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Let's tackle in-work poverty!

16th European Meeting of
People Experiencing Poverty

9-10 November 2017

INTRODUCTION

The 16th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty, held on 9-10 November in the MCE Conference & Business Centre, Brussels, was organised by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) with the support of the European Commission and the EAPN Fund. Among ³ the 120 participants were national delegations of EAPN members from 30 countries, (which included experts with experience of in-work poverty), representatives from civil society and trade unions, delegates from the European Parliament and the European Commission, Permanent Representatives of the member states in the European Union, the Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility Marianne Thyssen, and the Belgian government.

The theme of this edition was **In-Work Poverty**, and the event was programmed towards sharing experiences and promoting open dialogue, especially among EAPN members with direct experience of poverty. A new venue and experimental programme provided what one delegate described as **open spaces that empower people**. The main auditorium was arranged in a flat hemicycle style with layered chairs facing the panel, which created an intimate and open atmosphere that facilitated interaction between speakers and the audience. The opening plenary started with a short account of four personal stories of in-work poverty, which set the scene and established the meeting as a **gathering of the people for the people**.

Commissioner Thyssen offered encouragement to EAPN and the delegations, while presenting the EU's actions and core elements of the European Social Pillar of Rights. Open space workshops were then organised so delegates could shape the main proceedings of the event, leading to **ten working themes, 30 key messages and a series of poignant questions** posed to the panel of the closing dialogue session on day two. Panel members included Esther Lynch, Confederal Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation, Bert D'Hondt, Belgian Government Advisor on Poverty, Family & Social Policy, and Stefan Olsson, Director for Employment, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

EAPN Director Leo Williams and President Sérgio Aires moderated proceedings alongside EAPN colleagues and volunteers who made sure everything went to plan, including the more 'fluid' activities such as the 'Come and hear my story!' session and Visibility Action at Place Flagey in Brussels, which saw delegates holding images and placards in support of the working poor.

KEY MESSAGES



Homelessness and youth in poverty

In many countries there is a huge need for adequate social protection, access to understandable information, organizations to which people can turn for help and ⁴ social support, and more client orientated services

A group of people from different backgrounds shared their common experiences of homelessness. Being homeless also means living in a hostel or shelter, they stressed. Securing a well-paid job is the key to ending homelessness and life-long poverty, but it is a challenge for young people entering the labour market. Providing quality and affordable housing is just the first step on the road out of poverty; services and support are also needed.

Other key messages:

- ✦ Young people in particular face a huge challenge of student debts (education costs)
- ✦ Homeless people can have a paid job - but because of in-work poverty they cannot afford to pay rent and are living on the street. We demand adequately paid jobs.



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In-work poverty and rural issues

We must invest in people-centred services (rights, access) before profit

A small, solution-focused group heard experiences from different European regions and rural conditions. In Hungary, for example, inherited poverty is a major challenge. In Romania, health, education and ageing rural populations are big issues: 60 % of farmers are at risk of poverty, and 4 million people are working abroad. While in Scotland (UK), services and support are focused on urban poverty, largely ignoring rural communities and islands.

‘Poor services in rural areas make it hard to access childcare, education and health... services are centralised, top-down and profit driven...few doctors want to work in small villages...’

Other key messages:

- ✦ **Strengthen community and individual activism on rights (social and human)**
- ✦ **Make technology an engine for social change**

Question:

How can the EU harness the potential of technology to ensure that the services needed to overcome poverty in rural areas are sustainable, adequate and community- and people- centered?

Gender pay gap

We need binding and collective wage agreements, regardless of gender

A small, well-informed and cooperative group whose different experiences spoke to the range of gender issues at play. These included the glass ceiling on management positions (and higher pay), a culture of intimidation preventing women from standing up for their rights, lack of information on those rights, difficulties faced by single parents (mostly women), work-life balance, and the need for affirmative action, to name a few raised.

‘Cultural constraints undermine women’s confidence and make them believe that somehow they are worth less...’ ‘The reasons behind the gender pay gap go well beyond the mere presence of women in power-yielding positions’

Other key messages:

- ✦ **Develop and protect the status of informal carers (pension systems)**
- ✦ **We need fixed and transparent qualification standards**

Question:

How can we get women out of the gender gap and out of poverty?

Social welfare

We need transferability of social rights across borders, linked to a European Social Security Number (e.g. people living in border areas)

Intense discussions focused on topics chosen by the group, with all members given a chance to present their story and perspective, from the struggles of disability in Sweden and ⁶ bureaucracy in cross-border pension schemes between Germany and Denmark, to workforcerelated issues and the need for common standards and less complications in a more 'human' system.

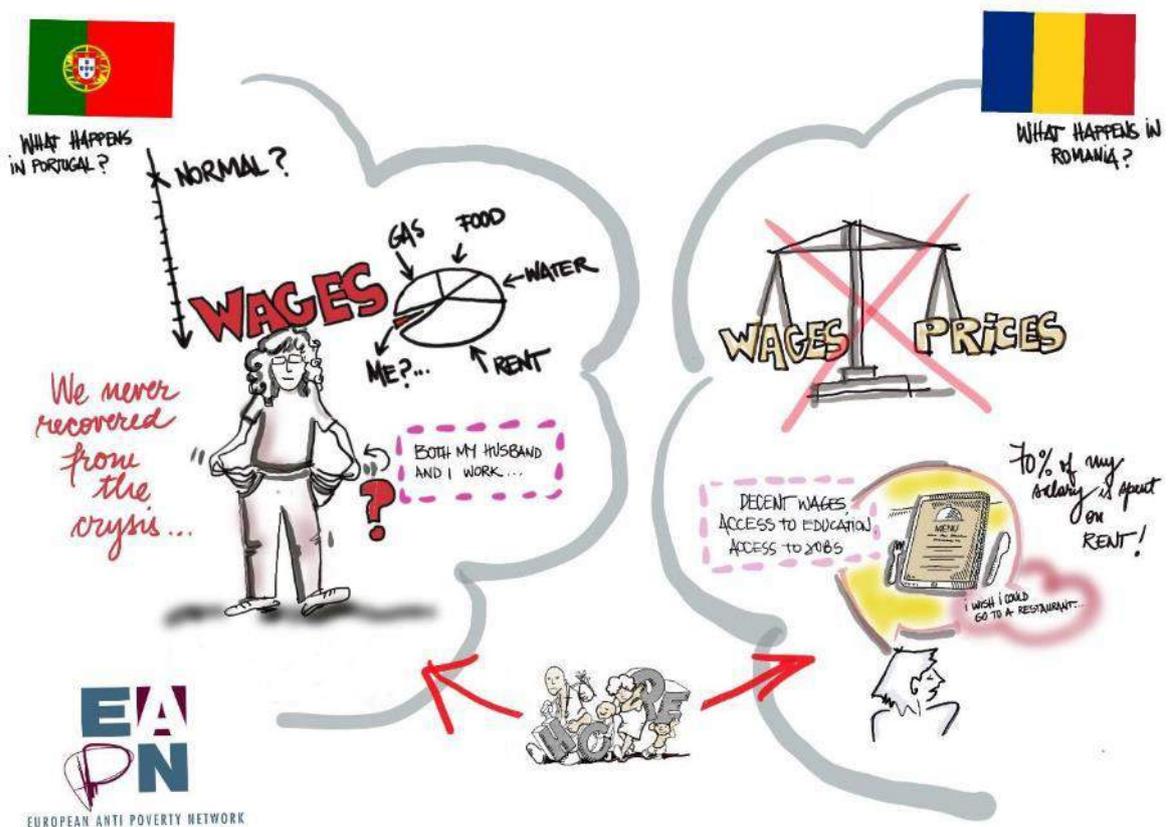
'My dream is for Europe to agree on the same system of assessing pension and for people who have to rely on pensions to be able to live a dignified life...'

Other key messages:

- ✦ Common standards for capability/disability assessment are needed ✦
- The system should encourage and support adequate wages, and provide sufficient resources for those who cannot work

Question:

Is it justifiable to doom a person to poverty for life for the sole reason of being disabled?



Youth and in-work poverty

We must inform young people of their working rights, and empower them to stand up for these rights

An enthusiastic group covered a lot of territory, including how young people struggle to find and secure work throughout Europe, and the gap between education and the labour market. The group explored how young people are trapped in low- and unpaid work, or informal and  non-standard positions forcing them to stay at home, continue studying (and building up debts), and to put their life and future on hold.

‘Young people are putting off starting families because they have no job, a low-paid job or they work under precarious conditions...’

Other key messages:

✦ Increase and equalise the minimum salary for a decent life ✦ Build and strengthen coalitions between different social partners

Migrants, refugees and in-work poverty

We must combat and punish those who profit from the exploitation of migrants

An earnest group discussed the complex relationship between poverty and migration with firsthand insights. Topics explored include the reasons for migration, difficulties they face on the move and once settled, prejudices and obstructions to better integration, problems of language and red tape, different treatment and rights in EU countries depending on status (refugee, migrant, asylum-seeker, etc.), and the struggles of living on the fringe of society with no voice.

‘Immigration caused by globalisation, capitalism, dictatorships...these are dramatic situations with people becoming poorer and more vulnerable..’ ‘Politicians should stop making migrants feel guilty...and punish people profiting from migration!’

Other key messages:

✦ Europe should see immigration as an opportunity not a problem ✦ EU should help economically poorer Member States and involve migrants in implementing projects ✦ Europe needs a common policy for the inclusion of refugees and migrants

Question:

How can we integrate the skills of migrants/refugees into the labour market?



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Education for rich and poor

We need free, lifelong education for all

The group discussed the growing sense of distrust in institutions, and the need for solidarity between rich and poor, implying the need for a better balance between economic, political and social imperatives like education, culture but also wealth distribution.

‘The main problem is that classes are overcrowded and teachers can’t control them...’ Provide more individual support for pupils and strengthen relationships between teachers and students...’

Other key messages:

- ✦ **Two teachers in every classroom (a professional and trainee) at all times**
- ✦ **Extra support for children from poor families (to avoid stigmatisation)**

The power to change policies

We must broaden minds by making education about politics, power and society a compulsory part of educational systems

In a balanced debate by a group of mostly northern and central Europeans, the key issues included the current political apathy and poor awareness in Europe, the issue of big business and wealth distribution, the need for better education, and more engagement with and by politicians, especially to reach young people and migrants who can't or don't vote, and the call for greater involvement by trade unions, activists and individuals in decision-making (at local, national and EU level).

‘EU countries are not following up enough when it comes to social issues...’ ‘From a poverty perspective...we need a collective voice...’

Other key messages:

- ✦ Identify, build and sustain relations with trade unions, politicians and mass media to reach people and influence decisions**
- ✦ Strengthen our united voice by co-organizing between diverse actors on common goals and mobilize the “working force” across borders**

Ageing (50+) and in-work poverty policies

We must promote non-discrimination in access to employment for over 50s

A diverse group in terms of background, the discussion covered diverse topics reflecting the situations in each member's country, from chronic job insecurity in Portugal for young and old jobseekers, to the difficulties facing over-50s in Latvia (returning to school, taking on debt, disability, finding help), to the need for attitude change both by older jobseekers and companies who refuse to employ them, to the high unemployment numbers and hardship in Greece since the financial and migrant crisis.

‘Companies should be compelled to care... people are sacrificed to the benefit of economics...’

Other key messages:

- ✦ Change tax policies for the working poor over 50 (more progressive/fair systems)**
- ✦ Establish a social rating for companies in addition to financial rating**

Adequate minimum wage for quality jobs

We must reorganise labour markets to promote growth which is based on quality jobs, adequate minimum wage and dignity!

This focused group quickly drilled down to the key issues which included defining the current interpretation of minimum wage and the basket of goods and services that it should be able to cover.

They called for better measures to protect workers, tackle temping agencies, stimulate entrepreneurship, control social security, and a tax regime that more equitably redirects wealth and resources.

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‘Tackle the wage gap between CEOs and workers!’ ‘Temporary job agencies must be abolished!’

Other key messages:

- ✦ **We are worth more than the banks (promote a fair and inclusive labour market)!**
- ✦ **Redistribution or revolution... you decide!**

Question:

What will be the next concrete step to achieve a minimum wage in dignity?

INFORMATION AND CONTACT

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See all EAPN publications and activities on www.eapn.eu

The European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) is an independent network of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and groups involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the Member States of the European Union, established in 1990.



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