

First Annual Convention of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion

a personal report

From 17 to 18 October the First Annual Convention of the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion took place in Krakow, Poland. The Polish EU-Presidency invited participants in cooperation with the European Commission.

Let us first admit that the conference was situated in a wonderful place and town! And Krakow is visibly a real European town: The castles shows the handwriting of Italian architects and the most precious carpets in the castle came from Brussels, from the time of Greater Brabant: a European place and city for a European conference, which took place for most of the sessions in the University of Krakow.

The European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EPAP) is an important element of the Europe 2020 strategy, which was decided by the European Council in 2010 with the goal of reaching “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”. The strategy includes concrete targets, like taking 20 million people out of risk of poverty by 2020. The strategy will reach its aims by 7 flagship initiatives. One of these is the EPAP. Within the EPAP, it is foreseen that once a year delegates from Member States, the European Commission and civil society will come together to analyse the progress made in reaching the goals and for debates on new political items and proposals for the EPAP. In Krakow some 200 persons discussed the issues for one and a half days in a very compact programme. CSC was itself invited to participate.

Some delegates on the part of NGOs criticised the fact that there was not enough space for discussions and that in earlier times the planning of the European Commission gave more room for ideas and proposals of the organisations invited. (Before the first Annual Convention of EPAP, there existed the so-called Annual Round Table which fulfilled a similar purpose.)

This year the Annual Convention was divided into three specific parts: After the welcome by the host of the conference, the first session was dedicated to “the progress made towards the poverty target by the Member States”. As a reminder: to reach the target goals by 2020 every Member State had to define its own targets and has to report every year in the so-called European Semester on its progress. In his welcome speech the representative of the European Commission, the Director General of the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Mr Koos Richelle, pointed out very clearly that this year the plans presented by the Member States were only achieving getting 12 – or perhaps 15 – million people out of risk of poverty, but not 20 million in 2020. And we don’t know how far the crisis will go! In the welcome part of the agenda a representative of the Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty was invited to raise her voice and she made it very clear how deeply the experience of poverty affects life and that we should not discuss numbers and percentages but the impact on the individual and personal life.

Ministers and Secretaries of State from Denmark, Ireland, Portugal, Belgium, Spain, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland took part in the first panel. The main impression I received - to put it very briefly – was an increasing helplessness by the representatives of government. They all deplored the necessity of the austerity programmes, which makes social policy crucial. The representative of Spain declared that she is trying not to cut down the budget for social policy because otherwise it will not be possible to reach the 2020 goals at all. The Polish Minister acknowledged that Poland has determined an ambitious goal for 2020, to get 1 ½ million people out of risk of poverty and that he is trying to pursue this target but that he cannot be in agreement with his Minister of Finance who has other goals. There were some proposals like strengthening of education, reform of tax policy, creation of new jobs by stimulating the social economy and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). But the main focus was to ensure that more people do not fall into poverty in the coming time. At the end of this round, the representative of the Social Protection Committee (SPC) - a

committee implemented by the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (art. 160), including experts from Member States to advise the Council – welcomed the policy of the European Union but warned that the concentration on employment and yet again employment will lead also to more precarious work in the EU!

The presentation was, on the one hand, interesting and confirmed the difficult times in which we live. On the other hand, it was a little bit boring to hear the same message from every side. It was surprising that nobody asked or tried to discuss the real background to the crisis! Only at the end of a short discussion, did the Belgian representative ask whether the whole system of the economy should be renewed and that there should be more pressure on banks and big enterprises, for example, through taxes. I would have wished that the panel would have been composed in a different way so that a real discussion could have taken place. It had a little bit of self-pity.

After this, various members of the European Commission and General Directorates presented the approach of the European Commission to fighting poverty and social exclusion in Europe – notably the DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, which is leading this fight, but also DG Justice with its framework for Roma integration, DG Education and Culture with its policy for combating early school-leaving, DG Internal Market and Services with its proposal for free access to basic banking services and DG Health and Consumers with its plans for social inclusion of people with mental health problems. All these presentations and their aims could be supported and CSC has commented on the different policies and proposals on different occasions and in different ways. But taking up the experience of the Polish Minister on the first panel, we would have liked to have had a presentation also from the Economic and Financial Affairs and Budget corner of the European Commission to know a little bit more about the internal frictions concerning social policy in the Europe of today. Or it would have been interesting to hear from a Member of the European Parliament and his or her views on these presentations. It was on the whole significant that the EP had no role to play besides a short commentary at the very end of the Convention.

The second session embraced 6 workshops on the programmes and projects of the European Commission for the coming time. We list them here only, but the headline gives an impression concerning in which direction the Commission is looking and working for the moment:

- 1) “Breaking the cycle of poverty through integrated family and child-centred policies” - a recommendation on child poverty will be published in 2012;
- 2) “Leaving no one behind: young people not in education, employment or training” – in EU-Brussels the so-called NEETs are a real and crucial task in many member states;
- 3) “Social innovation for active inclusion” – demanding especially a reliable evidence-based approach;
- 4) “Fighting poverty and social exclusion of older people” - which will be the main subject of the upcoming European Year 2012 on active aging and solidarity between generations;
- 5) “Building a dynamic national, regional and local commitment to the fight against poverty” - by strengthening a multi-stakeholder structure and implementing a regular peer review;
- 6) “Poverty, employment and the role of the social economy”.

These workshops were prepared by different teams and worked well as the results presented proved. But, nevertheless, the two hours given to them were not at all sufficient for a deeper debate and exchange of experience. We will pursue how far the Commission and the Council – as promised – will take over the ideas shared. CSC took part in the first workshop on child poverty and referred to the family paper and its deliberations.

The third session comprised visits to institutions and activities in the field of combating poverty and social exclusion with the focus on innovation and cooperation. Most of these projects reflected the social economy.

The Annual Convention closed with speeches from Mr F. Daerden, Member of the EP and rapporteur for a report on the EPAP, which was an initiative of the EP, the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Mr L. Andor (see: <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/11/682&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>) and the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of the Republic of Poland, Ms J. Fedak.

Frank-Dieter Fischbach, October 2011