Social protection and social inclusion. Report

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Edit BAUER (EPP-ED , SK) in response to the Commission communication on social protection and social inclusion. MEPs began by pointing out that the objectives of the Lisbon strategy defined in 2000 (long-term economic growth, full employment, social cohesion and sustainable development in a knowledge-based society) were far from being achieved: at least 15% of the EU population were living at risk of poverty in 2002 and unemployment remained high in a number of Member States. They stressed that "employment must be viewed as the most effective safeguard against poverty".

MEPs pinpointed the categories of people who were most at risk of poverty and exclusion, inter alia due to the difficulties they faced in accessing or remaining on the labour market: those in casual employment, the unemployed, single parent households, older people living alone, women, families with several dependants, ethnic minorities, sick or disabled people, the homeless, victims of trafficking and victims of drug and alcohol dependency. Member States were urged to support the integration of "people at a disadvantage" in order to prevent and combat social exclusion, as well as to promote education, encourage job creation, ensure the right to equal access to health care and decent accommodation and ensure the sustainability of social protection systems.

The committee said that tackling disadvantages in education and training, and improving the qualifications of the labour force - regardless of age, sex and ethnic origin - were key tools for combating unemployment. Youth unemployment should be addressed as a problem in its own right, through specific policy measures and training. Member States were also urged to develop access to lifelong learning, to help older people to remain on the job market.

Child poverty was also a persistent problem and priority needed to be given, at EU and Member State level, to the prevention and elimination of the intergenerational transmission of poverty. The committee called on the Commission to draw up a Green Paper on child poverty and to step up its efforts to introduce a 'Children's Charter' upholding the rights of the child.

The report stressed the need to increase the participation of women in employment, not only as a necessary safeguard against the risk of poverty but also as a way of coping with current demographic trends, i.e. maintaining sufficient numbers of people in work in the face of an ageing population. The Member States and the Commission were urged, when applying the open method of coordination to social protection and integration, to pay greater attention in the future to the issues of reconciling work and family life, with particular access on childcare, family income situations and the employment rate of mothers. More generally, MEPs wanted the European Council, meeting at its summit in Spring 2006, to agree on a uniform list of common objectives in the field of social integration, pensions, health and long-term care.

Lastly, MEPs expressed their full support for the Commission's intention of organising a European Year of Equal Opportunities for All in 2007 as well as a future European Year of Combating Exclusion and Poverty.