

Austrian EU Presidency Conference
5TH EUROPEAN MEETING OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING POVERTY

Key Messages

Context: The 5th Meeting took place in Brussels on 12-13 May. The theme was *How do we cope with everyday life?* It was attended by over 200 people. These included delegations of people experiencing poverty from 23 countries (21 Member States plus Bulgaria and Norway) together with many Social Protection Committee (SPC) and Social Exclusion Programme (SEP) committee members, representatives of the European Commission, EAPN and other European NGOs, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Most of the national delegations had undertaken a detailed preparatory process and compiled a report prior to attending the 5th Meeting. It was interesting to note that, following the recommendations from the previous meeting under the Luxembourg Presidency, in a number of countries the preparation had received financial support from National or Regional Authorities. The following are some of the key themes stressed by delegates during the meeting.

Participation

Participation is essential: It is essential to involve people experiencing poverty in the decisions that affect their day to day to lives. Policy makers must listen to and engage in meaningful dialogue at both European, national, regional and local level. Systems and services must be open and transparent. This is the only way to ensure effective policies to prevent and eradicate poverty and social exclusion. Such participation must be regular, be given a formal status and structure and be resourced. Indicators should be agreed for monitoring participation. European meetings of people experiencing poverty should be formally recognised and be guaranteed on a regular basis.

The Reality of Living in Poverty

Coping is a constant struggle: Coping with poverty is difficult. It is a day to day struggle for survival. This is because if you live in poverty you are isolated and lack basic information. Your basic needs such as access to work, decent housing and health and education services are often not met. Even when available, essential services often treat you in a disrespectful, unresponsive and stigmatising manner. Racism and discrimination deepen your exclusion and isolation. Lack of an adequate basic income results in overindebtedness. You feel powerless, stigmatised and blamed. You lack choice.

Widening gap: The gap between rich and poor is widening. This is not only the result of widening income differences but also because of the increasing privatisation of utilities and services, the sell off of social housing, increased charging for health services and medicines, lack of affordable public transport, growing costs of participating in social, cultural and sporting activities.

Inadequate and insecure work increasing: For many access to decent work is very restricted. Work is often low paid and insecure and not sufficient to lift people out of poverty. Access is worsened as a result of discrimination and racism, especially for the Roma, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants but also for others such as single mothers and disabled people. This forces some into unregulated work. Workfare measures and cuts in benefits, which take no account of whether decent quality jobs are available, also result in exploitation and force people into low paid jobs. Often such measures seem to take no account that for some a job, because of particular difficulties, is not a realistic option. The relocation of factories to future Member States and beyond is also creating new risks of unemployment and poverty in present Member States as well as having potential negative impacts in terms of social standards in the countries to which they relocate.

Fear for one's children: Many parents fear that the things they missed in their own lives when growing up are now happening to their children. It is not only that children may lack basic necessities or have inadequate access to essential services but that they lack the possibility to participate in normal social, cultural and recreational activities.

Basic Needs for a Good Life

Human rights and dignity for all: The most fundamental need for a good life is respect for the human rights and dignity of all people irrespective of their ethnic origin, religion or legal status. Every individual person and their story count.

An adequate minimum income: In as wealthy a part of the world as the EU every citizen should be guaranteed a sufficient minimum income to pay the bills and lead life with dignity. This should be enough not just for basic needs but also for participation in social and cultural life and for personal development. This requires not only increasing access to work but redistribution of resources. All Member States should have a minimum income scheme and this should be at an adequate level. These should take account of the increasing needs of children as they get older and the additional costs faced by some people such as those with a disability. Benefits and minimum wages should be linked to increases in the cost of rent and utilities such as water, gas and electricity.

Enforced anti-discrimination legislation: Strong anti-discrimination and equality legislation which is rigorously enforced and guarantees the right to work and equal access to services for all, including undocumented migrants, the Roma and disabled people, is essential. This needs to be backed up by solidarity between people in poverty to oppose political extremism and racism.

Access to decent work: Access to quality work is a key route out of poverty for many, but not all people, enabling them to become active citizens. Such access

needs to be supported by linking appropriate training opportunities, supportive social services and flexible income support systems.

A roof over one's head: Decent and affordable housing is essential. This means investing more in building social housing, controlling rents and evictions, prosecuting bad landlords and ensuring respectful housing services.

Access to essential services: Essential services need to be: available locally, up-to-date, efficient and universal (not targeted at particular groups).

- equal opportunities in **education** is a springboard for life and access to life long learning, including free higher education and training in new information and communication technologies is essential for all;
- access to essential **health care** services, including dental services, needs to be guaranteed for all and the current very widespread discrepancies across the EU need to be addressed, possibly by establishing minimum standards. Health education and access to healthy food should be increased;
- access to affordable **transport, social services** and **child care** are all important for a decent life;
- opportunities to participate in affordable **cultural and creative activities** and in **sporting and leisure activities** are an essential element in a good life.

Access to information: access to relevant and understandable information about rights, services and opportunities is vital to surviving and leading an independent life.

2006-2008 NAPs/inclusion

Participation of people experiencing poverty and NGOs representing them in the preparation but also the implementation and monitoring of the new NAPs must be extended and deepened. Training on participation techniques should be organised for civil servants responsible for the NAPs.

The next NAPs need to be more **concrete, focussed and specific** and thus more understandable and effective than previous NAPs.

Preparation of the NAPs must involve the **whole policy system** and **link** different policy fields together.

The NAPs should take into account the **range of needs** that are necessary for a good life and not only focus on activation measures.

The impact of the **privatisation of utilities** (e.g. water, gas, electricity) needs to be taken into account in the NAPs.

Ongoing **monitoring and evaluation** of what has actually happened because of the NAPs need to be strengthened.

The Future

In future social inclusion objectives should be **mainstreamed** across all areas of EU policy making.

The future **German Presidency** of the EU announced that it will host the 6th Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty in Brussels in 2007.