

# **REPORT**

## **Social Convergence in the EU**

### **A strategic dialogue meeting with People Experiencing Poverty**

**19-20 November 2015**

**Les Ateliers des Tanneurs, Brussels**

December 2015

**Aim and objectives of the meeting:** The 2015 meeting was seen as an important consultation with people experiencing poverty to gather their input on policies to foster social convergence in Europe and to strengthen the participation of people experiencing poverty in policies that affect them. It is expected that the outcomes of this Year's meeting will feed into the Annual Convention that is likely to take place early 2016.

In addition to this consultation, it is also envisaged that this year's meeting will provide a more open space for the delegations of people experiencing poverty to share their stories on how they experience poverty, what they do to combat it and what support they expect from authorities. The aim behind this session is to acknowledge and give validation for the expertise and work that people experiencing poverty contribute to achieve social inclusion. It aims to create a space for mutual exchange and learning and to develop solidarity between people and communities experiencing diverse forms of poverty within Europe. For more information see the webpage [www.voicesofpoverty-eu.net](http://www.voicesofpoverty-eu.net)

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This report was drafted by Mihael Topolovec and finalised with the help of Fintan Farrell, Coordinator of the meeting.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background to the European Meetings

The European Meetings of People experiencing Poverty have played an important role in driving the development of the direct participation of people experiencing poverty. The European meeting also supports national processes and national meetings of people experiencing poverty. The European Meetings have been well documented and positively evaluated for their impact on the delegates and the guests who attend (see [www.eapn.eu](http://www.eapn.eu)).

The first of these meetings was organised by the Belgian Government in 2001 as part of the EU inclusion process launched by the Lisbon European Council (March 2000). The meetings continue to contribute to key EU processes including the follow up of the poverty target of the Europe 2020 strategy and have helped to keep poverty and social exclusion visible in the European agenda. They have contributed to some key areas of policy development such as adequacy of minimum income, child poverty, housing and homelessness, indebtedness, the links between discrimination and poverty (particularly the realities for Roma community), and the impact of liberalization on public services. The meetings help to put faces to the realities behind the numbers of people experiencing poverty, including the different realities for women and men throughout the life cycle. In addition the meetings have provided a 'barometer' in relation to social and economic developments in Europe.

### General Objectives of the European Meetings

- To empower people experiencing poverty and their organisations and communities.
- To strengthen the participation of people experiencing poverty in relevant policy making processes at local, national and EU levels.
- To facilitate exchange and learning and to stimulate further exchanges and joint projects.
- To identify similarities and differences in different countries and to check the reality of measures to fight poverty against the experience on the ground and to adjust their policies and actions as necessary

## 1 OPENING PLENARY and POSTER SESSION

### 1.1 Welcoming Words from Fintan Farrell

**Fintan Farrell**, Acting Director of the European Anti-Poverty Network and the project coordinator for the Strategic Dialogue Meeting with People experiencing Poverty, expressed welcoming words to the delegates of the meeting and to all the guests present. He opened the meeting with thoughts of reflection on the current most pressing issue in Europe: *“Today we’re Europe on the move. As asylum seekers and refugees struggle to enter a hostile Europe in an effort to find shelter and the possibilities of a better future. They join with millions of existing people living in Europe who experience poverty and social exclusion. That’s the Europe we’re living in and that’s the Europe we want to change”*. He continued by linking this reflection with outlining the main topic and methodological structure of the meeting. The focus of the 2015 Strategic Dialogue Meeting with People experiencing Poverty is the new policy initiative that is currently being developed by the European Commission and that is being referred to with expressions such as ‘Social Convergence’ and ‘Social Pillar’. The main objective of the meeting is to offer a common space to people experiencing poverty and to their organisations for sharing personal experiences, for conveying their messages to the stakeholders on the ‘Social Convergence’ initiative announced by the European Commission. Delegates’ give their views on which policy areas should be included in the so called ‘Social Pillar’ for Europe and, more generally, on how the Social Europe of tomorrow should look like.

Fintan Farrell continued by giving the floor to **Jetta Klijnsma**, State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment at Dutch Ministry for Social Affairs and Employment. Jetta Klijnsma greeted the audience by stressing the commitments of the upcoming Dutch Presidency of the Council of the EU to the actions aiming to eradicate poverty and social exclusion.

The Opening Plenary concluded with the screening of the [short video](#) prepared by the Dutch Delegation (group of delegates coming from Netherlands). The video featured personal storytelling by a Erik Slagter who, after experiencing poverty and addiction-issues, found empowering support at the organization Ommen samen Sterk.

### 1.2 Poster session

The national delegations had an opportunity to present their activities and/or national realities through visual material (pictures). Through this session delegates could get to know each other and could begin with exchange of experiences and knowledge.

## 2 EXCHANGES of EXPERIENCES BETWEEN DELEGATIONS

The aim of this session was to stimulate discussion and experience-sharing on the issue of poverty and social exclusion among delegates from different European countries and anti-poverty organisations. The participants were reflecting on their *personal experiences* of individual and/or collective poverty in their countries, they were giving explanations *how organisations from their countries, in which they are active, are working to bring forward positive change*, and they were asked to give *recommendations on how national and EU authorities should help to reduce poverty and social exclusion across Europe*. In connection to the given recommendations the delegates were also reflecting on the question of *ways to build solidarity between countries and between different groups experiencing poverty*. From exchange of knowledge based on lived experiences, delegates identified a list of key messages/issues/recommendations on the initiative for social convergence in the EU. The outcomes of the workshops were presented to and discussed with representatives of the EU institutions, political authorities, NGOs and other social actors at the following session.

### 2.1 RED WORKSHOP

**Facilitator: Sonja Leemkuil**

**Note-taker: Mihael Topolovec**

**Delegations: Bulgaria, Serbia, Poland, Greece, Estonia, Denmark, Netherlands**

#### 2.1.1 Delegations' Presentations and Reflections on Experiences and Building Solidarity

##### **Greek Delegation:**

The Greek delegation pointed out the following issues that are occurring in Greece: Issue of housing (e.g. big numbers of people that have debts because of the housing or are in danger of being evicted), education (too many young people with high education but with no possibility to find a job), lack of access to health-care services (with refugees' crisis more pressure is on civil society organisations providing necessary services).

They stressed that change can happen through participation (participation of NGOs, members of EAPN) at national Ministries, by collecting data, and, most importantly through three ways of action - intervention, prevention, advocacy. It is also important to give visibility through public media (to tackle the negative labelling and shame that many people experiencing poverty experience), and to combine local and national level intervention.

*"Solidarity begins with the acknowledgment of the fact that the problems are same for all"*

Key path to change is information sharing and networking.

*"When people are informed then they are not so afraid and become more proactive than reactive"*

**Danish Delegation:**

After the change of the government there was a reform of social benefits which risks creating new groups of people experiencing poverty in Denmark.

A 26 years old participant, who is facing issues related to homelessness, stressed that in Denmark there is a problem of laws on homelessness. There are different laws impacting on homeless people and they are not in line with each other - e.g. according to Social Security law when a homeless person moves from one region to another, the hosting region (municipality) returns the homeless person back to his/her home region, which is a big problem for young homeless person who would like to get out of poverty or solve his/her housing situation by changing the living environment. The problem is also that the rents in the cities are getting higher and living in shelters only deepens social problems.

*“If you don't have addiction before entering the shelter, you for sure come out with one”.*

Change can be achieved through work on the political level in the field of affordable housing and greater social security.

Another young delegate shared his experience with local social services that didn't provide him with the information regarding the amount of money he is entitled to under the new social security law. He filled a complaint on the national level together with the organisation he is part of as a young person facing homelessness. Therefore having the right information is the key.

It's important to share the experiences of people experiencing poverty (sharing personal stories) and country situations.

*“Youth are very resourceful people, they are creative, loving. Sometimes it is enough to have someone to go with you to the social services' office, to have the solidarity. We need to show people that we are resourceful people, strong, intelligent. Instead of telling people what they do wrong, we should tell them what they do right”*

**Estonian Delegation:**

Food banks are important in helping people experiencing poverty in Estonia. There was a problem with government aid to the food banks – food planned for food banks was not always reaching the intended beneficiaries. The solution can be the adoption of the national legislation that would regulate donations to the food banks.

The problem is also that the low level of social welfare makes different socially disadvantaged groups compete among themselves for social benefits.

**Bulgarian Delegation:**

The problem is not only the income poverty but lack of access to services and lack of efficiency of the financial and economic institutions.

The quality of public policies should improve (in connection to taxes, public spending etc), capacities of local NGOs should be strengthened (as they are often remaining the main



provider of services for disadvantaged people), government should enable people to participate (more democracy), social impact of laws should be assessed.

The first step towards change is eradicating wealth inequalities through redistribution and the second to make institutions more democratic

### **Polish Delegation:**

They asked the beneficiaries of their organisation how they are experiencing poverty and the common answer was connected to abuse, social exclusion, homelessness, lack of security, the lack of political involvement:

*“They are accused to be poor and they are left alone”*

*“Poverty it's no one's fault, it's a common responsibility”*

They explained what they do as an organisation: Organising the time of beneficiaries through different activities, providing them with shelter, helping them finding an internship, psychological counselling etc.

The path towards change should come first through engagement on the local level.

### **Serbian Delegation**

The delegate working on the issues of Roma population in Serbia (especially Roma girls and women) pointed out that it is important to empower young Roma girls to stay in school and to empower them and their families to reduce force marriage - there should be more political will in recognizing this problem.

Two delegates were from refugee population in Serbia (refugees and internally displaced people in time of civil war in mid-90s in Yugoslavia). They identified that one of the key issues in Serbia is the issue of property rights in countries of origin belonging to displaced people from civil war - this issue should be addressed by the EU. Nowadays Serbia is one of the transit countries for refugees coming from Middle East and experiences from Yugoslav civil wars in the 90s can be used as module in facing current refugees' crisis. The emphasis should be put on providing housing solutions through adequate funding.

*“What is needed is a political will to address homelessness”*

*“Poverty is a political issue and a global problem”*

### **Dutch Delegation**

The quote of one participant:

*“Life of poverty is a life in which one can't defend him or herself. It takes away chances you want to make in life /.../ If someone gives you help, you need to show gratefulness /.../ It makes you feel guilty /.../ Your contribution to the society is only measured through financial perspective /.../ If you want to find way out of poverty, you need to be creative /.../ In this way you're always surviving without having a life on your own /.../ To find a way out needs to start with finding again your lost self-confidence”.*

The Dutch Council for Social Services needs to be faced with the question: 'How do they think they are perceived by people if they are treating them as a lost cause?'

The positive changes in the social field in Denmark: government (social workers) will be visiting people at their homes; people don't have to report financial income every year but it goes automatically through registration; the "participation law" (if you get money from social services you need to do community work in return) can be seen as an opportunity for self-growth, development.

Needed change: housing rents should be adapted to the individual income (personalized approach to housing), and accessibility to public health services and education should be improved.

The outcomes of these meetings need to be integrated in the policy-making process on national and EU level.

## 2.2 ORANGE WORKSHOP

**Facilitator: Amana Fero**

**Note taker: Marja Hermans**

**Delegations: Slovakia, Norway, Iceland, Lithuania, United Kingdom, Luxembourg.**

### 2.2.1 Delegations' Presentations

#### **United Kingdom (Scotland)**

Poverty in Scotland is shown through the need for food banks and through the increase in number of parents who do not have the necessary resources to raise their children.

We are all volunteers who are working in communities, with homeless people, with families. We work with small groups, and teach the people the necessary skills so that they can function on their own in society. People can always come back to us, even after they do not need our support for a while.

I work with families because there is a lot of poverty in Scotland. We try to care for the children because the government no longer provides childcare. Childcare is a major issue in Scotland. We have several governments, the UK government is not seen to be doing anything, but we are hopeful that the Scottish government is taking action. There is change but there is still no clear agenda.

#### **Iceland:**

Iceland is a rich country. I think the government thinks there is no poverty. My experience is that poverty is not accepted as a social problem. We live in a 'glass house', where there is a

large poverty community but the community is pretty closed. We hope that our contribution can make the poverty problem visible.

I am the child of a disabled parent. I have no education. Without education life is difficult. It's difficult if you are a single mother. You start to flirt with the idea to commit suicide - not that I would want to do it, but sometimes I think it would be a solution. I have nothing, only deficits. But I hope and believe that things can change quickly. I'm sick and I know I do not always have the necessary energy to fight but I go wherever I can speak. We want to open the eyes of the government and make sure they see us. We want to show that we have no opportunities.

*"People ask me if I'm ashamed that I am poor - I'm not. But my government should be ashamed that I am poor"*

#### **Lithuania:**

In Lithuania there is a lot of poverty. 30% live below the poverty line. If you earn less than 200 Euro/month you are under the limit.

Our organization works mainly in rural areas where poverty is the highest. We have on one hand few large farms and on the other extreme poverty, there is nothing between. Children have few opportunities. We have several projects, e.g. we see solutions in a collective farming. We teach people about the farm work. We have several successful projects including a sheep farm. We also teach them about their rights and about human rights. We also work with the government, but it is very difficult work. We got support, for example, by being provided with farming equipment but not, for example, with the purchase of animals.

#### **Slovakia:**

During the socialist regime we were all equal. There were no millionaires, and no homeless. We had no money, all the money went to Moscow. Now we live for 26 years in a democratic country. We have a growing number of millionaires and a growing group of people living in poverty.

My salary was 300 euros. Now I am retired and receive 200 Euros, my children have to support me for the rent of my apartment.

What is the young generation doing? Many leave their parents, are unemployed and this can lead to addiction. We are heading towards a lost generation. We publish a report on poverty two times per year and we try to show that the government changed some statistics to make the problem seem less severe. We try to be open minded, we try to organize as many activities as possible. We try to show that people in poverty are not lazy people. They suffer from a very hard life. We try to hold a mirror to the rich people.

We work with people in different places at the bottom of society and we try to help them to find again a place in society. We're doing participation projects with them and we work with homeless people to teach them the necessary skills so that they can return to society. We also try to start some co-operatives.

We have an embassy for NGOs and we also have a minister for NGOs. The government does not know the work of the NGOs so it is good that we now have an embassy that defends our rights.

I grew up in a small family. I got the chance to study. I had a good job until I realized that I wanted more. I want to engage myself. I try to live with less money. I am currently homeless, I sleep on the couch at my parents' home. So I came to the conclusion that poverty is very difficult to understand.

I note that for example in Russia there is no room for voluntary work, which is nevertheless important in the fight against poverty. I conclude that the change must come from the people.

I see two main aspects: First, the stereotype of poverty. We have to make people understand what poverty is. Poverty is not a picture. Nobody is one-dimensional. Poverty is not your identity. Second, poverty of the mind. You must have the chance to read to your children, to let them go on a school trip, to go grab a beer etc. For people who do not live in poverty this is a habit. For them this is the most normal thing in the world. That should also be for people in poverty, but it is not.

I am a single mother. Being a single mother is not the problem but the lack of money is a problem. To be forced to remain in a bad relationship in order to survive is a serious problem. The fact that you have to accept poor conditions to survive is a serious problem. We want that everyone can live in dignity.

**Luxemburg:**

For many people Luxembourg is a rich and socially secure country. But the country is also organized for wealthy people. There is not enough social housing, whole families live in studios - it is very difficult to build a social life when you live in a box. That is a very serious problem in Luxembourg. We do not have a stable life. If you do not have a permanent contract, you cannot find a house, and there are high requirements to get a job (three languages etc.). Sometimes housing costs are much more than you earn. Our minimum wage is 1200 Euros. It seems a lot in comparison to many other countries, but the rents are also very high. For a room in a shared house you can pay 800 Euro.

“Immigrants are obliged to do jobs that nobody wants to do”

“Inequality is the biggest problem in many countries”.

**Iceland:**

The situation in Iceland is about the same as in Luxembourg. I live in social housing. Homelessness means more than not having a roof over your head. All bad living conditions are considered as homelessness.

**Norway:**

We come from different organisations. I am a man that was sexually abused and there are many thousands of young people who are sexually abused. And we fight against this.

I come from central Norway. I have experienced poverty as a child and I was sexually abused thus I could not finish my school. I didn't find a job because I had no education. I used my experience as a basis to clarify this problem. That's why I started an organization to help people with similar problems. We believe that all people are at the same level. We have several organizations that help people to grow. I believe that by sharing personal experiences we can reach a more equal life.

I work mostly with people with mental problems. We train them to take back their place in society.

I mainly work with immigrant women so they can live a decent life in Norway. If you help women, you help the whole community. We work mainly on family perspective. I myself am from Congo. 15 years ago I came to Norway. I experienced many barriers to participation in society because I did not speak the language and I am black. It is a big problem that people see only what you look like and not what you can do. Even though I was born and grown in Congo, I have experienced poverty for the first time in Norway, not in Africa. At one point I had a choice: live or die. If I am here today, it is because I have chosen to live. We have many organizations of different sizes but with a purpose: the fight against poverty.

“We believe that change is not possible without us. Collaboration is needed to affect change”.

### 2.2.2 Reflections on Exchanges and Building Solidarity

We have heard a lot of difficult stories in the first part of this workshop. But we have not lost hope and we intend to work towards change. We now want to draw lessons from what we heard together and see how we can create greater solidarity. We continue to believe that change is possible, if we work together.

We learned a lot from the stories told by participants. We heard many voices. Some comment learning's from what we heard are:

- We must work together to find a joint solution.
- We must come together and share stories.
- We need more joint consultation, more togetherness to find solutions. We need more joint communication - more interaction between different groups and different countries. In that way we will be able to understand each other very well and will be able to work together to find solutions to poverty.
- People do not belong to one group. People belong to different groups. One person can be single and a mother but also the daughter of an alcoholic. You should have a voice in all the groups to which you belong.
- Only if we are together, we will have influence. The more voices they hear the more they should consider us. They cannot keep the door closed. Share and support each other is the basis to keep the struggle of passion and energy.
- Let us finally become a Europe where we speak with one voice. Let us make more use of social media. Our experience and knowledge must be honored. Our common problem is lack of money. Lack of money affects all aspects of your life. Lack of money means that you do not have the mental space to battle But together we can have the space.
- We need to prevent people from losing hope. We transmit our poverty from generation to generation - when will we rise above this? Poverty makes you have low expectations and then you lose the battle. We have to be aware of our own strength and our right to a dignified life.

### 2.2.3 Lessons Learned

#### **Luxemburg**

Everyone deserves a descent live.

- Breaking the wall of differences
- Listen to people who are concerned
- Look at what we can do and not at what we are or look like.

#### **UK:**

Support from EAPN to collectively use of the PEP Family to

- Conciliate a viral media day prior to PeP 2016 (social media, paper, organisations, EU commissioners blog pages).
- Raise the voice and awareness as a collective (real people testimonial) - We are as one!
- Add email and websites of organizations to all future participant lists so we can try to connect. Create PEP participants' web page with EU wide access (include blog, load materials, toolkits, share and support).

#### **Norway**

- Stay together, work together in the fight against poverty and social exclusion
- Listen people with poverty experience

- We are all survivors, let us take back our DIGNITY

**Iceland:**

- Unified voices of many instead of many speaking alone
- The systematic inequality of the distribution of wealth
- Multi-level discrimination
- The positive spirit of people wanting to achieve change and are willing to be the change
- Positive attitude, refusing to be a victim, denying shame that does not belong to us
- Deserving a dignified live and believing it is obtainable.

**Slovakia:**

- Community have to understand that poverty is not a free choice
- Teaching is one of the key points.

**Lithuania:**

- Increase of self-awareness to lower spiritual poverty
- Building communities and NGO's
- Networking of NGO's and creating common strategy
- Active participation on policy making on all levels (local, regional, national, European, universal)
- Lack of citizenship education (people do not know their rights and system)

**2.3 GREEN WORKSHOP**

**Facilitator: Robin Hanan**  
**Note takers: Josee Goris and Lea Schumacher**  
**Delegations: Sweden, Macedonia (FYROM), Ireland, Czech Republic, Finland**

**2.3.1 Delegations' Presentations:**

**Macedonia**

- There are high numbers of people experiencing poverty in Macedonia with weak social protection from the government.
- A special problem is youth unemployment and youth leaving the country as a result.
- The delegates are all members of the Macedonian Anti-poverty network which consists of over 100 different organizations. They work for elderly, young people and social protection.
- They want a Youth Guarantee and minimum income scheme from the public authorities.

**Czech Republic**

- The Czech delegates share a common experience of homelessness.

- They work in the 'SlezskaDiakonie' and support homeless people.
- The Czech authorities are good and effective in supporting homelessness in the Czech Republic.

### **Finland**

- Poverty increased in Finland due to the economic crisis.
- They report that the phenomenon of unemployment has changed as before, only low skilled people had a risk to be unemployed while nowadays even skilled and educated people become unemployed.
- The Finnish delegates work at the Association for Unemployed in Helsinki and share a common experience of unemployment.
- Authorities in the public sector should strengthen the third sector.
- A citizen's salary and basic income should be supported by Finnish authorities.

### **Ireland**

- Homelessness is one of the biggest problems in Ireland as rents are too high and there is no control over the housing sector.
- In-work poverty increases due to rising housing prices and lacking adaption of incomes to inflation.
- The Irish delegates work to support homeless people in Ireland.
- The authorities should increase rent support and regulate the housing sector.

### **Sweden**

- The problem of social exclusion is more relevant than poverty as poverty is relatively rare in Sweden.
- Lack of affordable housing and unemployment among youth are the most important issues in Sweden.
- Public authorities should ensure a better implementation of the Youth Guarantee, most importantly by giving more personnel to employment agencies.

### **2.3.2 Reflections on Exchange and Building Solidarity**

Subsequent to this session, the question was discussed how solidarity can be built among social actors in the fight against poverty. Different possibilities were discussed which are presented below:

- Members of the Swedish delegation stressed that similarities have to be highlighted instead of the differences between actors fighting against poverty, and that the internet is a good medium to collaborate.
- Different delegates also highlighted national initiatives which might be extended to a regional or European level, for example the Finnish delegation which presented annual meetings on human rights for unemployed people and civil society organisations where ideas can be exchanged, expressing an interest to have such exchanges on a regional



- level, for example among the Scandinavian countries. The Swedish delegation recalled that they had a similar meeting 2 years ago in Malmö where different organisations working on unemployment met, realizing that problems are similar to most organisations.
- The Macedonian delegation also narrated about a cooperation of different organisations regarding a law on abortion in Macedonia, stressing the advantage of advocating change in great numbers as the influence on political actors increases then. “When many organisations cooperate, they are very strong together”, they stated. Furthermore, they reiterated that European models and quotes from what other countries do are important arguments to convince the national government.
  - The Macedonian delegation raised the issue of experiencing different realities from other countries outside of its region. Whereas similar problems and also past cooperation’s have been pursued with Serbia, there are hardly similarities with the situation in Finland, for example, as Macedonia has no issues with housing or with refugees. A member of the Swedish delegation in this context also drew attention to cultural differences which might hinder transnational cooperation.
  - A positive effect of transnational cooperation that was mentioned and valued by several organisations was the exchange of best practices and experiments, thereby being able to learn from other projects and to receive inspiration for own projects. In this sense, also the use of knowledge of the situation and tools in other countries as means to pressure own governments was mentioned, for example with regard to implementing the Youth Guarantee.

### 2.3.3 Lessons learned

The **Macedonian delegation** learned that active inclusion of beneficiaries such as homeless people into the work of NGOs is important, as opposed to just giving out food for example. Furthermore, they acknowledged the need to develop new programs and support for unemployed people as existing programs do not work. As a third point, they mentioned that face-to-face communication with governments and other organisations is a means to go forward, and that international solidarity can be built by exchanging ideas and projects.

The **Finnish delegation** learned that in order to fight poverty more effectively, a return to more regulation, especially with regard to rental costs, is needed, as well as a turning away from austerity measures as they cut policy targets and as “austerity targets the poorest first.” Furthermore, they stressed the need for a dialogue between people experiencing poverty and politicians as a face-to-face dimension is missing.

The **Czech delegation** stressed that there was no lack of resources as all of us are living in the richest part of the world, but a lack of solutions. As stated by one of the delegates, “solutions come by inspiration, you cannot buy them. They are for free.” It was also stressed that they can be shared for free, for example by exchanging good projects.

The **Swedish delegation** learned about the immense differences of poverty in different parts of Europe, stating that “we knew there are differences, but we didn’t know how big these differences are”. Furthermore, they learned about how people handle issues such as unemployment in different ways.

The facilitator summarized the key findings of the day: Although the delegates of the workshop face similar problems such as homelessness and unemployment, the differences between their countries of origin are still immense. This puts obstacles to European-wide cooperation in the fight against poverty and highlights the value of regional networks. However, European exchange of ideas is still valuable as European models in different countries can be used to pressurize the own government to change policies for the better. In this context, also the learning from social experiments and best practices is valuable and can be transferred to other countries, however different they may be in some regards.

## 2.4 BLUE WORKSHOP

**Facilitator: Magda Tancau**

**Note Taker: Sigrid Dahmen**

**Delegations: Austria, Croatia, Germany, Malta, Romania, Italy**

### 2.4.1 Delegations’ Presentations

#### **Malta:**

With the help of NGO they can learn English and work together with people.

We would like to be an ear for people, give training and help people get motivation back. We would like to raise awareness among the people and among the staff of the organisations. We would like to share our experience and work directly with people. We have to gain peoples’ trust.

#### **Croatia:**

4 million people live in Croatia and one in 5 is in risk of poverty. There is a high unemployment rate, and huge numbers of employers that do not always pay their employees. We are a young network that started working in January 2015. We have good relations with media and with EP. We are carrying out a project together with Hungarian Anti-Poverty Network and we are exchanging ‘know-how’.

In Croatia there is a big black economy that should be stopped. Employees should be paid. We should collect data on these issues. At the moment we do not have exact figures and no follow-up. Children should not enter poverty and they need to receive psychological support.

#### **Romania:**

I live in poorest area, where every factory was closed. People left the country and there is not enough money for whole family. It is 2015 and no change is happening. We need to wake up!

Young people are the future and we have to support them so I'm very glad young people from Romania are here. Central duty of ESF is to give more money to Romania, to fill the gap that the national authorities cannot fill.

There is a big problem with corruption in Romania. I hope that things will be better one day.

If Greece got a Troika to save the banks, maybe we need Troika to decide on ESF.

**Italy:**

In Italy it is hard to keep track where money goes. There is also no minimum income and in general the lack of support. The problem is that the governments are changing quickly and there is no continuity. No government ever gets to the end of something.

I've been trying to become a journalist but you have to pay for everything and you work for almost nothing. In that kind of circumstances there is a risk of becoming a criminal. Nobody helps you to live on the right track.

In Italy there is the EMIN project for promotion of minimum income. Organizations look after refugees, children, and they carry out integration through sport activities.

**Germany:**

I became poor because of the caring responsibilities. I took care of my husband and my husband's father. I had to leave my job. A caring home is very expensive. Bigger savings will melt down if care lasts longer.

There should be National Anti-Poverty Conferences in order to influence governments. There should be different levels of participation. For example, every 4 years there could be (shadow) reports on poverty and wealth. There should be a redistribution of money into structures, like social services. Minimum income should be raised.

**Austria:**

We four are all experiencing poverty because of different experiences - sickness, being alone with 4 children, or being homeless.

We organize a poverty platform because we want to be seen and to show how we work. We believe that poverty is a political problem. We fight for negative income tax without conditions. A big problem is also child poverty. Austria is a rich country but the money is not given to the poor.

*"Accept every person as a person so that everybody can have a good life."*

We are not calling for mercy. Help is not the right word. We want to change the situation.

There is not enough focus on people with disabilities.

Very impressive what was said by Romania: better control of financial means and to fight against corruption. We need to stop the Influence of large lobbies to European Institutions.

We want dignity.

If we get together, that gives us power.

Young people are suffering. When I was 16 years old I didn't have the opportunity to speak at this kind of meeting. We must not discriminate people but we must help. I came here to change something, we are here to make our voice heard. Power is in numbers and the number is large.

Dignity and respect of the person should be put in the center. We need to show a lot of respect. Poverty is not an individual responsibility, should not be ashamed.

#### 2.4.2 Reflections on Exchanges and Building Solidarity

Delegations are paired to work on the question how to build solidarity between countries and between different groups experiencing poverty:

##### **Germany/Italy:**

- We need to talk about common problems to find common solutions.
- Strengthen human rights through education of different culture
- Common actions against corruption (transparency)

##### **Austria/Romania**

- We need solidarity as the unity between people. To make connections with other people from other countries or groups with the same goals, visions, dreams, challenges.
- Make positive proposals, actions, events, education, and exchanges.
- Using EAPN Platform more and make it more user-friendly (translations).
- Accept and respect different opinions, different groups of people.

##### **Malta/Croatia:**

- Experts on solidarity are people experiencing poverty. We could carry out trans-national projects so we could work together for a common goal.
- Respecting human dignity. Solidarity starts from dignity and respect.
- People should live and not survive.

#### 2.4.3 Lessons Learned

- We all want to work on same goals, as human beings
- Politicians/expert should involve themselves more "in the field" (not 'solving' problems from their chairs)
- Education and sharing experience with young people = building more solidarity coming from decision makers/experts

- Intensive contact exchange
- View of positive changes
- Listen to youth!
- Reduce prejudices
- Creating common goals
- Know and respect each other
- Pass forward the knowledge and experiences
- Power is in the numbers
- Children’s voices must be heard
- We need actions not words

## 2.5 BLACK WORKSHOP

**Facilitator: Elke Vandermeerschen**

**Note taker: Phillipe Lemmens**

**Delegations: Spain, Belgium, Hungary, Latvia, Portugal, France**

### 2.5.1 Delegations’ Presentations and Reflections on Exchanges

#### **Spain**

23% of population lives in poverty and 9% in the extreme poverty in the Balears.

“Migration issues, discrimination/social discrimination is present since my youth”.

I was living in a single room and I had no money for a flat. I’ve slept in shelters and on the street - I continued to be poor. Now I’m part of the organisation that gives voices to people experiencing poverty.

The reflection of Spanish delegation on the activities of their organisation

- Eradication of certain loans, labour and social integration, war on companies that discriminate.
- Homeless and poor people need to be helped – help in administration for NGOs.
- Information – more social policy – institutional help.

The reflection of Spanish delegation on the changes that needs to be made:

- Everyone should have a house, money for food, and work.
- Participation of people: support/info for migrants to empower them.
- More action on Minimum Income – there are 17 different income schemes because of the different regions. It’s a “regional social lottery”. Minimum income is very different depending on the region: 400 Euro in Catalonia, 349 Euro in Galicia, 649 Euro in Bask country.

- 3<sup>rd</sup> sector should be more humane, politicians should bring more equality.
- Demands on migrants are higher than for the natives.

### **France**

Evictions: there's a commission of prevention of evictions in France. They meet with the person beforehand to try to avoid/solve the problems. A lot of people don't know of the existence of this commission.

Youth of 18 to 25 years old have not worked and thus have no access to social rights. Access to minimum income should be already possible before the age of 25!

Access to work for migrants when in process of regularisation.

The reflection of French delegation on the activities of their organization

- We give advice to Government on how to deal with the participation of people.

### **Portugal**

- A lot of people are suffering from poverty, social exclusion, loss of housing, lack of education, unemployment.
- Rise of risk of poverty.
- No social protection.
- The social and economic crisis is not over in Portugal!

The activities of their organization:

- Exchange of experiences/information about poverty.
- Local council participation.
- Associate (= join an association) to fight poverty.

What changes should be made:

- Giving a voice to the poor.
- Help poor with a policy that is fair – the future should be just for all in our society.
- Policy makers should assert human rights.
- Fair distribution of wealth.

### **Latvia**

- The majority is poor, we have "soviet" (low) salaries.
- The problem is that the income is 360 Euro, the GMI is 49 Euro, 12% unemployment, and 19% poverty.
- Elderly, youth, unemployed are the groups that have the most problems.
- Thinking is difficult, politicians take unbalanced decisions.
- Taxation is weak, bureaucracy difficult.

- Income doesn't match the expected expenses as the cost is the same as in the Western Europe countries.
- High tolerance to illegal activities: corruption, bureaucracy.
- Pensions are too low: Someone who has worked for 20 years has only 200 Euro of pension. The government uses the argumentation - "they worked for the country before independent Latvia" – to justify low pensions. Russia refuses to pay pensions outside Russia.

Activities/issues addressed by their organisation:

- Youth employment.
- Fair distribution of resources.
- Reduce risk of social exclusion.

What changes should be made:

- Public awareness and regional and national participation.
- Social contacts between people.
- It's not fair that millions die of hunger and food is thrown away.

### **Hungary**

- 9.9 million People or 1/3 of population lives in poverty, and there is 1/3 of child poverty.
- Cynical government is a big problem: they deny that there's a problem. E.g. 50.000 children are hungry, but they refuse to solve this.
- Huge regional differences, and difference is growing even bigger.
- 1.2 million in severe poverty, out of which 1 million Roma.
- Roma born in the country side have no future of getting out of poverty.
- Low minimum income: 270 Euro.
- Unemployment benefit is 60 Euro/month, but for this you need to cooperate with the different institutions.
- Supplement of 6 Euro (3 times a year) from the village for "settlement support", but you also need to do something for this.
- The social security system is to disappear in 2018, and will be replaced by a Public Work scheme. However, only 10% will be able to get into this scheme.

Activities of their organisation:

- We preferred actions, petitions, demonstrations, activist groups, ...
- We are meeting with mayors.
- The poor think they need to suffer and cannot choose to act.
- NGO's were attacked by police because they got support from Norway funds – this is considered as a sort of treason.
- Lack of resources, except if you're close to the government.

What changes should be made:

- Services are free, but there are no resources – doctors and nurses are leaving the country because of low pay and poor working conditions.
- Corruption is higher than ever now. This corruption is blocking everything.
- There's a big opposition to human rights court and it's very weak as the leading party is very popular. The European Parliament closes its eyes for Hungary because of the political links.
- Threats from Europe (to reduce structural funds, etc.) go nowhere.
- Refugees are badly treated in Hungary. They try to hide this, but it's ridiculous as everything is known (internet, social media, etc.). As we had 3 million refugees in the past all over Europe, it's a ridiculous attitude towards migrants. Government reacted by saying that the Hungarian migrants were educated ... Soviet times are still somehow present.

### **Belgium**

- Indebtedness, divorce, disease, death, mediation (with this we stay in poverty, because the money goes to the mediation).
- Chronical disease: benefits are too low to pay treatment. Some go to a psychiatric hospital to avoid having to sleep outside.
- Rights are violated: 20 Euro for an identity card to get help/access to health insurance, but some cannot pay this.
- Poverty = surviving = living in the past, as we have no today or no future because we don't have the means = frustration for not being able to give our children what they need = not freedom.

Activities of their organisation:

- A game "Bridge the month" has been invented for social workers so they can learn what's needed to live/survive with low income.

What changes should be made:

- Europe must ensure that minimum income and basic income is adequate and they must enforce this in all Member States.

## **2.5.2 Reflections on Building Solidarity and Lessons Learned**

### **France:**

- France and Belgium are rich countries, but I see the situation of poverty worsening everywhere.
- They should relaunch the social OMC (peer reviews between countries).
- Develop and institutionalize participation (and not have this decided nationally or regionally in the countries): the creation of a European advisory council of People experiencing poverty and social exclusion.
- "The solution is in us, we're not the problem".



**Belgium:**

- Organizations should know each other better, create networks, beyond borders, and exchange their good practices.
- We should organize citizen “power-resistance” against the divisions that some politicians want to create between groups.

**Spain:**

- Like small crumbs for birds, our Governments are saying that this is all that’s available for the people and we’re trying to fight for this. I call this “struggling for an economy of survival”. The truth is different of course, we should be able to access much more for the majority of people.
- Humanity should be a reality in general in all countries in Europe.
- Create a commission to care for a mandatory establishment of principles of European chart of Fundamental rights.
- People who experience poverty must be heard by European decision makers.
- A better diffusion of needs about poverty in European mass media.

**Hungary:**

Between different groups there should be:

- Exchange information.
- Special training programs (to get to know each other better).
- Sharing of best practices.
- Tackling prejudice.
- Mentoring programs/integration.
- Providing financially sustainable programs.

Between different countries there should be:

- To get to know each other’s reality/social system.
- Strengthening the NGOs.
- Sharing best practices.
- Forming regional communities.
- Tolerance.

**Portugal:**

- Europe needs a culture of solidarity amongst its member states, and between them and the rest of the world.
- Values like justice, solidarity and equality should be taken into account when defining new policies.

- We are absolutely convinced that the world needs profound cultural renovation and rediscovery of fundamental values to use them as a foundation when building a social future (E.g. European charter of values).

**Latvia:**

- To raise public awareness to improve people's political understanding.
- To educate society on the importance of participation.
- To raise public awareness on true reasons of poverty.
- To exchange experiences/good practices between the countries on their similarities and differences.

### 3 PLENARY ON SOCIAL CONVERGENCE IN THE EU

#### 3.1 Welcoming Words from Saviour Grima, Vice President of EAPN

**Saviour Grima** reminded the participants on their virtue that is being shown through their every-day work and life – solidarity and dignity. Solidarity and the respect of dignity are also one of the main demands posed to policy-makers in this meeting. He continued that this meeting is a channel through which voices of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion can be heard on national and on the EU level. Furthermore, he stressed that this meeting is of great importance in shaping the existence of the social Europe, especially looking at the current signs of deteriorating social standards as seen in the refugees' crises and with increasing number of people experiencing poverty.

#### 3.2 Speech by Evzen Vojkuvka, member of Czech Delegation

**Evzen Vojkuvka** presented his personal experience with poverty and social exclusion. After being homeless for 7 years he decided to make a step towards a change. He became active in a local organisation and continued working supporting people experiencing poverty and other forms of social exclusion. In this organisation they established a platform for social housing and have important expertise for supporting homeless people. One of the most recent successes of the organisations was the adoption of their Strategy for addressing the issue of homelessness in period 2015 – 2020 by the Czech Government. Evzen Vojkuvka continued with expressing his gratitude for being part of the meeting and for being given an opportunity to share his experiences with other people from different European countries. But what is most important, he stressed, is the meeting's aim to find common solutions. He concluded by calling on the policy-makers and politicians to *"... sit down behind one table with people who are not indifferent and really want to help and fight poverty. The sooner we will start the easier we will find solutions"*.

#### 3.3 Speech by Dominique Faber, Representative from the Luxembourg Presidency, Ministry for Family and Integration

Dominique Faber greeted the delegates with stating that this meeting has an empowering potential for all participants. She stressed the importance given to the European social values by the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the European Union. She stressed that Common social values for Europe are defined by social protection and inclusion of all people in Europe, in the form of fight against poverty, social exclusion, homelessness and housing exclusion. She further asked how these values are transformed in real-life measures. Equal access to quality jobs, minimum income schemes, national reference budgets, equal access to affordable and quality services, equal access to cultural and sport activities, and affordable housing with emphasis on the concept of 'housing first' were measures of social inclusion presented by Mrs. Faber. Among those measures she stressed the importance of combating poverty of children by adequately supporting parents. *"Poverty is a scandal, child poverty is a tragedy"*, she remarked. She concluded by giving examples of the essential measures of social protection – access to health-care, long-term care and pensions for all people.

### 3.4 Speech by Mrs. Sussane Conze, Policy Officer at European Commission's DG EMPL

Sussane Conze gave an overview of the recent policy priorities in the field of social affairs that were put forward by the new formation of the European Commission and that can be summarized with the concept called social triple A, with which the EU is aiming to strengthen the social Europe. She continued by touching upon The Five Presidents Report, a document in which presidents of the main European institutions propose actions for stronger development in the social field.

She then turned back to the meeting and looked at the messages that were highlighted in the Meeting of People experiencing Poverty 2014 and that were considered by the European Commission. Among the most recent steps forward that were taken by the European Commission and that are giving solutions to the demands of the last year's meeting she listed proposal for the recommendation on long-term unemployment and Youth Guarantee. In connection to the proposed recommendation on long-term unemployment she pointed out the provision of personalized approach through individual assessment of the needs and skills of the long-term unemployed people.

She continued by looking at the Commission's future plans listed in the Work Programme for 2016. The Commission's proposals in the 2016 will touch upon the topic of work skills, work-life balance and social rights. The topic of social rights is connected to the idea of the 'social pillar'. She invited the delegates to contribute to the formation of the 'social pillar' by feeding the Commission's initiative with their views. Further on she outlined the basic feature of discussion on the 'social pillar'. The 'social pillar' should look at the current situation in the labour market by examining the precarious work contracts and by identifying possible compatibilities in the European labour legislation between the need for more labour flexibility on the one hand and the need for more social protection on the other.

Another part of the 'social pillar' will look at the policy framework in the field of social protection and will try to identify measures for greater social convergence in Europe. She suggested that the 'policy part' of the 'social pillar' could include policy recommendations for minimum income schemes, access to services, reference budgets.

In her final remarks she emphasized that *"The question today is: What do you think what should be part of this social initiative? This is something we would really like to hear from you and to have your feedback"*, and that the answer on this question can be found only through cooperation between the European Commission and civil society. She concluded that the outcomes of this meeting will shape the European Commission's Convention on poverty and social exclusion planned for the spring of 2016.

## 4 WORKSHOPS ON BUILDING SOCIAL CONVERGENCE IN THE EU

The objective of this workshop was to share a list of key messages/issues/recommendations that would be considered as proposals for the European Commission's initiative on social convergence.

The discussions regarding the European Commission's initiative for social convergence continued in the next session, in which delegates presented their key messages/issues/recommendations to various stakeholder representatives (Officials of the European Commission, Politicians, Representatives of Authorities, NGOs and other social actors) with objective to receive reflections, explanations and answers from people who are professionally engaged in the policy-making at the EU level. The messages were then adjusted and were presented at the final plenary.

### 4.1 RED WORKSHOP

**Facilitator: Sonja Leemkuil**

**Note-taker: Mihael Topolovec**

**Delegations: Bulgaria, Serbia, Poland, Greece, Estonia, Denmark, Netherlands**

#### 4.1.1 Exchange between delegates

##### **Serbia**

Experience with social housing project, 'housing first' module – this approach needs to be used more. In Serbia there is one social housing model which meets the criteria of housing first approach, it has been developed 10 years ago – providing decent housing first as a precondition for the development in all other dimensions of life. This model provides rent-free social housing and tailor-made services for each family. The module was recognized by the state and by the donors and by other NGOs and now we have over 2.500 housing units, which is a lot in comparison to state social housing projects.

One delegate is a host family in one of the social housing buildings. The host family is an important part of provisions of services. He was first living in collective centres (centres for most vulnerable refugees) and 7 years ago he applied for a role of a host family in the city Niš. He is, for example, hosting a single-mother with two children living in the same building together with his family.

Another delegate is coming from Roma community in one of the cities in central Serbia. She expressed disappointment over the situation, in which Roma population is still strongly affected by poverty. Roma population is also experiencing discrimination and violence.

##### **Greece**

I'm a beneficiary of the social housing. 5 years ago I lost my job and my husband lost most of the independent income. The social housing programme gave me a chance to get a job - they didn't let me to go down deeper, they helped me to stay in the surface without too much debt.

I now have a part time job and my husband has an income, we are able to provide food to our children and to give them education. We are happy with that.

Greece has the highest rates of unemployment in the EU - more than 50% in the official statistics. Taxes are rising (in order to repay loans to the state), the state is not able to provide access to social services to such high number of people so people are increasingly coming to NGOs for support.

### **Denmark**

The core issue is the minimum income for everybody. Another core issue is the shortage of jobs – because minimum wage is so high, which is of course a good thing, and unions are very strong, there is quite difficult to get job as a low-qualified worker. The holistic approach is very important in addressing and approaching to people's problems (taking in the account the wide range of people's situation). Finally, the core issue is also the lack of affordable and adequate housing.

One delegate from Denmark shared his experiences with the new financial reform. They give him the lowest income – under the new financial reform the income that was given to him was not high enough but the social workers were not aware about that and he was aware because of the help of his organisation. He filed the complaint and won compensation.

One delegate shared her experiences with youth homelessness and inclusion of young homeless people. The activities of the organisation she is part of are funded by different sources. The activities include, for example, trips for homeless people, sharing experiences (help them to write, take pictures, and make videos). She's an alcoholic and she has been using all sorts of drugs but now she is clean for a long time and this is a way for people to get out of all sorts of issues in their lives because they are shown that they are needed, they are supported and they are resourceful as human beings.

### **Poland**

The issue of health care – waiting time, costly private health care. Also basic salary after taxes is very low. Support for elderly is needed as many of them are nowadays left alone.

The issue of employment of young people. Their organisation is looking for internship placements for young people. Now agencies are contacting them with offers for young people – first 1 month unpaid internship that can extend to trial period (three months) leading to stable employment.

One delegate from Poland shared his experience: It's hard to be honest when you're trying to get a proper job. This is especially hard if you have a psychiatric disability or mental illness as in his case. In 2014 he came to their association and he started to see positive bright future but then he found himself depressed. He came across problems when searching for psychiatric

help – expenses and waiting time - so he returned to the association where he was given psychiatric help. He feels abandoned by the responsible institutions that should be there to help people like him.

### **Bulgaria**

Adequate income for all is one of the most important issues. The delegates presented one example: In Bulgaria the minimum is fixed at 32 Euro and this amount hasn't changed since 2009, access to social assistance is extremely limited and people who receive minimum income need to participate in the community on voluntary basis and their participation is fixed at 14 days per month, 4 hours per day. At the same time these people are expected to actively look for a job and to be responsible parents. So the first issue that they want to raise is that all European citizens should have access to universal and adequate minimum income without conditionality. Second issue relates to economic policies and their proposal is that reducing poverty and social exclusion and reducing wealth inequalities should become the priority for European economic policies not just part of structural reforms. If we want to achieve greater social convergence decent wages and quality working conditions should be the aim. This requires change in basic proportions of distribution and redistribution of wealth.

### **Estonia**

There is a big difference between municipalities. In Estonia there are few municipalities that are doing well, e.g. Tallinn region, but then we have socially disadvantaged municipalities of the country-side where the social assistance infrastructure is less developed – people don't have access to basic social services. Now they are trying to proceed with the reform of municipalities that would merge existing municipalities and that would enable equal access to social services to all people no matter where they are living.

Another example touched upon data-collection: EU has developed different indicators of poverty, three different ones, however in Estonia only one is being used – the reason why Estonian government chose only one is to portray the country in as much positive way as possible. Hope this will undergo certain positive change as Estonia will hold a presidency of the EU in 2018. The national minimum salaries are much smaller compared to what is considered to be an adequate minimum income for a person to have a normal life. There are people working full time that don't earn or don't reach the level of minimum income.

### **Netherlands**

The government is talking about lowering the minimum wage as it is they say too high, the unemployment rates are going up, the main concern is youth unemployment. We represent people who are invisible, we try to give them some hope, some power – we need support. We are able to tell people how valuable and important they are and that they are working as much as people who are earning wages. EU should be aware of the fact that we are key actors.

#### 4.1.2 Exchange with Guests: Sussane Conze and Sian Jones

**Sussane Conze (European Commission):** In terms of participation – not only to have meetings with civil society but to make an effort that these meetings feed in the policy making process. The point that came up in several workshops is to value human dignity and stop with blaming the poor for being poor – this is the issue we need to work on and start a new discourse, discussion culture. To make efforts on improving minimum income schemes is essential – if it works well, it will be only a temporary face in life for most of the people.

**Sian Jones (European Anti-Poverty Network):** It is really important to make the same messages over and over again and to be specific about it and to link it to the EU developments.

First point on rights and dignity is absolutely crucial. And I would link it to participation. What I mean by participation includes: individual, which is about empowerment, about you as a person to feel supported, to have a capacity to make your own future – personalized services, mentoring, giving group support. Then there's a collective side, which means making an impact together and that's where it becomes civil dialogue – we have to find better ways to engage people on the ground into that policy debate. For that we've been pushing for guidelines from the Commission.

Adequate affordable housing. This is one of the big area that needs more attention by the EU. The way housing is looked at is in terms of a market – they are very interested in growing the housing market but they don't prioritise the delivery of affordable housing for people. We want the Commission to pick this up as one of the priorities.

Minimum income – EAPN has done very well in pushing for the minimum income in last 10 years. But we want more than that - we want the EU to contribute to a guarantee for adequate minimum income schemes through a framework directive. We think it's possible and we just need some real political will to drive it forward.

Active inclusion – everybody should have a right to adequate minimum income, adequate access to quality services and inclusive labour market. The trouble with active inclusion concept is that it is not being implemented – we want a Roadmap, we want EU to say exactly how it will be implemented: when, who, how.

Economic policy should deliver first on social inclusion, social objectives should be a priority. I would like to add inequality. We need to tackle unequal distribution and redistribution – we have to talk about tax. We want progressive tax policies.

There is the funding issue. 20% of the European Social Fund should go to reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion – but is this money actually going to do the right thing and are they involving local organisations in monitoring.

**Sussane Conze:** The Commission is not a monolithic institution but it is not easy find a common position; the Commission's proposals are always reconsidered by the Member States. The



Commission is aware that none of the Members States have the minimum income scheme that would bring you above the poverty line. We need to develop a mechanism that would allow the countries to develop the minimum income scheme according to their economic capabilities but also at the same time to put pressure on countries to make the development of develop adequate minimum income schemes a priority. Active inclusion is a good concept but we can see it is not being implemented; we need to go back to it.

Before I worked at DG EMPL I worked at DG for Education and Culture – we looked at the issue of early school leaving (as one of the main target of the Europe 2020). We developed recommendation to the Council that was well accepted – but the impact considering the implementation was limited. Considering the social pillar we also have to think about what is realistically achievable, what brings us forward, what could have a real impact, and what is more than just a nice looking paper, where can we actually really make a change.

What difference will the new social pillar bring?

**Sussane Conze:** It will bring a boost to social initiatives again. It should offer a broader framework. But there is no guarantee that these initiatives will automatically bring more social Europe – we all have to work for this change. I see it as a response by the Commission to the social effects of the economic crisis.

**Sian Jones:** I'm afraid that the discourse on the new social pillar is based on the flex-security debate that brings us back to 2008 - in order to have more flexible labour market we need stronger social protection. It worries me that this approach is not really rights-based. About prioritizing of the demands: we're also giving away too much ground, it's not a problem of money, there are enough resources, the problem is how it's distributed, this are political decisions.

## 4.2 ORANGE WORKSHOP

**Facilitator: Amana Fero**

**Note taker: Marja Hermans**

**Delegations: Slovakia, Norway, Iceland, Lithuania, United Kingdom, Luxembourg.**

### 4.2.1 Exchange between delegates

#### **Norway:**

The problem in Norway is that you have to work in exchange for support. Work in exchange for support is not a good thing, it is also bad for employment.

First jobs at national level must be created. A campaign for all EU countries is needed. Strong activation leads to change. There needs to be adequate support at national level. The labor

market should be more open with access to quality services, housing, etc.

**UK:**

Access to services is the most important issue. There are not enough houses, too many generations have to live together in small houses. There is a need for a good and affordable housing. Social housing is a big problem.

We want a clear policy. Now there are too many agencies that conduct their own policies but we require a common policy with the same information and rights for everyone. People have little access to their rights and the services to ensure their rights. In addition to that, the lowest salaries must be raised.

**Slovakia:**

We need social standards. It would be good to compare standards between different countries and from there to design a joint strategy.

We need more information on the use of European funds in our country. The EU should exercise greater control over the use of the funds and they should be better monitored. The funds should be used to strengthen the NGOs.

How do we make the European strategies concrete at the local level? There must be clear connections between the NGO and the Commission. We have to be kept well informed by EAPN and we must take more face to face contacts.

**Iceland:**

We have no guaranteed minimum income. One positive development was the free dental care for children, but this is also standing on the ramp. Another good approach is practiced by the Church that gives credit cards instead of food so that people can go and buy food. Access to services is very expensive. Housing is, especially for single parents, very expensive.

Asylum seekers are sent back to their home countries and they have no access to housing.

There is an important task for the NGOs to make the government aware.

**Lithuania:**

Every day I meet people in poverty; often they come out of prison. We bring them together, give them education, we have a social restaurant. The starting point is to give people a new life, to give them new courage, to make them stronger. There are people who are drug dependent since childhood. We try to catch them, and to provide education so that they then become independent and build a life. We must teach people to help themselves. Single mothers need a lot of help because they are unable to work due to caring

responsibilities for their children. We support them so they can work at home. I have experienced these problems myself and I am happy that I can pass on my experience. It is not about charity but about empowering people. To provide them with opportunities so they can take their own lives.

### **Luxemburg:**

We are on the right track, there is a lot of social action and there are changes. But there is still not enough social housing, the population is growing, but not social housing. Poverty is not visible in Luxembourg. It's there but it remains indoors. Women in poverty have little access to assistance, to homes ... I want to be free, but I'm still not.

Progress is made, we have a minimum wage. I do not know how many people would survive if there wouldn't be for minimum wage. Many people work for minimum wage. They do not work with a permanent contract. And without a permanent contract you cannot get access to the rental market.

We have the impression that our government is starting to listen. We had a conference where the minister was present. For us it's not fast enough, but they listen. The need for cultural life is great, people need mental space to live. We are concerned that people are being forced into a competition - a competition where people in poverty and asylum seekers are competing against each other. Prioritizing target groups is increasingly a problem. We must work together to find an answer. We need to stop dividing people into sub-groups, we should all have equal rights. We must counter this trend.

Bringing together messages from our workshop:

- We will have associations to obtain changes. We need to give each other courage.
- We need to stop giving each other labels.
- We must never give up.
- Rights, dignity, humanity. We are talking about people with feelings, hopes, ...
- Human connections are very inspiring.
- We must be aware of our rights. You must know that you are a person who has rights. This must be translated into political action.
- It is important that politicians are aware of the issues so that they act and talk about people with a beating heart.
- We should be able to walk with our heads up.
- Government must ensure that you have a "good" life.
- Access to services, especially health services is very important. We want good services for all, no poor services for poor people.
- Housing is a major problem. "Buying" is a dream that is very distant for many. But after

the banking crisis we have found out that a private home is no guarantee to stay out of poverty. Yet we must continue to advocate for good homes – a home is more than a roof over your head.

- Universal access to quality services is urgently needed.
- Timely assistance is needed to prevent even more people get into trouble, waiting lists should not exist.
- An adequate income is necessary for everyone. Social protection is necessary.
- People don't work for money, people work to live, to be useful, to be part of the community.

#### 4.2.2 Exchange with Guests: Hugh Frazier and Peter Verhaeghe

**Hugh Frazier (European Social Policy Network):** Listening to the debate this morning was very inspiring, it's important to know what works and what does not.

The first point - Humanity, dignity, rights - is very important. That is what we must keep in mind, even as researchers. We need to think about the impact that decisions have on people's lives. It is not the policy itself, but how policy happens to the people. There is not sufficient thought around this issue. I note that our policy is very patchy, but people are not fragmented. Governments are repeatedly asking the question "how does this decision affect our lives"?

European policies are highly driven by the economic conditions. We need more policy that is based on the assessment of the impact that it has on people. Rights must be given in a way that they are comprehensible to people, policy must be based on this.

Services: here we have a problem of policy implementation. It will be a major challenge to provide access to services. Certainly we need to train policy makers in incorporating the human aspect, and the impact of their policies accordingly. I was impressed by the demand for universal services for all with an extra for people who need them more.

We need much more emphasis on the fact that building social housing is also a very good economic investment.

We must dare to ask why there is no progress in the, for example, case of a minimum income? We must continue to look at why countries do not work on this issue?

Work and employment is a key issue. There is a big problem with unsafe and temporary work. Also the European funds could be used much better to support access to quality jobs.

We have seen great progress in terms of participation, but now I see a slight decline. We have to go back again and we have to write down the good practices so that the methods remain available. Maybe we can also develop a social standard of participation so that we have the

necessary tools to put pressure.

**Peter Verhaeghe (CARITAS Europa):**

Dignity is the foundation of human rights. The rights are there but the implementation at the local level does not happen. Social protection: we see a descent of the rights of workers, which has to do with competitiveness. Universal child allowance is needed and would be a good start for a universal child protection.

Regarding child poverty you can contact your MEP and ask them to say ‘yes’ to the report "Reducing inequalities with a special focus on child poverty". If Europe does not pay attention to children, how can we build a better Europe? We cannot expect children to be "waiting to grow up again when money will be available”.

The bulk of the power still lies with national governments. The EU uses only soft measures to push national governments. Therefore, it is important that you continue to put pressure on your national government to implement EU legislation.

Important to take note is that the access to culture is very important in the fight against poverty, which is not discussed at EU level in greater extent.

#### 4.3 GREEN WORKSHOP

**Facilitator: Robin Hanan**

**Note takers: Josee Goris and Lea Schumacher**

**Delegations: Sweden, Macedonia (FYROM), Ireland, Czech Republic, Finland**

##### 4.3.1 The Exchanges between Delegates

The **Czech delegation** started by presenting their views on the most pressing issues based on a not yet published report from Caritas Czech republic. The first major problem in the Czech Republic thus is perceived to be **over-indebtedness**. In recent years, the number of insolvencies has dramatically increased, also because of the discouraging debt relief conditions which are often too complicated. The European Commission is therefore asked to provide tailored policy guidance on the issue while urging the government to implement Council Recommendations related to over-indebtedness. The second area of concern mentioned was **access to housing**. The costs of living have sharply increased in the last decade in relation to the income earned: in 2005, a household needed only about 60% to pay for costs of living, whereas in 2012 this percentage has risen up to over 80%. This made many people moving to commercial housing, also because decent housing possibilities decreased. Regarding this issue, the Commission is recommended to promote the building of more social housing opportunities in member states. Another important issue in the Czech Republic is **in-work poverty**. People have to work under unjust working conditions with low salaries, and are

often blackmailed by the companies that they will move to lower income countries when complaints come in. Here, the Commission is asked to appeal to the government to increase the minimum wage and to impose stricter controls on labour inspection.

The **Swedish delegation** presented **health care** to be one of the most pressing issues in the country. It was stated that the system is not inclusive of all people, denying some services to for example drug addicts or people with disabilities. One delegate complained that “[p]eople have the same rights on paper, but not in practice”. Another important issue to be addressed is **right to housing**. Not enough cheap apartments are built, which led to a call for more government regulation, also with regard to minimum income which should be adjusted to the inflation rate in the country. The next issue mentioned was the **right to be part of the community**, which is important to strengthen self-esteem and inclusion. Furthermore, a **right to labour market education** was called for, a labour market where not only work but also life experience is taken into consideration. Regarding the practices to be shared, the Swedish delegation presented the right to a modified home and assistant for people with disabilities which is captured in a law in Sweden as a good practice. Furthermore, the “Swedish Semester” was presented: It is a process in which analyses and testimonies of poverty and people experiencing poverty are collected and shared at a meeting with politicians once a year. This meeting enables direct communication of people living in poverty with politicians, with over 100 proposals being collected in a year. After the meeting, there is a follow-up of the actions of politicians in order to see if they have implemented some ideas. The delegates stressed that the semester is an on-going method where continuity is especially important.



The **Finnish delegation** shared their own good example of bringing poor people and politicians together: Since 2008, they regularly meet with parliamentarians in a so-called poverty group. This group includes an open board with experienced experts which invites the Finnish delegates and others to the parliament in order to discuss issues related to poverty. The meetings take place seven or eight times a year and bring together practical experts, thus people experiencing poverty, and policy experts from the parliament. Thereby, experiences can be exchanged. Furthermore, the Finnish delegation presented stepping stones of the social pillar for ensuring a decent and inclusive life, starting from European

values to social rights to dignity and social skills, work and housing, work life-balance and reaching the top of a decent life.

The **Macedonian delegation** stressed democracy to be the main problem in the country, which is also one of the main factors why Macedonia receives negative evaluations from European Union institutions with regard to the enlargement criteria. Furthermore, they provided a list of other pressing issues such as corruption, working poor, gender inequality, youth poverty and lacking social protection.

The **Irish delegation** stressed again that high housing prices are a major problem in Ireland, calling for a rent control. Related to this are the extra obstacles for people with disabilities, who need to rent an apartment not only for themselves, but also for their personal assistant which makes finding a decent and suitable flat close to impossible.

How can we make the processes more open to people?

The question was discussed how people experiencing poverty can be included into the processes and projects aimed at helping them. Different proposals and statements were made which are listed below:

- People experiencing poverty should be encouraged to document their every-day experiences which captures their point of view on issues and can then be shared with organisations and policy-makers who have as a result a better understanding of the actual situation on the ground.
- Local meetings between politicians and poverty activists to discuss exchange ideas should take place.
- People experiencing poverty should be included in the executive and advisory boards of organisations.
- Academics as well as people experiencing poverty should be brought together to discuss policy changes, with the organisations and academics addressing and going to the people experiencing poverty instead of expecting them to come to conferences.
- The approach of having a two-layered panel where first of all specialised experts discuss issues related to poverty in front of civil society organisations and affected people, and subsequently a discussion round between all participants as compared to the PeP meeting was supported.
- Another approach was presented by the Czech delegation where experts are hired from the political and social field which discuss different issues point by point in three groups. The feedback is then referred to the government which makes a decision on what should change.

#### 4.3.2 Exchange with Guests: Dominique Faber and Jean Lambert MEP

At the start of the meeting, the delegates were given the chance to ask questions to the guests.

- The first question concerned the **procedure** of the social convergence report within the Commission, asking when a final decision will be made. The representatives explained that the time line is not defined yet, but that a task force is working hard to plan the next steps in the process.
- Secondly, a question of the definition of **social pillar** arose. The representatives explained that the Commission team under Juncker has a strong commitment to deliver on social objectives in the next working program period.

- It was asked after the **time scale** of the process, with the answer indicating a full year of dialogue planned before the implementation phase is set into action. For the implementation, a mapping of best practices will be done.
- Lastly, it was asked what will happen with the **recommendations** made at this workshop. The representatives answered that they hoped that the information will be collected and shared within the responsible Directorate-Generals in the Commission, presenting the requests at all relevant meetings as much as possible in order to advocate them. Furthermore, the results will be used at the convention on social convergence which will take place in spring 2016.

#### 4.4 BLUE WORKSHOP

**Facilitator: Magda Tancau**

**Note Taker: Sigrid Dahmen**

**Delegations: Austria, Croatia, Germany, Malta, Romania, Italy**

##### 4.4.1 Exchanges between Delegations:

Presentation of key messages on the topic of social convergence that were formed in groups:

##### **Italy/Malta**

- Right to work (target groups: women, youth)
- Democratic participation (space for active participation with a bottom-up approach)
- The right to live not to survive
- Integration through sport, music etc
- Involvement of stakeholders
- Talk about it, media, social media, events, network campaigns and discussions
- Support the presence/participation of European Commission in national initiatives

##### **Germany/Romania**

- Adequate minimum income
- Access to medical services
- Employment for youth and employment support for long term unemployed persons
- Access to quality education
- Access to social services at community level for family support, for disadvantaged categories

##### **Austria/Croatia**

- Faster procedures in accessing services, rights
- Housing (regulation of rents)
- Crisis management (fast social system)
- Education for everybody
- Access to work
- Participation of PEP in promoting EC proposal
- Visibility, we should have important stakeholders at the meeting



- ADEQUATE MINIMUM INCOME (right to live not to survive)

#### 4.4.2 Exchange with Guests: Anne Van Lancker and Judith Berkemeier

Comments from the panel on the key decisions

**Anne Van Lancker (European Minimum Income Network):** Proposed messages are very much in line with the process of active inclusion, maybe a bit missing is decent work. Labour market that enables people to participate is needed. The voice of people that support this idea of a social pillar need to be heard. Therefore the involvement of local powers is crucial – this message should be sent to Europe.

You can always define standards of social rights, you need standards, important to mention social standards and the capacity of the EU to promote high level social standards. Important: it is not 'us' against the refugees,

**Judith Berkemeier (European Economic and Social Committee):**

The new president of EESC is coming from Greece and he has proposed an opinion on minimum income and he has proposed a European Fund to support this demand. Although the Commission positively accepted the proposal, it has said that it's not the right time for it because member states are not ready to accept this proposal. The EESC will continue to push for this.

EESC works on social and economic affairs. According to EESC's view, the European pillar for social rights is a window of opportunities. What they want is benchmarks - Member States are responsible for this, EU can give guidance. Integration of social issues into economic life is needed – in the Country Specific Recommendations, we should push for monitoring the social area.

We have to see what member states do. European Commission does not have the solution to everything.

Presentation of key messages defined in groups' discussions:

Key messages:

- Adequate minimum income (right to live not to survive)
- Access (good/fast/equal) to services, quality and affordable (health, housing, care, social services) services
- Access (equal) to good quality education, to increase access to the labor market
- Participation of different stakeholders (professional, cultural, political) to focus on beneficiaries, to include users to policy making processes (equal/fair share of wealth/prosperity)
- Transfer of power (finances, decision making) to local communities, networks and grassroots to develop sustainable solutions to local problems, bottom-up approach

- Standards and capacity (building up) to deal with humanitarian crisis: welcoming migrants in a culturally appropriate way
- Common framework for social rights
- Focus on decent work

#### 4.5 BLACK WORKSHOP

**Facilitator: Elke Vandermeerschen**

**Note taker: Phillipe Lemmens**

**Delegations: Spain, Belgium, Hungary, Latvia, Portugal, France**

##### 4.5.1 Exchanges between Delegations

Delegates were discussing on what should be included in the social convergence for EU/in the social pillar, and what are the current most pressing issues:

##### France

- Unconditional access to fundamental rights.
- All + 18 should be eligible for min. income unconditionally.
- Social rights for minimal benefits should be administratively simplified.
- Same social worker for all procedures for 1 person/family.
- Measures to prevent social exclusion.
- Coverage for social services should be the same all over the country.
- Access to health, sports, healthy food.
- EC recommendations were to lower social levels (pensions, unemployment, ...) and money allocated to fight poverty.
- Framework for labour market, human rights should be more fair (economic and legal constraints on Countries to be enforced).
- 2020 strategy feels to be left behind (at national and European level).
- Participation of People Experiencing Poverty advisory council in the EU (in order to construct a decent Social Policy).
- There are between 2.7 and 3 million poor children in France, a rich country. A charter is nice, but Europe should give the means to the Member States so that an adequate minimum income can be imposed.

##### Spain

- Minimum income: nothing has changed for few years. Spain has poor min. income schemes. There's great inequality between regions. Benefit schemes are limited in time. Directive needed by EC for minimum income in all Member State countries.
- Health services: no guarantee in Spain. Universal health service was a target, but not in the last 4 years. Disability and migrants don't have access to this. There should be a directive for all "inhabitants" (not citizens) of the European Union to have a universal right to health service.

- Access to housing.
- Minimum wage should be defined in function of the purchasing power.
- Child poverty needs to be addressed.
- Jobs is one of the social pillars of Europe, but in Spain 25% are unemployed. This can/may not be the only focus.
- People with disabilities, health problems, administrative burdens, pensioners, poor workers, ... what is the answer for these 2.3 million people?

### **Portugal**

- Social protection for citizens.
- Better policies.
- Equal distribution of economy and wealth.
- Active participation.
- Invest in future: attention to invest in children for our future social security.
- Restructuring labour market (fair jobs).

### **Hungary**

- Sustainable systems for structural funds.
- Energy poverty.
- Public work schemes are not the way to go: they will be decentralized and don't address the needs of a modern labour market. People get stuck in the same situation, treated as servants. If they're part of this system, they cannot access other, better jobs. The cost for these public work schemes are very high with low return in % of jobs or in skills for the people.
- Short term thinking.
- Social security, stronger Europe.
- Minimum income schemes.
- Social rights, basic rights, lack of democracy.

### **Belgium**

- Transversal approach (links between domains).
- Social standards should be binding (Commission should sanction, citizens shouldn't be the victims).
- Social security is very good in Belgium. EC asked to reduce/deconstruct this. Countries should be allowed to have this.
- Adequate minimum income to be integrated in main social standards (heating, housing, healthy food, ...) Reference budget is a useful tool.
- Social services/standards mandatory and they should be opposable (claims if not foreseen) and automatically awarded.
- Education and culture should be free.
- Europe is dual, inequalities are strengthened.

## Latvia

- Adequate minimum income.
- Quality jobs.
- Access to health services (healthy food), main services (should be a basic human right).
- Austerity measures after the financial crisis.
- Success story of Latvia regarding economic growth
- Instead we should invest in social growth.
- The public work schemes don't work well.
- To end prejudices Social rights for electricity – e.g. homeless don't have access because they're not registered.
- Complementary allocations for pensions.
- Directive is important because the difference between countries is too big.

### 4.5.2 Exchange with Guests: Istvan Vanyolos, European Commission Peter Lelie, Social Protection Committee, Herlinde Vanhooydonck, Socialplatform

#### Responses by Istvan Vanyolos:

- The 3 pillars of active inclusion framework from EC are Adequate Income, Access to services and Inclusive Labour market. These all need to be progressed. European semester includes analysis of all social policies and recommendations to member states for minimum income schemes. Small progress has been made in some countries (like Latvia and Portugal).
- Active inclusion: follow up in 2013 has been disappointing. Deliverables on adequate income support include following actions: 1. Strengthen and raise awareness of minimum income support (with EAPN). 2. Reference budgets project (engage dialogue with the national and European level for discovering basic needs in cash and benefits to better support systems available at national level or those lacking at national level.
- Precarious employment - social rights pillar initiative will have two points: 1. How to address precarious jobs (working time, conditions, ...). 2. Social benchmarks (minimum income, skills, unemployment benefits, ...). There should be an upward convergence, especially in countries where this is the challenge.

#### Peter Lelie (European Social Protection Committee):

- The EU Treaties limited things that the European Social Protection Committee can do. However social standards need to be developed such as in the area of Minimum Incomes and the committee tries to build consensus on this between the Member States. There are 3 groups to be found within the Member States: 1. those in favor 2. those hesitant, because maybe weaker after standards are set, and 3. those that don't want to be forced

in their development. At this moment, we're waiting upon information from the European Commission about the social pillar.

**Herlinde Vanhooydonck, Social Platform:**

- We should realize that the reason for not having more social legislation is in our Governments resistance. The Platform and EAPN will work together for social standards (minimum income, ..). Parliament needs to ask the European Commission to implement social standards. Your MP's should subscribe these requests. Civil dialogue is to be involved in the decision making (advisory council with European Commission). What do we want out of this? We want to know what will be done? How? What will be the result (how many people less will be living in poverty)?
- If Poverty isn't in the texts of the Social Pillar, where is it, what will you do about it? This is a question to be asked the National Governments and the European Commission.
- Charter of fundamental rights. How to respect this? Frans Timmermans, 1<sup>st</sup> President of the European Commission, is responsible. The Platform will continue to ask what's happening to democratic rights in EU Member States where these seem under threat.

## 5 CLOSING PLENARY

### 5.1 Key Messages from Delegates

Each workshop group presented the list of key messages/recommendations/issues that were reached as an outcome of workshops' discussions about the European Commission's initiative for Social Convergence.

#### **Red Workshop - Delegates from Bulgaria, Serbia, Poland, Greece, Estonia, Denmark and Netherlands:**

- The right to fully participate as fully accepted citizens on all level of society
- To be seen as equal and dignified members of society
- A home that is adequate and affordable
- Minimum income and active inclusion
- Open and sustainable labour market
- Free access to public health-care, medicine and social assistance
- Tackling youth unemployment
- Social inclusion of NGOs
- Change in Economic Governance: "Job is not enough to end poverty!"
- The importance of meetings with People experiencing Poverty on national and on the EU level for exchange of information, strengthening of power and hope, and to have political influence

#### **Orange Workshop – Delegates from Slovakia, Norway, Iceland, Lithuania, United Kingdom, Luxembourg**

- Humanity, dignity, rights
- Universal access to affordable and quality services
- Adequate social protection throughout of the life-cycle (especially adequate minimum income)
- Quality of work and employment (inclusive labour market)
- Participation and engagement (put in place formal channels and fundings)

#### **Blue Workshop – Delegates from Austria, Croatia, Germany, Malta, Romania, Italy**

- Adequate minimum income (right to live, not merely to survive)
- Access to quality/fast/equal services
- Access to quality/equal education (focusing on specific social groups, such as women and youth, to increase their inclusion in the labour market)
- Participation of different stakeholders (focus on beneficiaries)
- Transfer of power to local communities and networks (bottom-up approach) but also top-bottom approach (funding opportunities, inclusion in the decision-making)

- Standards and capacity-building to deal with humanitarian crisis (e.g. welcoming refugees in a culturally appropriate way)
- Common framework for social rights
- Focus on access to decent work

### **Green Workshop – Delegates from Sweden, Macedonia, Ireland, Czech Republic, Finland**

*(see picture of their construction of the social pillar in workshop report above)*

Key policy issues identified by the Green Workshop explaining their perception of the social pillar:

- Action on housing issues is needed (suggestion for innovative approaches)
- Equal rights in health care
- Indebtedness (implementation on the EU level)
- Minimum income (thinking around the reference-budget and how can this be translated to the EU-wide reference-budget)
- Tackling gender inequality, in-work poverty and lack of accessibility to education

Ways of achieving the change proposed by the Green workshop:

- Giving direct voice to people experiencing poverty at all levels
- Consulting and documenting the views of people affected by policies targeting social issues
- The cooperation among NGOs and people experiencing poverty (suggested joint project among countries with similar economic systems/backgrounds)

### **Black Workshop – Delegates from Spain, Belgium, Hungary, Portugal, Latvia, France**

- Minimum income schemes: EU Directive mandatory for all Member States
- Right to participate for people experiencing poverty and to give suggestions of solutions at national level and to the EU institutions
- Universal access to services for all inhabitants of the EU (also migrants)
- Tackling child-poverty (especially helping single-parents)
- The call to the EU institutions (EP, EC, the EU Council): “Stop austerity policies that only create poverty!”
- The creation of the permanent Committee of People experiencing poverty as an advisory body to the EU institutions

## **5.2 Meeting follow-up**

Fintan Farrell, thanked the delegations for all the work they undertook over the two days and also the great efforts they made to prepare for the meeting. He said that now there will be key messages developed from the outputs of the meetings and these will be widely distributed to try to influence the final version of the Commission’s proposal for a Social Pillar.

A question was raised by the French Network regarding the proposal to have a permanent European Commission of People experiencing Poverty to be consulted about key developments that impact on their lives. Fintan responded saying that this is a complicated issue and said that it needs to be a discussion at the next European Meeting of the National Coordinators of People experiencing Poverty.

### **5.3 Closing Speech by Manuela Geleng, Acting Director, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission**

After greeting the participants of the meeting Manuela Geleng acknowledged the fact that the economic crisis has left deep scars for social Europe as the rates of poverty and social exclusion have increased – more than 6 million people lost jobs during the crisis in Europe, 122 million people are at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

She continued by giving an overview of the initiatives that were formed under the lead of Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility: Implementation of the Youth Employment Initiative, Proposal for the Recommendation on Long-Term Unemployment, Proposal for Act on Accessibility for People with Disabilities, and Proposal for Work-Life Balance. Furthermore, she also stressed the importance given by the European Commission to the issue of minimum income (EMIN project), availability of quality services and jobs, democratic participation and national reference budgets.

For the social pillar, which still needs to be developed, she explained that it is foreseen for social pillar to have two elements: 1. Social pillar will look at the legislative side of working arrangements and will identify gaps in this field; 2. Social pillar will serve for producing guidance for Member States by identifying clear benchmarks. In relation to the social pillar she also remarked that social pillar is an attempt to combine the need for greater flexibility of the labour market with the need for more social protection. She concluded her speech by ensuring that the social pillar will be constructed through close and extensive dialogue with civil society representing the voices of people experiencing poverty. Finally she listed upcoming activities of the European Commission regarding its work on social pillar. Commission will arrange discussions with stakeholders on the possible shape of the social pillar, it will launch the call for public consultation on the social pillar, and next Annual Convention 2016 will focus on the social pillar.



## Annex

### Key Messages

#### *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**



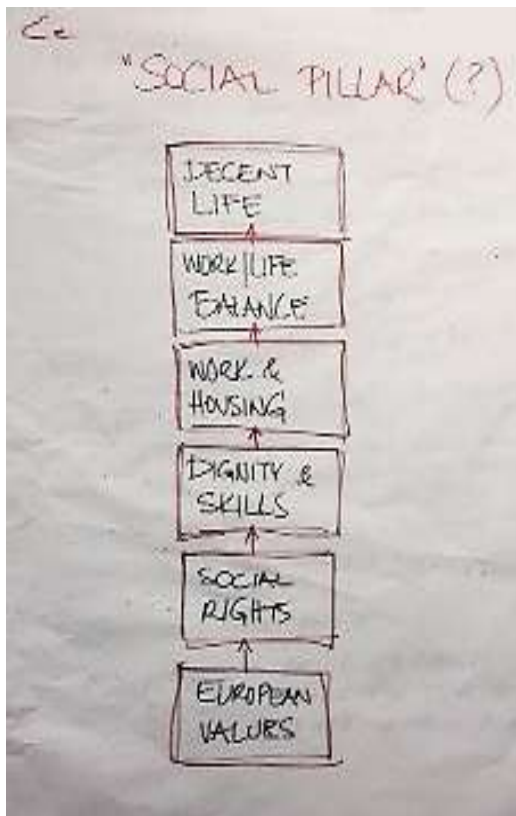
Despite the harsh realities of their everyday lives, people experiencing poverty came together to support each other and to bring forward their ideas of what is needed to have a Europe closer to citizens. They stressed that in order to reduce the gap between Europe and its citizens, reports and

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 Proposals

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.

## List of Participants

Title	Last Name	First Name	Organisation	Country
<b>National Delegations</b>				
Mrs.	Femi-Mebarek	Anna	Single parent organisation, EAPN-Austria	AUSTRIA
Mrs.	Geschwendtner	Henriette	EXIT-Sozial, EAPN-Austria	AUSTRIA
Mr.	Nachtmann	Georg	Kupfermuckn - street paper, EAPN-Austria	AUSTRIA
Mr.	Schuette	Michael	Augustin - street paper, EAPN-Austria	AUSTRIA
Mrs.	Baert	Geneviève	Bapn (Eapn Belgium)	BELGIUM
Mrs.	Garcia	Amparo	Bapn (Eapn Belgium)	BELGIUM
Mr.	Hayen	Jo	Bapn (Eapn Belgium)	BELGIUM
Mr.	Ketelslegers	Yvon	Bapn (Eapn Belgium)	BELGIUM
Mrs.	Atanasova	Zvezdelina	EAPN Bulgaria	BULGARIA
Dr.	Draganov	Dragomir	EAPN Bulgaria	BULGARIA
Mr.	Iliev	Gancho	EAPN Bulgaria	BULGARIA
Mrs.	Lybomirova	Pamela	EAPN Bulgaria	BULGARIA
Ms.	Adamlje	Jelena	Pragma	CROATIA
Mr.	Hrženjak	Luka	Croatian Anti Poverty Network	CROATIA
Ms.	Chowaniokova	Martina	Slezska diakonie	CZECH REPUBLIC
Mr.	Mrozek	Stanislav	Slezska diakonie	CZECH REPUBLIC
Mrs.	Siroka	Sarka	Slezska diakonie	CZECH REPUBLIC
Mrs.	Bay-Petersen	Sofie	SAND	DENMARK
Ms.	Kjær	Shila	SAND	DENMARK
Mr.	Laursen	Jonas Nicholai	SAND	DENMARK
Ms.	Schmidt	Emma	SAND	DENMARK
Mr.	Kiolein	Evert	EAPN Estonia	ESTONIA
Ms.	Ojakivi	Agnes	Estonian Food Bank	ESTONIA
Ms.	Veesalu	Greete	EAPN Estonia	ESTONIA
Mr.	Viisimaa	Heiki	EAPN Estonia	ESTONIA
Mr.	Haapanen	Rauno	Association of Unemployed in Helsinki, HeTy	FINLAND
Mr.	Kylmälä	Jouni	Association of Unemployed in Helsinki, HeTy	FINLAND
Mr.	Lee	David	Association of Unemployed in Helsinki, HeTy	FINLAND
Mrs.	Siimes	Sari	Association of Unemployed in Helsinki, HeTy	FINLAND
Mr.	Bourens	Jean Pierre	Salvation Army	FRANCE
Mrs.	Das Neves	Rita	Salvation Army	FRANCE
Mrs.	Dubois	Perrine	Salvation Army	FRANCE
Mrs.	Pion	Dominique	Salvation Army	FRANCE
Mrs.	Breuhäus	Gisela	NAK Germany / Mobil mit Behinderung	GERMANY
Mr.	Krebs	Wolfgang	NAK Germany	GERMANY
Mr.	Lange	Horst	NAK Germany	GERMANY
Mrs.	Stolzmann	Ivanka	NAK Germany / VAMV Bremen	GERMANY
Ms.	Saliag	Lilgana	HELLENIC ANTIPOVERTY NETWORK	GREECE
Ms.	Vardaramatou	DINA	HELLENIC ANTIPOVERTY NETWORK	GREECE
Ms.	Vergi	Afroditi	HELLENIC ANTIPOVERTY NETWORK	GREECE
Dr.	Jász	Krisztina	Hungarian Anti-Poverty Network	HUNGARY

Ms.	Lorincz	Barbara	Hungarian Anti-Poverty Network	HUNGARY
Mrs.	Szabó Juhász	Sára Zsuzsa	Hungarian Anti-Poverty Network	HUNGARY
Mr.	Szombathy	Károly	Hungarian Anti-Poverty Network	HUNGARY
Mrs.	Gudjonsdottir	Asta Thordis	Sjalfsbjorg - handicapped association.	ICELAND
Ms.	Kristjansdottir	Geirdis Hanna	The Salvation Army	ICELAND
Ms.	Olafsdottir	Laufey Lindal	FEF - Single Parent Association	ICELAND
Mr.	Oppong	Akeem Richard	Panorama Iceland - Immigrant Association	ICELAND
Mr.	Costigan	Martin	EAPN Ireland	IRELAND
Mr.	Flanagan	Patrick	EAPN Ireland	IRELAND
Ms.	McCabe	Joanne	EAPN Ireland	IRELAND
Mr.	Di Capua	Sirio	Cilap EAPN Italy	ITALY
Mrs.	Emilio	Francesca	Cilap EAPN Italy	ITALY
Mrs.	Pazzetta	Sara	Cilap EAPN Italy	ITALY
Mr.	Perrone	Nicola	Cilap EAPN Italy	ITALY
Mrs.	Alere-Fogele	Elina	Women's NGOs Cooperation Network of Latvia	LATVIA
Mrs.	Giptere	Baiba	EAPN Latvia	LATVIA
Mrs.	Zilde	Dzintra	Latvian Pensioners' Federation	LATVIA
Mr.	Jasinskas	Darius	Baltic foundation	LITHUANIA
Mr.	Svitojus	Paulius	Baltic foundation	LITHUANIA
Mr.	Vertinskij	Artur	Baltic foundation	LITHUANIA
Mr.	Berrang	Charles	Luxembourg Delegation	LUXEMBOURG
Ms.	Dondelinger	Nadia	Luxembourg Delegation	LUXEMBOURG
Mr.	Fassih	Tahar	Luxembourg Delegation	LUXEMBOURG
Mr.	Wagner	Jan	Luxembourg Delegation	LUXEMBOURG
Ms.	Mifsud	Josephine	Anti-Poverty Forum Malta	MALTA
Ms.	Scicluna Bianco	Carmen	Anti-Poverty Forum Malta	MALTA
Mr.	Xuereb	Jesmond	Anti-Poverty Forum Malta	MALTA
Mr.	Bothmer	Jo	stichting EAPN Nederland	NETHERLANDS
Mrs.	Schellevis	Wllemijntje	EAPN Nederland/ Member of the Client council East-Achterhoek, Oost-Gelre, Berkel EAPN Nederland/Stichting Ommen Samen	NETHERLANDS
Mr.	Slagter	Erik	Sterk	NETHERLANDS
Mrs.	van der Klei	Lidia	EAPN Nederland	NETHERLANDS
Mrs.	Brustad	Ann Kirsti	Bikuben/ Velferdsalliansen	NORWAY
Mr.	Holseter	Jarle	Utsatt Mann/ Velferdsalliansen	NORWAY
Mrs.	Kashale	Honoratte	BIBI AMKA/ Velferdsalliansen	NORWAY
Mrs.	Paulsen	Tina Marie R.	Fattig talt Ørland/ Velferdsalliansen	NORWAY
Mr.	Czernicki	Lukasz	Monar Association	POLAND
Ms.	Fornal	Anna	Monar Association	POLAND
Mr.	Krupiński	Kamil	Monar Association	POLAND
Mr.	Pawe	Kucharski	Monar Association	POLAND
Mrs.	Barriga Boaventura de	Cidália	EAPN - Portugal	PORTUGAL
Mr.	Figueiredo	Amandio	EAPN - Portugal	PORTUGAL
Mr.	Loureiro	Armando	EAPN - Portugal	PORTUGAL
Dr.	Vicente	Maria Jose	EAPN - Portugal	PORTUGAL

Mr.	Arizankoski	Rubincho	Macedonian anti poverty platform	REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA (FYROM)
Ms.	Dimushevska	Jovana	Macedonian anti poverty platform	REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA (FYROM)
Mr.	Jovanov	Sashko	Macedonian anti poverty platform	REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA (FYROM)
Ms.	Terzieva Pavlovska	Meri	Macedonian anti poverty platform	REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA (FYROM)
Ms.	Džakula	Ljubica	Grupa 484	REPUBLIC OF SERBIA
Mrs.	Petrovic	Milica	Romani Cikna	REPUBLIC OF SERBIA
Mr.	Ristic	Miroslav	Housing Center	REPUBLIC OF SERBIA
Mrs.	Timotijevic	Milena	Housing Center	REPUBLIC OF SERBIA
Mrs.	Giuglea	Loredana	Renasis Romania	ROMANIA
Ms.	Gyurka	Diana-Maria Georgiana-	World Vision Romania	ROMANIA
Ms.	Plopan	Andreea	World Vision Romania	ROMANIA
Ms.	Prisecariu	Lucia	World Vision Romania	ROMANIA
Mrs.	Galovicova	Anna	SAPN	SLOVAKIA
Mr.	Hromada	Frantisek	SAPN	SLOVAKIA
Mr.	Malek	Ivan	SAPN	SLOVAKIA
Mr.	Vittek Amador-Abalo	Peter	SAPN	SLOVAKIA
Mr.	Arribas	Francisco	EAPN - Spain	SPAIN
Ms.	Hernando Saiz	Alexia	EAPN Cantabria	SPAIN
Ms.	Laib	Imen	EAPN Spain	SPAIN
Mr.	Pérez García	Javier	EAPN Spain	SPAIN
Mr.	Andersson	Stefan	AlltMöjligt verkstaden Broby	SWEDEN
Mr.	Andersson	Jonathan	AlltMöjligt verkstaden Broby	SWEDEN
Mrs.	Clausen	Monica	AlltMojligt verkstaden Broby	SWEDEN
Mr.	Jørgensen	Johannes	Network Diocese of Lund	SWEDEN
Mr.	Holliday	Derek	The Poverty Alliance	UK
Ms.	MacLean	Janet Cameron	The Poverty Alliance	UK
Ms.	Mockford	Caroline	The Poverty Alliance	UK
Mrs.	Mushaka	Twimukye	The Poverty Alliance	UK

## Speakers

Title	Last Name	First Name	Organization	Country
Mr.	Baussand	Pierre	Social Platform	BELGIUM
Mrs.	Boger	Karola	GUE/NGL Group European Parliament	
Mrs.	Conze	Susanne	European Commission	

Ms.	Faber	Dominique	Ministry for Family and Integration Social Inclusion Policy and Practice - Maynooth	LUXEMBOURG
Mr.	Frazer	Hugh	University	IRELAND
Mrs.	Geleng	Manuela	European Commission	EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Mr.	Grima	Saviour	Anti-Poverty Forum Malta	MALTA
Mr.	Lambert	Jean	Member of the European Parliament	UNITED KINGDOM
Ms.	Jones	Sian	EAPN	BELGIUM
Mr.	Lelie	Peter	SPC	BELGIUM
Mr.	Striano	Mauro	FEANTSA	BELGIUM
Mr.	Vanyolos	Istvan	European Commission	
Mrs.	Van Lancker	Anne	EMIN	BELGIUM OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION
Mr.	Verhaeghe	Peter	CARITAS EUROPA	ORGANISATION
Mr.	Vojkuvka	Evzen	Charita Ostrava	CZECH REPUBLIC

### Representatives of European Institutions, National Authorities and Civil Society

Dr.	Araujo	Sandra	EAPN - Portugal	PORTUGAL
Ms.	Buttier	Julie	European Commission Eurocarers - European Association Working for Carers	BELGIUM
Ms.	Centola	Francesca	Eurohealthnet	BELGIUM
Dr.	Hamalainen	Riitta-Maija	Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment	NETHERLANDS
Ms.	Hussein	Faryda	Positive Money	UK
Mr.	Jourdan	Stan	International Federation of Social Workers	BELGIUM
Dr.	Kabasinkaite	Dale		LUXEMBOURG
Mrs.	Kiffer	Liz	State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment	NETHERLANDS
Mrs.	Klijnsma	Jetta		LUXEMBOURG
Mrs.	Kneip	Zoé		BELGIUM
Mr.	Leonori	Luigi	SMES Europa	LUXEMBOURG
Mrs.	Lima de Pina	Cécilia		
Ms.	Monti	Chiara	European Commission	
Mrs.	Paraskeva	Maria- Anna	European Commission	
Ms.	Steppe	Bérenghère	PPS Social Integration	BELGIUM
Mr.	Van Geertsom	Julien	PPS Social Integration	BELGIUM

### Facilitators and Rapporteurs

Mrs.	Dahmen	Sigrid	EAPN	BELGIUM
Ms.	Ferro	Amana	EAPN	EAPN
Mrs.	Goris	Josée	PPS Social Integratio	BELGIUM
Mr.	Hanan	Robin	EAPN Ireland	IRELAND
Mrs.	Hermans	Marja	Welzijnszorg vzw	BELGIUM
Mrs.	Leemkuil	Sonja	EAPN Nederland/ Member EUISG EAPN	NETHERLANDS
Mr.	Lemmens	Philippe	EAPN	BELGIUM

Ms.	Schumacher	Lea	Eurodiaconia	BELGIUM
Mrs.	Tancau	Magda	EAPN	BELGIUM
Mr.	Topolovec	Mihael	EAPN	BELGIUM
Mrs.	Vandermeersch	Elke	BAPN	BELGIUM

### Organisers

Mrs.	Dierckens	Catherine	Destrée Organisation	BELGIUM
Mrs.	Epinat	Nellie	EAPN	BELGIUM
Mr.	Farrell	Fintan	EAPN	BELGIUM
Ms.	Giorgianni	Delia	European Commission	
Mrs.	Grapeloux	Claire	European Commission	
Ms.	Lee	Rebecca	EAPN	BELGIUM
Ms.	Lombin	Emily	Destrée Organisation	BELGIUM
Mrs.	Mellone	Emilia	European Commission	
Mr.	Ruta	Alessio	Destrée Organisation	BELGIUM
Mr.	Van de Kerckhof	Sam	Destrée Organisation	BELGIUM

### Volunteers and Interpreters

				REPUBLIC OF SERBIA
Ms.	Jelenkovic	Zorana	Volunteer/Interpreter	
Ms.	Koutsoukidou	Fani	Volunteer/Interpreter	BELGIUM
Ms.	Lazarevic	Ana	Volunteer/Interpreter	BELGIUM
Mr.	Luyts	Bert	ATD Quart Monde	FRANCE
Ms.	Machado	Katharine	EAPN Netherlands/student College for International Studies, the Hague	NETHERLANDS
Mrs.	Nuytemans	Marleen	BAPN	BELGIUM