shown. As a Catholic, Mrs Záborská expects God’s judgment over every individual including herself.

Federico Reho thinks that charity, solidarity and subsidiarity form a vital part of the solution to the many pockets of poverty that exist within Europe. At the national level, the welfare state model has demonstrated some partial positive effects but often becomes an instrument for scoring political points. Indeed, countries without social welfare have a better developed sense of Christian charity, where individuals are more involved. Systematic approaches to solving poverty become ineffective in countries with high levels of corruption and where international aid disappears in the pockets of local officials.

Peter Seman, sharing his experience of working with poor communities including the Roma, warned against being “too international” and forgetting our own people in need. In Eastern Slovakia regular citizens live in much worse conditions than asylum seekers in today’s refugee camps. He described the phenomenon of “working poverty”, where 60% of people do not reach 50% of the average national income and cannot provide their living. It is really hard to persuade such people to solidarize with refugees. The spiritual level of human existence is one thing, Mr Seman said, but it cannot be separated it from the physical or financial needs: we have to solve our domestic problems first and only then help foreigners.

Slavomíra Mareková underlined the principle that if each member of a human society can develop, the whole society develops as a result. The crucial questions are: “Where do I belong in this social system? Who am I? How to secure my basic rights?” There are people in Slovak society with uncertain status, e.g. informal nurses who care for their handicapped family members but cannot be employed. While playing an important role in society, informal nurses

suffer from low income and low social status despite the fact that the European Charter and other documents protect their rights.

In the Q&A, the problem of graft in the distribution of humanitarian aid was highlighted, resulting in nations (or their leaders) becoming dependent on international assistance. Mr Reho replied that there are pockets of poverty where good Christians are actively giving money and efficiently helping the poor. In a broader point, Maureen Goodman added that it is usually human greed that enables poverty to be real. We need to change the paradigm, human thinking, otherwise our “solutions” will only amount to sticking plasters on the problem.

Summing up the discussion, the moderator Tomáš Horváth underlined that poverty is often a consequence of political decisions. Absolute and relative poverty must be distinguished. He shared his experience from Markušovce, a village in Slovakia’s East, where he teaches and experiences the existential principles: goodness, beauty and truth. He concluded by referencing Pope Francis: “It is good to see how kids can grow in knowledge amid all the poverty that surrounds them. This is where my dream comes true.”

The **Round Table** of the Slovak Anti-Poverty Network focused on preparations for the 15th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty 2016 (Brussels, 15-16 November 2016). Participants discussed the project Poverty and Health which would be presented as a Slovak theme at the upcoming PeP Meeting 2016.