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Response of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches and of Eurodiaconia to the Questionnaire on the Commission's proposal to designate 2010 as the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion

We thank the European Commission for the opportunity to participate in the consultation process on the proposal to designate 2010 as the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, putting forward the experiences of churches and diaconal organisations with people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

Churches and diaconal organisations are concerned about the growing gap between the rich and the poor in European societies, the segmentation of the labour markets with more and more precarious employment situations and the growing marginalisation of specific groups, like less skilled people or people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and people with a migration background.

The practice of solidarity is not only an essential element of Christian faith, but also a precondition for a socially cohesive society for all and, as such, is an important pillar of European economic and social policy. We therefore support the Commission's proposal to designate 2010 as the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

A. What? Objectives of the European Year

1. Taking into account the results achieved so far by the European strategy to fight poverty and social exclusion, what are the main challenges/obstacles still to be addressed across the EU in combating poverty and social exclusion? How could the European Year highlight these? What should the Year's objectives be?

European Churches and diaconal organisations are concerned about the lack of progress in the fields of social protection and social inclusion within the framework of the Lisbon strategy. Over the years, the Member States of the European Union have committed themselves again and again to take necessary measures to rapidly and significantly reduce poverty and to provide equal opportunities for the people in Europe regardless of their social background. But the evaluation of the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion and the analysis of the Joint Social Protection and Social Inclusion Report 2007 indicate that in many Member States this commitment did not have a significant impact on national policies. The obstacle here is lack of committed action.

In 2010 the Lisbon strategy will come to its fixed deadline. We see the preparatory process of the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion as an opportunity to prepare the follow up of the EU's policy framework in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The European Year 2010 can then be used to promote the renewed policy framework.

Key objectives of the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion would be for the European Union institutions and Member States to formulate a more effective strategy and for a joint commitment of EU Member States to take concrete action to combat poverty and social exclusion.

2. How can the Year contribute to reiterate and strengthen the political commitment of the European Union and its Member States to eradicate poverty and social exclusion, and in particular to the preparation, in 2011, of a follow-up to the previous cycle of the Open Method of Coordination?

We encourage the European Union and its Member States to **define in 2010 precise quantitative and qualitative goals for the fight against poverty and social exclusion**, comparable to the formulation of the "Millennium goals".

In our understanding, poverty and social exclusion are multi-dimensional phenomenon, not only economic issues, but ones, which affect all dimensions of life, and not only the individual, but also the community.

The 2010 Year should not focus exclusively on poverty inside the EU Member States, but be linked with the worldwide fight against poverty and social exclusion.

3. How can it draw most effectively on all lessons learnt in the context of implementing the OMC up until today, and also upon previous European Years and on other initiatives such as for example the gender equality roadmap and the European Youth Pact?

We would expect the European Commission to take their own analysis of the OMC into account and to be a much more proactive mediator and driving force behind the instrument. A precise quantitative and qualitative commitment of the EU Member States to making a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion would mean developing the OMC into a **more effective instrument**, including the participation of all stakeholders.

4. How can the Year contribute to an increased political visibility for the social objectives of the European Union, in response to citizens' concerns and aspirations?

Precise quantitative and qualitative goals would facilitate **awareness raising** and necessitate **networking** among political institutions and other stakeholders.

Poverty is invisible for many people. One of the objectives would be to make poverty visible for those who are not experiencing it.

5. In relation to the above-mentioned objectives, what do you see as the key message(s) of the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion? And how can this key message(s) be best communicated?

That Member States are committed to achieving results through concrete actions: **Joining forces to fight poverty and social exclusion.**

That anti-poverty strategies should also be anti-inequality and anti-discrimination strategies.

That those experiencing poverty and social exclusion are listened to and that their views are taken into account

The message will best be communicated by a **participatory process**, which involves people in Europe on all levels.

B. Who? Involvement of stakeholders

1. How would you like the Year to involve your particular organisation?

Churches and diaconal organisations are institutions based at grassroots level, close to the people, and very often the places to go for those who are falling through the safety nets of the social protection systems. In so doing, churches and diaconal organisations are bridge-builders for a socially cohesive society for all. They are wedded to a “privileged option for the poor”. The practice of solidarity is an essential element of Christian faith.

We would therefore suggest cooperation with existing networks like churches and diaconal organisations through participatory mechanisms (see B.2)

2. What mechanisms can ensure that the Year encourages the participation in society of disadvantaged groups?

“Outreach” programmes carried out by those working with disadvantaged groups and Forums for disadvantaged groups at the local level. Here, those experiencing poverty and social exclusion would be listened to and then their views taken into account when forming policy and objectives, through an effective feedback mechanism.

The outcome of the active involvement of those who are disadvantaged, as well as those who work with disadvantaged groups in the process of defining the European Union's policies and processes to combat poverty and social exclusion (see above) would in turn lead to better participation of these groups.

3. How can the Year best involve – constructively, together – the various stakeholders – people experiencing poverty; NGOs; community groups; social partners; local/regional authorities; service providers; national authorities, citizens in general?

Cf. answer to question B1, B2.

C. How? Overall design, framework and types of actions

1. What types of actions/initiatives would you consider useful for achieving the objectives of the Year at both EU and national and sub-national levels?

See above B1, B2.

2. How can the Year best be framed and steered by the EU level? What kind of support (advice, technical assistance, guidelines, financial, etc) would you expect from the EU level in the implementation of the Year? What about corresponding support from Member State and local/regional level?
3. How can the Year link back in the most effective way to existing EU policies and strategies in a wide sense (e.g. gender equality issues; combating discriminations and promoting equal opportunities, etc.) and to results of previous European Years in issues related to the fight against poverty and social exclusion?

See B3.

By defining precise quantitative and qualitative goals for the fight against poverty and social exclusion (see above), taking these into account in all policy areas, such as integrated guidelines for growth and jobs, mainstreaming them and using them for impact assessments. This would promote a coherent policy approach. In elaborating the goals, evidence from consultations with those experiencing poverty and social exclusion must be taken into account (see answer to B2).

4. How can the Year ensure the best interaction with activities under current EU programmes and Funds in the social field (PROGRESS, ESF etc.) but also in other areas as, for example, Education, Active Citizenship, Youth, etc.?

It should be ensured that the structural funds are used to facilitate the participation of people experiencing poverty (according to the conclusions of the EQUAL programme) and that the views of these people are taken into account in the guidelines for EU funds.

D. Lasting Value

1. How can the Year further the objective of mutual learning?

Through facilitating the exchange of information based on activities such as those described in A1.

2. How could the Year best interact with the National strategies for fighting poverty and social exclusion? How might it improve its consistency with the European strategy, strengthen the co-ordination of policies to promote social inclusion and encourage more effective policy making?

By defining precise quantitative and qualitative goals for the fight against poverty and social exclusion (see answer to A1).

3. What would you consider a successful result at the closing of the Year?

A political commitment to working towards clear goals in combating poverty and social exclusion.

A visible empowerment of those experiencing poverty and social exclusion through methods such as those described in C1; that the views of these people would have concrete effects on policy.

We thank you for this opportunity to address our concerns to you for your consideration. Due to time restrictions we were not able to respond as fully as we would have liked to the questionnaire, but we would be delighted to participate in the preparatory process and to contribute to a successful 2010 Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. If you have any questions regarding our response, please do not hesitate to contact us.

We remain, yours sincerely,

Heidi Paakjaer Martinussen
Secretary General
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Rev. Rüdiger Noll
Director
Church and Society Commission
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The Church and Society Commission (CSC) is one of the commissions of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). The CSC links CEC's some 125 member churches from all over Europe and its associated organisations with the European Union's institutions, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, NATO and the UN (on European matters). Its task is to help the churches study church and society questions from a theological social-ethical perspective, especially those with a European dimension, and to represent common positions of the member churches in their relations with political institutions working in Europe.

Eurodiaconia is a federation of 32 members - churches, non-statutory welfare organisations and NGOs in Europe - operating at national and international level. Our members are rooted in Christian faith within the traditions of the Reformation as well as in the Anglican and Orthodox traditions. We network diaconal and social work of institutions and church communities and co-operate with civil society partners.

Our Mission: We link our members to serve for solidarity and justice. Our strategic aims are to ensure quality of life for all in a social Europe, to link institutions of diaconia, social initiatives and churches in Europe, to be and to enhance a network of competence.

Eurodiaconia and the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) have a joint Social Policy working group.