



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities DG

Social Protection and Integration
Inclusion, Social Policy Aspects of Migration, Streamlining of Social Policies

Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be with you this morning to participate in your Conference toward a just, sustainable and smart Europe where you dedicated a full session to the European Year for combating poverty and social exclusion. I am particularly happy to share this important moment with you today as it symbolises the work we need to do together with all the EU stakeholders, our partners in implementing not only this European Year to combat social injustice but also the “Common House of Europe”. The European churches have a crucial role to play in this matter.

This European Year 2010 raises many expectations among the 84 million Europeans who live below the poverty threshold in their country of residence, one European out of every six! All this in Europe - one of the wealthiest regions of the world.

Let me explain you how **poverty rate** is calculated.

It is a threshold which sets the poverty line at 60% of the median income of each country. All the EU is counting in the same way.

This indicator takes account of different living standards, e.g. Poland (€208), Spain (€646), France (€880), and Luxemburg (€1,546 a month) for one single person. In your Yearbook of Justice IV, you underline the economic and social divide between the member states from the Eastern or Western parts of the EU. This indicator reflects Europe diversity.

Some segments of the population are more at risk of poverty than others: women, children and young people, the elderly, those on precarious contracts, migrants and people from ethnic minorities.

Having a job may be the best route out of poverty, yet 8% of people in work don't earn enough to escape from it.

This European Year raises expectations among people who are affected by the current crisis; who face precarious uncertainty or fear for their future; and among people who have relatives or friends affected by poverty.

With the European Year 2010, the European Union wishes to bring to all affected a message of solidarity and a commitment to achieving a better future that everybody can believe in. We know that we can count on the Conference of European Churches to bring this message of solidarity and social justice back to each of your country. Two weeks ago, I participated at the plenary Assembly of COMECE and I am glad to see the natural involvement of the churches within the European Year against poverty and social exclusion.

Poverty and social exclusion can be prevented and alleviated, by tackling both their structural and individual causes. We know for example that these figures would be considerably higher without the contribution of social protection systems, which lie at the heart of the European social model.

The crisis is of course adding considerably to the challenges. As a priority, we need to tackle rising unemployment, pave the way for a sound economic recovery, while also managing the social impacts of the crisis. In April 2009, you wrote an open letter to the presidents of EU institutions which stated that “our societies are suffering from a lifestyle which is focusing on individual profit, consumption and greed rather than taking responsibility for the common good, the well-being and the future for all people and for the world we are living in”.

Some months later, in December 2009, President Barroso who was shaping his new Commission, underlines that the current crisis was not just a financial or an economic crisis. It is also a crisis for the values of our societies. The answers to today challenges do not lie in the market alone, nor in the state alone. They must come from society so that they can respond to people’s needs. We must put human dignity and solidarity at the heart of our endeavours.

2. What is the EU’s contribution in social inclusion

You are aware that, according to the division of competences in the EU Treaty, combating poverty and social exclusion is primarily the responsibility of Member States. Yet the EU has brought important added-value, and this contribution has increased with time. Many of our policies have been mobilized to this end, for example by supporting job creation and better working conditions, promoting social and territorial cohesion through structural funds, or combating discrimination.

More than 9 million people who are socially excluded participate in programmes which receive support from the European Social Fund.

One decade ago, the EU also launched the Social Open Method of Coordination. This process has allowed Member States to formulate and work towards common objectives in terms of rights, resources and participation, develop national plans and improve their governance by involving major stakeholders such as social partners, regional authorities or NGOs. It has highlighted best practice in crucial areas such as child poverty, homelessness or active inclusion.

EU 2020

One month ago, the Commission presented its proposals for the new "Europe 2020" strategy. It is a strategy for a return to a sustainable growth focusing on:

(1) "Smart" growth based on knowledge, research and innovation. (2) Green growth, and (3) inclusive growth delivering higher employment levels and better social inclusion.

Let me highlight one point:

The European Commission is of the opinion of fixing a limited number of European targets, which will be translated into national targets to measure progress.

Among those targets one is focused on poverty reduction. The Commission proposes to lift at least 20 million people out of poverty by 2020.

The challenge ahead for us will be to focus on the delivery of the reforms to turn the targets into a reality both at European and national levels.

In order to meet the targets, the Commission proposes a series of flagship initiatives. One of these initiatives is **the creation of a European platform against poverty** - ensuring economic, social and territorial cohesion by helping the poor and socially excluded and enabling them to play an active part in society.

The European Council, in its meeting of March 2010, discussed this European Union's new strategy. It agreed on promoting social inclusion, in particular through the reduction of poverty BUT without setting a measurable target. It underlined that further work is needed and it will revert to this issue at its June meeting.

Let's come back to the European Year 2010:

3. How can we create momentum and strengthen the fight against poverty

A European Year is an original instrument, complementing existing tools to reach out to a wider audience and engage the hardest to reach. It promotes freedom and creativity, and provides a real space to engage from the local to the European level.

One of our first objectives is to promote a better understanding of what poverty and social exclusion mean today, in such a diverse European Union. This will lead us to raise questions such as: *What does it mean to live on the poverty threshold, depending whether you live in central Dublin or a rural area in South Romania? What has worked in tackling poverty? What has not?*

People experiencing poverty are of course central to the Year, which has to be developed *with them*, rather than *for* them. We hope it will create momentum to strengthen their active participation. One example is the European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty, which will take place at the end of June in the European Parliament. We strongly hope it will become a real milestone in this regard.

The EY2010 will help us better to recognise the rights of people experiencing poverty to play a full part in our societies. It should also actively combat stereotyping and stigmatization.

Finally, the European Year should also spread the message that combating poverty is a shared responsibility, where we all have a role to play.

- On the one hand, we hope this year will allow European citizens to explore and put in practice values of solidarity and social justice, and highlight the richness of initiatives developed throughout Europe, in all our communities.
- On the other hand, the EY 2010 should also allow for the strengthening of existing partnerships and the creation of new ones, by reaching out beyond those traditionally engaged in social exclusion issues. It is a call for NGOs (Caritas and Eurodiacona are strongly involved) and public authorities of course, but also social partners, business, media, regional/local authorities, and decision-makers to put poverty on their agenda in 2010 even more than they usually do.

Several hundreds of activities are planned from the local to the European level. These include participatory debates and round tables, solidarity marches, film competitions, studies, information sessions in schools, training for the media and decision-makers, and interactive theatrical performances. We have been very positively surprised by the number and quality of initiatives already developed.

4. Some concrete examples of activities at EU level :

21 January 2010: opening conference in Madrid

-High level participation: Barroso, Zapatero, more than 12 Ministers from all the EU, a group of people experiencing poverty.

- Consensus on putting poverty higher on agenda, highlighting the need to strengthen social dimension of the EU and give more prominence to poverty reduction
- Strong commitment of new Commissioner Lazlo Andor (Hungary)

Two focus weeks

- The first focus week will be held in June during the meeting of People experiencing poverty coming from the all EU during 3 days in Brussels. They will prepare recommendations for actions from their perspectives.

- The second focus week is organised in October during the Ministerial Round table of social inclusion - 17 October the international day against poverty.

At the end of the Year in December the Belgian Presidency is planning a political declaration to be signed by end of the Year by the Heads of States and Heads of Governments. There will be also the awards of a European Competition for journalists to recognise excellence in journalism in coverage of issue of poverty or social exclusion.

In addition a European campaign will be coordinated by the European Commission and we have prepared a range of resources that can be used by each of you when you prepare an activity: leaflets, brochures, posters, video clip, Video News Release for journalists and a website translated into 23 languages.

www.2010againstopoverty.eu

5. Conclusion

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

If, all together, we are able to raise awareness about poverty and social exclusion, if we are able to show examples of solutions that have worked, of people making their way out of poverty, if we are able to build a momentum for action, if we are able to give hope to all those concerned, then the EY2010 will have contributed to strengthening trust in our values of solidarity and social justice.

Let us speak openly to the hearts and minds of our citizens to build a fairer Europe where the most vulnerable can live in dignity and play a full role in society.

One of our challenges will be to build on this momentum, keep on developing partnership and invite new actors to join

We count on you to inform and raise awareness within your churches of the development of the European Year and to take an active part in this process.

We count personally on each and every one of you.

Thank you.

Anne Degrand-Guillaud
Coordinator of the European Year 2010