



EUROPEAN ANTI POVERTY NETWORK

Going beyond the data The Reality of Poverty in Europe

Conference Report
16 October 2019

S&D Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats in the European Parliament

epp group in the European Parliament

GOING BEYOND THE DATA
THE REALITY OF POVERTY
IN EUROPE
Wednesday 16 October 2019
13.00 – 15.00
European Parliament, Brussels
Room: ASP 3G3
[#BeyondTheData](#) [#EndPoverty](#)

ATD FOURTH WORLD
EMMAUS EUROPE
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E!PN EUROPEAN ANTI POVERTY NETWORK

Hosted by Pierfrancesco Majorino MEP (S&D Group), Cindy Franssen MEP (EPP Group), European Anti-Poverty Network, ATD Fourth World, International Federation of Social Workers, and Emmaus Europe.

Programme

Interpretation: DE, IT, FR, EN

Chair: Pierfrancesco Majorino, MEP (S&D Group)

13.00 Welcome

Cindy Franssen, MEP (EPP Group)

Richard Delplanque, Vice President of EAPN

13.15 Going beyond the data - Stories from the ground

Speakers:

Anne Marie Decroock, ATD Fourth World, Belgium: Facing prejudices when living in poverty

Jean-Philippe Legaut, Emmaus Satu Mare, Romania: From the institutions to the street: the issue of marginalised young adults

John Brennan, International Federation for Social Workers: Social workers' perspective on tackling poverty

Jürgen Schneider, EAPN Germany: Reality of Poverty in one of Europe's richest countries

Cristina Avonto, fio.PSD President: 'Housing First': an Italian best practice to reduce Homelessness

14.00 The European dimension – past progress and current hopes

Sian Jones, EAPN Europe

14.15 Discussion with MEPs and audience

14.55 Closing and next steps Pierfrancesco Majorino, MEP (S&D Group)

Introduction



This event was hosted by the **European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN)**, with **Pierfrancesco Majorino**, MEP (S&D Group) and **Cindy Franssen**, MEP (EPP Group). The other organisers were **ATD Fourth World**, the **International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)**, and **Emmaus Europe**. The roundtable aimed at helping MEPs deconstruct myths and break stereotypes about (people experiencing) poverty, and to build their understandings of the realities of poverty going further than data and statistics, and to build support for the re-creation of the Parliamentary Intergroup on the Fight Against Poverty.

This meeting came in the context of a failure to achieve the poverty target of the Europe 2020 strategy, and thus the key need to maintain the fight against poverty as a political priority in the post-2020 strategy. Europe has an ambition to *leave no one behind* while doing what is necessary to make the transition to a more sustainable, carbon neutral economy. How will people experiencing poverty be protected during this transition? How will economic and social rights be guaranteed within a more social and sustainable development model?

The event opened with five case studies, bringing the voices of people experiencing poverty directly together with MEPs. The key questions that were addressed are: What does poverty in Europe look like, and what are the key trends? What progress has been made on poverty levels in Europe in recent years? What role has the Parliament played in this?

Roundtable Objectives

- To help MEPs deconstruct myths and break stereotypes about (people experiencing) poverty, and to build their understanding of the realities of poverty, going further than data and statistics
- To build support amongst MEPs for the re-creation of the Intergroup on Poverty and Human Rights

Cindy Franssen, Member of the European Parliament (EPP Group), opened the roundtable and greeted the participants. She clarified that the scope of the conference was to understand together which could be the ways to break the cycle of poverty in Europe. She particularly focused on children and affirmed that the European Child Guarantee can be a crucial instrument to tackle child poverty. She also stressed education and quoted the Commissioner-Designate for Jobs, Nicolas Schmit, who expressed the importance of developing a comprehensive strategy to fight poverty. Before leaving the floor to Richard Delplanque, she highlighted the need to develop an ambitious European anti-poverty strategy that prioritises the eradication of poverty and supports the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals, through dialogue with civil society and people with direct experience of poverty at EU and national level.

Richard Delplanque, Vice President of EAPN, kicked off the discussions. He affirmed that he is a former person experiencing poverty and he is now very committed to ensuring the participation of people experiencing poverty in France. He continued by presenting EAPN, its work and commitment, which is first and foremost giving a voice to people experiencing poverty. Indeed, in this respect, EAPN has launched a social media campaign for the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on 17th October, and he invited everybody to follow it on EAPN's [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) page. He highlighted that it is crucial to raise awareness about poverty and social exclusion among all citizens, as there are still unjustifiable prejudices, false images, sentiments of hatred of these people; citizens often think poor people are taking advantage of the system. It is thus necessary to stress the urgency of combating these stereotypes and creating an inclusive context for people experiencing poverty. He highlighted that 2019 has been an important year for EAPN cooperation with political actors, when more than 250 candidates to the European elections signed a manifest showing their commitment to fight poverty; nearly 40 of them were elected.

He also stressed the fact that the socio-economic system, as it is today, has led to more than 100 million people becoming poor; it is not acceptable that 22.5% of the population is today living in poverty or is at the brink of poverty. He concluded that EAPN particularly wants the European Semester to become a real social framework for the Agenda 2030, which also takes into account sustainable development goals and the impacts of our economic system on the society and the environment. He concluded on the importance of working together with the European Union and stakeholders, pleaded on the need to strengthen the collaboration among them and civil society, as well as on the need to take into account the participation of people experiencing poverty in decision-making and policy implementation processes.

Going beyond the data – Stories from the ground



We know that 113 million people live at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Europe – but what are the stories behind these statistics? We heard 5 case studies, bringing the voices of people with experience of poverty directly together with MEPs.

Anne Marie Decroock, from **ATD Fourth World**, highlighted the difficulty of facing prejudices when living in poverty. She underlined that it is often thought that people in poverty don't want to work. However, the reality is that a lot of people do not have the possibility to change their life. For instance, people who have not learned to use the computer when they were young, have scarce chances today to get a job. There is distrust towards these people, and how much courage a person needs to overcome the obstacles which derive from his/her situation is not seen. She then took another example: a woman who lived in the streets for 10 years, who finally managed to get a home. But when the landlord discovered that she received welfare benefits, he didn't want to accept her anymore. This kind of situation leads people in poverty to fear what others think and their criticism. To conclude, she presented the book written by ATD Fourth World Belgium, in collaboration with journalists and scientists: "At the bottom, the bar is always put higher" (in Dutch "Aan de onderkant ligt de lat altijd hoger" - more information, can be accessed on the website: aandeonderkant.be.)

Jean-Philippe Legaut from **Emmaus Satu Mare (Romania)** focused on the marginalisation of young adults. He firstly explained that his association in Romania is an affiliate of Emmaus Europe, which has more than 300 groups acting in 20 countries in Europe. They receive people in difficulties which are very different in nature. In the North East of Romania, the association specifically works with children and young adults. He affirmed that in Romania social protection has improved during the last years, as it was a prerequisite to access to membership in the European Union. However, when young adults leave the system at 18 years old, their situation becomes precarious. The young people they take in are extremely vulnerable; they have low school attendance records, many of them started school at 11 years old, as they were poor and could not start before. Of course, this has a considerable impact on them, also from a professional point of view. Indeed, they have no qualifications and cannot go on apprenticeships; their professional life is precarious and, with it, their entire livelihoods. Nevertheless, there is more, because young adults become vulnerable for other reasons: they often develop drug additions. He took a concrete example: a young girl lived in an association until age 18, and received psychological assistance. For administrative reasons she was moved into a state centre. Here she did not receive any kind of treatment. She returned to the street and started taking drugs. No other assistance centre wanted her.

He then focused on young children who have a disability or who develop a disability during the time they spent in assistance, because they don't receive suitable medication for their age. At 18, they have no opportunity; they are completely abandoned by society. He concluded by saying that the previous month, a considerable sum of funds has been allocated in the EU for training and education of young people included in programmes. However, despite the funds, there are no accompanying measures for them. These people need social accompanying measures, i.e. to get access to health and services. What is needed, he affirmed, is a more integrated policy.

John Brennan, International Federation for Social Workers, highlighted that social workers specifically work with the causes of poverty and on the stigmatization of poverty. The image of poor people the society has should be changed, by also shifting the focus from economic power to social power. He affirmed that in his country, Ireland, people spend more in renting systems rather than in creating new accommodations; someone waits 7 years for housing. Unfortunately, social structures have too often left people behind. He underlined the need to fight marginalization and to find a way to achieve sustainable development, looking more closely at the causes of poverty and deprivation. It is necessary to search for all possible solutions at local, regional and national level. Society is weakened by inequalities but, by pooling the efforts, civil society organisations and political actors can do much more, namely in implementing concrete strategies in the framework of the European Pillar of Social Rights to fight against the structural causes of poverty.

Jürgen Schneider from **EAPN Germany** then presented the reality of poverty seen from the perspective of one of Europe's richest countries, Germany. He affirmed that there are different types of poverty in his country. Even though, within the last decade, the number of people in poverty has decreased, their employment has become more and more precarious. Many people do not have a place to live because rents costs have been constantly increasing in the last years and are too high in Germany, even outside big cities. He then specifically focused on several policy recommendations which are also contained in the Poverty Watch Germany 2018:

- Reduce precariousness;
- Increase the minimum wage;
- Unemployment benefits should be designed in such a way that they don't put the living wage at risk;
- Increase the possibility to reconcile family and work;
- Strengthen the link between protection of human rights and social aspects;
- Ensure the participation of people in poverty;
- Make the European Pillar of Social Rights a binding instrument;
- Make social protection systems more effective.

Based on own experiences, he also illustrated the difficulties and institutional and practical hurdles people experiencing poverty face when they want to get involved in associations, parties, etc. and for them to be accepted on an equal footing and as experts to address and overcome poverty and social exclusion. He also advocated for sufficient funding to enable the full involvement of people experiencing poverty, both at national and European level, as well as the need to have adequate minimum income schemes and, as John Brennan said, for binding measures in implementing the various principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights. He also underlined the need to strengthen

the social dimension of the EU cohesion policy with higher budget allocations for anti-poverty and social inclusion measures and the need to pursue a social and human rights-based approach.

Cristina Avonto, fio.PSD President, brought her project experience carried out in Italy, called Housing First. The experience aims at putting people at the centre of the experiment, so as to make them citizens with rights. The concept of Housing First originates in North America and essentially means taking people who live on the street and giving them a safe and protected place to stay. She explained that it is very complicated, if not impossible, for people to work on themselves if they live in the street. Indeed, the objective is not to test people but to make them feel safe. Data show that Housing First is much more successful than sanitation measures, which are very expensive. In the beginning, the Housing First project in Italy started as a bottom-up experiment. The Italian Ministry were convinced to put a real structure in place only after seeing concrete successful data. A scientific committee of Universities became involved in the project. Thanks to them, a series of studies is now available, which collects literature on the theme of combating severe poverty. It is thus possible to discuss this issue with policy-makers at an operational level, using scientific and economic results. She concluded by presenting the beneficiaries of the Housing First project: there have been 688 Housing First users in 2 years, namely 456 adults and 232 children. 51% of the people are Italian citizens. The figure that is worth mentioning here is the success results of more than 85%, after 2 years of residence in Housing First accommodation.

The European dimension – past progress and current hopes



Sian Jones from EAPN Europe then elaborated on the following questions: What does poverty in Europe look like, what are the key trends? What progress has been made on poverty levels in Europe in recent years? What role has the European Parliament played in this, and what do we want to see from our new political leaders?

She started by presenting the work done by EAPN, especially at the European level. She highlighted that it is crucial to ensure the participation of people experiencing poverty, this being also necessary for finding solutions. The Europe 2020 poverty and social exclusion target, which had aimed at reducing those in poverty by at least 20 million people, delivered disappointing results. The number of people in poverty or those facing the risk of poverty peaked at a record height of 123 million during the crisis, in 2012. Since then a slight decline to 113 million can be observed, - a reduction of only 5 million people compared to 2008 figures. When discussing and assessing these results, there is the need to take the situation of the labour market into account where we witness an increase in the numbers of in-work poverty, now hitting nearly 1 out of 10 workers across the EU. There is a considerable divergence if we look across Europe: one third of the population in Bulgaria and Greece is in poverty, while in Czech Republic the percentage of those at risk of poverty is 12%.

The inequality gap is also not closing, but has rather widened in a number of countries. People in poverty belong to different categories: they are children, parents, ethnic minorities such as Roma, unemployed, migrants. These different groups need different answers. Hidden data should also be taken into account, i.e. female poverty is not included; the OECD does not evaluate family expenses of families with children and overestimates the real standard of living of the poor who have to spend money on basic goods. The statistical index at-risk-of-poverty is not comprehensive, as it refers to national averages.

She then underlined that at the heart of EAPN's work are people: poverty is a violation of human rights. It is a political choice, which can be resolved if there is the political will to do so. People are not poor because it is their fault, but because the system does not ensure a minimum wage and social protection. She underlined that poverty levels are still unacceptably high with increasing disparities, hidden poverty and growing inequalities. Sian Jones recalled the strong relationship between quality work, social protection and adequate minimum income systems and levels. The problem for poor people is also access to health services and affordable housing, and insufficient income leads them to making choices for deciding what to spend their money on.

She concluded by highlighting the fundamental role that NGOs could play, defending rights and providing protection to people. What is the EU doing? Europe must have poverty as a priority. The instrument to do so exists; indeed, the European Semester is not only an economic tool but could also be social policy-oriented, even though the European Union has predominantly and too often remained focused on economic criteria and internal market objectives in latter years. The 1992 Council Recommendation on common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social assistance in social protection systems backed the importance of adequate minimum income benefits and systems for people to make a decent living. At that stage, all the Member States signed up to it and committed to its implementation. The last decade has shown that "soft-law" instruments alone will not bring progress to substantially reduce the current much too high level and too wide-spread risks of poverty, material deprivation and social exclusion. EAPN therefore advocates for EU frameworks on a living minimum wage and adequate minimum income. The focus should be on active inclusion, investing in children, tackling housing and homelessness. Today, with the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU can also deliver on equal opportunities, access to the world of work, inclusion and social protection, but we also need an ambitious poverty reduction target delivered through an integrated anti-poverty strategy in the post Europe 2020 strategy, combining access to adequate minimum income, quality jobs and universal services.

What can the European Parliament do? She stated that the Parliament has limitations in promoting its position vis-à-vis the other European Institutions. However, there is much to be done to ensure that poverty remains on the agenda so that the EU can deliver on its commitments. She added that there are several other action areas around the theme of poverty, i.e. the European Minimum Income Network project, the Child Guarantee. The focus areas should be a post-2020 social and sustainable agenda, the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and making poverty eradication a priority in the 2030 agenda. More ambitious targets, such as 50% poverty reduction by 2030, are needed. Adequate minimum income, quality work and services for all are essential. Minimum income is necessary for a variety of reasons, i.e. survival, right to housing for all, youth guarantees, but it should be distinguished from minimum wages. For EAPN, a key ingredient and precondition to making progress towards the reduction of poverty and social inclusion is a meaningful partnership with and participation of people experiencing poverty on all levels, also in EU-level policy design, decision making and monitoring.

MEP Cindy Franssen intervened to affirm that there is the need to transform the socio-economic and political structures, to stand up and speak up for voiceless people. The role of Civil Society is crucial to make the voice of people in poverty heard. It is essential to develop a new strategy to tackle poverty. In this respect, she underlined that the European Pillar of Social Rights is a key instrument. She finally underlined that an action plan is needed in order to put concrete and effective measures in place.

Interventions from the audience

During the discussion with the audience, participants stressed several issues around the theme of poverty, by asking how the European institutions have foreseen to tackle it through the post-2020 strategy. One of the points raised was on the implementation of the Child Guarantee and on the role of the ESF+ for putting it in place. There was also a call for a strategy aiming at investing in young people living in suburbs. Two other issues raised were the inclusion of people with disabilities and Roma inclusion. Concerning the latter, it was stressed that there are no objectives for reducing poverty in the Roma community and that there is the need to create better synergies between Roma inclusion and the post-2020 strategy.

Conclusions and Wrapping Up

MEP Pierfrancesco Majorino highlighted the need to build up a strong alliance between politicians, representatives of civil society, the third sector, workers, social workers and citizens living in poverty, fragility and discrimination. He expressed his conviction that there must be the right spirit to open a dialogue with the direct involvement of everyone. The European institutions as a whole were called upon to make a major change in this direction. It is a challenge that Europe still has to overcome; if it can be said that the number of poor people has fallen in absolute terms in recent years, then it is also essential to acknowledge that we cannot be satisfied. Poverty has diversified, the number of poor workers has grown. He affirmed that this multifaceted issue is a challenge that can be won only if we know how to deal with poverty by looking at the different stories that populate it: childhood, disability, mental health problems, stigma, repressive actions.

Poor people have been treated, and still are treated today, as a problem to be repressed and not as a challenge to be overcome together. Fighting poverty means insisting on the promotion of people and of the most fragile, such as women, who are often in a condition of fragility that translates into a difference in wages. He stressed crucial issues, such as fighting poverty, the right to health, housing, minimum income and minimum wages. He underlined the crucial role of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which is a container for all these challenges and the importance of the European Social Fund, as well as of other funds, i.e. The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD). He concluded by acknowledging the need to develop a more ambitious policy which comprehensively takes fundamental rights into account.

*This report was written by **Francesca Perulli**, Policy Intern at EAPN Europe. For more information about EAPN's policy work, please contact **Sian Jones**, EAPN Europe Policy Coordinator – sian.jones@eapn.eu – or visit www.eapn.eu.*

