



Joint statement of the Archbishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Church of Sweden regarding Child Poverty and Social Exclusion

Child poverty has increased considerably during the last years both in Sweden, Finland and in the rest of Europe. In Europe, 20 million children are today at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Within the scope of the ongoing European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, the fight against child poverty has been raised as a top priority issue in the European Union.

Children have a special status in the Christian faith. Jesus promotes children as an example. In Churches in Sweden and Finland, we meet children of all ages and in all life situations. These are often children that are poor, excluded, exposed to violence, discriminated or lack permit of residence. Our task as Churches and Christians is to listen to these children, show them that we care and give a voice to their experiences.

Every child is entitled to a good childhood filled with **faith** and the possibility of spiritual development, **hope** for a safe future and **love** in the form of a family that is present, time together and close relations to other adults. For parents and other adults close to children, the challenge to follow and support the children is essential. Parents shall obtain economic and other support for managing their important task in upbringing children. All children need to feel that they are welcome to join church activities, that they are seen, listened to and that they can turn to the Church in all situations. Children need to experience the joy of life, hope and build strengths to meet life's challenges.

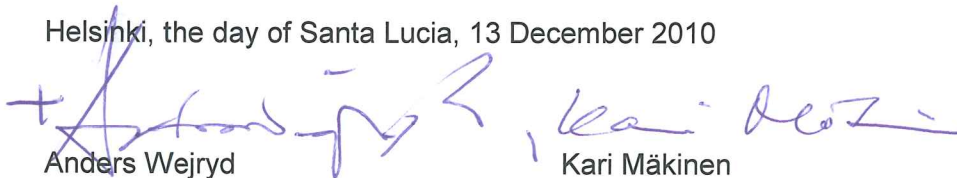
Growing up at risk of poverty and social exclusion restrains children in their personal development and their possibilities to get a good start in life. Poverty is also a risk for children's mental and physical well-being, and often tends to have adverse affects on school examination results and chances for higher education. Child poverty increases the risks for young persons of involvement in criminality, difficulties to get established in the employment market as an adult and to find one's place in society. Children growing up in poor households are also at greater risk to get caught in a life-long poverty trap, which often transmits from generation to generation.

We welcome the initiatives by the European Union and various Member States to combat poverty, such as the Europe 2020-strategy with the aim of lifting 20 million Europeans out of poverty by 2020 and the upcoming European Platform Against Poverty. However, we find that these measures are not enough, but that the situation of children must be given priority in a more explicit, coherent and consistent way. Obligations arising out of ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child must be given more weight within all policy areas.

Our message to the decision makers in Sweden, Finland and EU:

- Within the scope of the new Europe 2020-strategy, combating child poverty and social exclusion of children must be prioritized, especially with regard to the upcoming European Platform Against Poverty. We urge the European Commission to prepare a Recommendation to Fight Child Poverty and an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child.
- Combating child poverty and promoting the well-being of children must be given particular priority in all decision-making on local, national and European level, for example by introducing Child Consequence Analyses in all decisions affecting children. This concerns also decision-making within the Churches.
- Both in Finland and Sweden the fight against child poverty and social exclusion of children must be reinforced, especially regarding intergenerational poverty. In this respect innovative, flexible and sustainable solutions are needed.
- Children's right to spiritual development and education in one's own religion must be safeguarded with positive freedom of religion as the starting point.
- The growing welfare gaps and the increasing polarization in society must be combated and basic social security enhanced. There is also need for concrete and explicit actions for strengthening community cohesion.
- We call for a debate about the role of the business sector in combating poverty and promoting responsibility and moderation instead of ever increasing consumption.
- The articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child must be fully implemented in all EU Member States and the Convention must be made legally binding in Sweden.

Helsinki, the day of Santa Lucia, 13 December 2010



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