



**COUNCIL OF  
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

**Brussels, 5 June 2008**

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**NOTE**

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from : The Presidency  
to : COUNCIL (Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs)

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**Subject : Information from the Slovenian EU Presidency on the 7<sup>th</sup> European Meeting  
of People Experiencing Poverty  
(Brussels 16-17 May 2008)  
(Any other business item)**

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Delegations will find attached a note from the Presidency.

**Information from the Slovenian EU Presidency on the  
7<sup>th</sup> European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty  
(Brussels 16-17 May 2008)**

The Slovenian Presidency, with the support of the European Commission, the Belgian Government and the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN), organized the seventh European Meeting of people experiencing poverty in Brussels on 16 and 17 May 2008.

124 delegates from 26 countries took part in the meeting as well as 90 guests from National Ministries, EU Institutions, NGOs, academics, and trade unions.

This year's meeting focused on four pillars in the fight against poverty: services of general interest, social services, housing and minimum income. The following are some of the key messages and recommendations stressed by the delegates to the seventh meeting:

**Services of general interest** (SGI) which are accessible and affordable are essential for a decent life and for the respect of fundamental rights. Many of the delegates expressed increasing difficulties with accessing such services. Energy Poverty was discussed as a particular example. Key concerns were raised about the impact of rising energy and other utility prices on people with low-incomes. Delegates spoke of the unacceptability of being forced to choose between food and heating. Key recommendations from the delegates included:

- Affordable access to energy and other basic services must be guaranteed as a fundamental right.
- Members States should guarantee affordable access for all to essential services through measures such as regulated pricing regimes, guaranteed access to a minimum package of services and the prohibition of cut-offs etc.
- The proposed European Charter on Energy Consumers' Rights has to include social standards and be legally binding. The Charter has to be a tool to protect consumers.

- Energy Poverty must be recognized as a key problem on which the EU must take united and urgent action, particularly in the light of rising energy prices. This should include action on fair pricing and energy efficiency and be linked to ensuring an adequate minimum income.
- Understandable and accessible information has to be delivered through face-to-face services, rather than a reliance on electronic means which are discriminatory to those on low-incomes, but also in order to ensure free independent advice, and effective complaints procedures.
- The effect of liberalisation of the markets, including the impact of the Services Directive, has to be urgently evaluated to assess its social impact on people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.
- People experiencing poverty have to be involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies related to SGI if a true assessment is to be made of how far SGI and the current workings of the internal market are supporting social inclusion.

**Social services** are essential services which support the social inclusion of people in poverty and which have to be accessible, of good quality and guaranteed for all. The internal market's rights should not have priority over fundamental rights and should not interfere with the Member States duties to organise accessible social services which really deliver to the needs of their local communities. The right to social assistance is recognised in the charter of Fundamental Rights, but this right is gradually becoming more and more difficult to obtain due to discriminatory criteria, contracts and sanctions. Key recommendations from the delegates included:

- The right to access good quality social services must be guaranteed.
- Social services have to be affordable, of good quality and continuous, meeting the real and evolving needs of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion throughout their lives and changing circumstances.
- Everybody has the right to be treated equally, in a dignified manner and have access to social services without any discrimination.
- Information and advice must be made available to every person as an obligation, and in a form that is accessible to people on low-incomes, i.e. through local services.
- Access to affordable, quality health care and to housing has to be improved urgently.
- A European observatory on health and poverty should be created.
- The new approach to developing individual contracts between clients and providers of social services is causing concern amongst people in poverty. Action must be taken to ensure that these contracts are not discriminatory.
- The EU should establish quality standards that ensure that Member States guarantee affordable access to quality social services.
- National Governments have to guarantee that social services are effectively working well according to standards set at EU level.
- Social services have to be coordinated, implemented and evaluated at the local level.
- If human rights are to be respected, people experiencing poverty have to be structurally involved through participation mechanisms at all levels. Participatory models of policy development and implementation must be actively promoted and supported through EU and national funding mechanisms.

**Housing** and accommodation is a fundamental right which needs to be recognised by the EU. The delegates emphasised that housing is more than four walls and that people need a good environment with good services in order to live in dignity. The particular difficulties in relation to housing and shelter for homeless people, people with drug addictions or mental health problems were highlighted, as well as examples of successful housing projects addressing the needs of such groups run by non-governmental organisations and directly involving the people concerned.

Delegates were extremely concerned by the difficulties faced by migrants in relation to housing. It was also noted that people with disabilities have special needs in relation to housing in order to ensure their right to independent living. However, it was also pointed out that in many Member States the increasing cost of housing and the percentage of people's disposal income needed to pay for housing meant that difficulties in relation to housing were a problem for large sections of society. While it was recognised that housing is primarily a Member State competence, it was also felt that greater efforts needed to be made through cooperation at EU level to address the problems in access to housing. Key recommendations from the delegates included:

- The involvement of NGOs and the people directly concerned with housing problems is essential to address the real needs of homeless people and people with housing problems.
- Financial support to empower people experiencing homelessness to speak for themselves and to assist NGOs to respond to housing problems is essential.
- Strategies and National Action Plans to address housing and homeless problems should be developed.
- Housing and homelessness should become a focus for a thematic year in the EU Inclusion strategy.
- The existence of Public and Social housing is an essential part of a successful strategy to address housing problems.

- European Structural Funds should better support access to affordable and sustainable housing.
- Member States should set targets for the percentage of disposable income that people should have to pay for their housing.
- Taxation policies should discourage leaving houses vacant and speculation in the housing market.
- Non discrimination in the access to housing is essential and EU legislation in this regard should be strengthened and its implementation strictly monitored.

**Minimum Income** schemes have to be available in all the EU Member States, and considered as a right, acknowledging that dignity actually costs money, as well as an essential investment for the future of our society. Key recommendations from the delegates included:

- Minimum income has to be considered as dynamic tool, which can easily be used by people in need in order to change their lives.
- Minimum income is an investment to improve the inclusion of people, acknowledging that employment is not the only way to inclusion.
- The participants insist that progress is needed regarding information on and access to Minimum Income. Administrative procedures should be made more simple, more transparent, and more respectful of the dignity of the persons concerned (for example, by creating only one place to make the application, and avoiding people having to repeat their stories many times).
- Minimum income is not only about money, but also about access to medical care, culture... and other resources necessary for a dignified life.

- Minimum income should be linked to the real cost of living, taking into account price increases, according to each country's standards, and in reference to what people know they actually need. Social NGOs have a particular role in facilitating a participatory approach for the definition of a 'basket of goods' necessary for a dignified life.
- The EU should be driving the recognition that Minimum Income is an asset and a resource, rather than only an expense, and should avoid stigmatising minimum income schemes as 'passive measures'.

The delegates stressed the need for these four pillars to be visible in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. They further stressed the need to engage with the media to give an accurate picture of what poverty really is and to break negative images of 'lazy people who don't want to work'. The delegates insisted that fostering the participation of people experiencing poverty is essential to overcoming these negative stereotypes and to recognising their intelligence and valuable experience, and their ability to contribute constructive proposals.

The delegates requested that evaluation tools should be developed in order to measure the progress between each Meeting. They also pointed to the need for an evaluation of the impact of the current EU inclusion strategy in preparation for the 2010 EU Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

**Proposals of the Presidency:**

The Presidency supports the view that the participation of people experiencing poverty is essential and calls for greater efforts to be made to foster this participation.

The Presidency encourages Member States to consider the messages and recommendations expressed by the delegates to the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting, as appropriate, in their National Action Plans 2008 – 2011, in their National Reform Programmes and in the follow up to the active inclusion communication.

The Presidency encourages the Commission to take good account of the views expressed by the delegates to the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting in its work on services, in the principles to be drafted on active inclusion, in its follow up work on the Lisbon Strategy and on the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion, and in its proposals for the future Social Agenda.

The Presidency encourages all participants and guests of the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting to disseminate the results and experiences of this 7<sup>th</sup> meeting as widely as possible and to make greater efforts to show how the results of the meetings contribute to the exchange of knowledge and experience, the development of actions to combat poverty and social exclusion at all levels and the ongoing development of policies to eradicate poverty and social exclusion.

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