

Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty, including child poverty, in the EU

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The European Parliament adopted by 540 votes to 57, with 32 abstentions a resolution on promoting social inclusion and combating poverty, including child poverty, in the EU.

The own-initiative report had been tabled for consideration in plenary by Gabriele **ZIMMER** (GUE/NGL, DE) on behalf of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs.

Parliament recalls that a sizable part of the Union's population remains socially excluded, since one in five live in sub-standard housing and each day about 1.8 million people seek accommodation in specialist shelters for homeless, 10% live in households where nobody works, long-term unemployment approaching 4%, 31 million workers or 15% are earning extremely low wages, 8% of workers or 17 million experience income poverty despite employment, the proportion of early school leavers is over 15% and the digital divide still persists (44% of the EU population lack any internet or computer skills).

In response to these alarming facts, the European Parliament has adopted this resolution which concentrates on the following:

A more holistic approach to active social inclusion: Parliament welcomes the Commission's approach to active social inclusion which must enable people to live with dignity and participate in society and the labour market. This approach must also make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion, both for those in employment (the "working poor") and for those not in paid employment.

While agreeing with the main proposals of the Commission in relation to income support sufficient to prevent social exclusion, keeping a link to inclusive labour markets, the Parliament calls for a more holistic approach to active inclusion should also include a special focus on the eradication of child poverty.

Guaranteeing sufficient income to ensure a dignified life for all: once again, Parliament calls upon Member States to define minimum income schemes for social inclusion. It agrees with the Commission that social assistance in most Member States is already below a level which makes poverty a risk and insists that the central objective of income support schemes must be to lift people out of poverty and enable them to live in dignity. To better define this level of minimum revenue in the Union, the Commission is called upon to provide a detailed report on whether welfare provision in the Member States (e.g. minimum income schemes, unemployment, invalidity and survivors' benefits, statutory and supplementary pension schemes) provide for incomes above the Union's at-risk-of poverty threshold of 60% of national median equalised income. In particular, MEPs want it to establish a common method of calculating the minimum subsistence amount and the cost of living (a basket of goods and services) in order to ensure comparable measurements of the poverty line in the Union. They state that adequate minimum income schemes are a fundamental prerequisite for a European Union based on social justice and equal opportunities for all. They therefore call on the Member States to ensure that an adequate minimum income is provided for periods out of work or in between jobs. The Council is called upon to agree an EU target for minimum income schemes and contributory replacement income schemes of providing income support of **at least 60% of national median equalised income** and, further, to agree a timetable for achieving this target in all Member States. MEPs point out that, statistically speaking, the risk of falling into severe poverty is greater for women than for men and that appropriate gender-related

policies are called for. Furthermore, they consider that Member States should provide targeted additional benefits for people with disabilities or chronic diseases, single parents, or households with many children. The situation of self-employed people living below the poverty line also needs to be addressed.

Eradicating child poverty: of all the forms of poverty, child poverty has to be the most serious. For this reason, the Parliament calls on the EU institutions, the Member States and organised civil society associations to address its eradication by means of a holistic approach. It urges the Member States to **reduce child poverty by 50% by 2012** and to allocate sufficient resources in order to achieve this goal. In this regard, it proposes a battery of measures: recognising that children are citizens and independent holders of rights, their rights to vital resources (housing, food but also emotional, social and educational needs), as well as that of their parents so that the latter do not abandon them, their access to services and opportunities that are necessary to enhance their wellbeing, specific help for disabled children, children's right to participate in society (social, recreational, sporting and cultural life), aid to large families and for single parents to facilitate their entry into or return to the labour market, recognition of the role of the family, particular attention to be given to street children and those who are exposed to human trafficking, and, lastly, the promotion of family reunification. Special assistance is also called for to combat prostitution, child drug addiction and child trafficking. The Commission is also urged to take into consideration the social exclusion of children in the context of immigration and disability, as well as all forms of maltreatment and forms of abuse to which they can fall victim.

Employment policies for socially inclusive labour markets: while agreeing with the Commission that having a job is the best way to avoid poverty and social exclusion, Parliament stresses, nevertheless, that **8% of workers in the Union are at risk of poverty**. It also points out that 20 million people in the Union, most of them women, are affected by in-work poverty (i.e. 6% of the total population and 36% of the working population). To combat this and to enable such people to live in dignity, Parliament considers that, for active inclusion in the labour market, the most disadvantaged groups need specific measures such as:

- I. support for personal development, through education, training, lifelong learning,
- II. maximum access to information to secure stable, highly skilled employment,
- III. support to foster employment and the ability to remain in the job market,
- IV. ensuring the cessation of work by persons of retirement age is monitored in the interests of releasing posts.

Parliament favours, in particular, policies to make work more financially attractive than unemployment by fighting against the employment trap phenomenon. This work, however, should permit the worker to earn a decent living and live in dignity. The Member States are also urged to reduce fiscal pressure not only on lower income earners but also on average income earners, so as to prevent workers from being caught in a low-wage trap. Other recommendations include promoting the social inclusion of young people, older people and immigrants and introducing measures to combat undeclared work, forced child labour and the abusive exploitation of workers, including illegal ones.

Providing quality services and guaranteeing access for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups: Parliament stresses the importance of statutory and complementary social security schemes, health services and social services of general interest in poverty prevention. It believes that access to goods and services should be the right of every EU citizen. It encourages Member States to consider social default tariffs for vulnerable groups (e.g. in the fields of energy and public transport) and also to enhance universal service obligations (e.g. in the telecommunications and postal services sector). MEPs also call on the Council to agree an **EU-wide commitment to end street homelessness by 2015** and for the development by Member States of integrated policies to ensure **access to affordable quality housing** for all. They urge

the Member States to devise 'winter emergency plans' as part of a wider homelessness strategy. Further social measures are envisaged such as maintaining national subsidies for specific services such as dinner money, free teaching materials and school buses, and for essential leisure and out-of-school educational opportunities, as well as assistance with childcare costs. For elderly people, specific measures should be drawn up, in particular in relation to mental health. Assistance would also be needed to combat alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence.

Improving policy coordination and the involvement of all relevant stakeholders: Parliament supports the Commission's view that any policy dealing with social exclusion must involve the disadvantaged people themselves. A uniform series of measures needs to be introduced at European level with a view to preventing and penalising abuses of any kind of minorities, people with disabilities and senior citizens, in the context of concrete actions for the across-the-board reduction of the vulnerability of those social groups, in particular by applying the Community legislation in force. Parliament also calls on the Council and the Commission to reinvigorate a clear strategic focus on the eradication of poverty and the promotion of **social inclusion in the context of the Social Agenda 2008 to 2012**. It calls for a more explicit commitment in the next cycle of the Open Method of Coordination in the fields of Social Protection and Social Inclusion, to a dynamic and effective Community strategy that would set meaningful targets and lead to the creation of effective instruments and to monitoring focused on fighting poverty, social exclusion and inequality.

Parliament also calls on the Council and the Commission to give their explicit commitment to a Community strategy to eradicate poverty and promote social inclusion. It encourages the Member States to take effective measures to ensure that 90% of children across the Union can benefit from childcare facilities from birth until mandatory school age and that a sufficient level of care provision is set in place for other dependent persons by 2015.

Lastly, MEPs consider that the launch, next year, of European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion should be the occasion to deploy a wide variety of awareness initiatives in this field.