

**The contribution of NGOs
to the fight against poverty
and social exclusion in Europe**



CONFERENCE OF INGOs
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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and social exclusion in Europe**

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FOREWORD

The “**Extreme Poverty and Social Cohesion**” Grouping was set up in 1990 to work with Council of Europe bodies, speaking on behalf of the associations committed to helping the financially, psychologically and physically deprived, and demonstrating the involvement of thousands of voluntary workers who work with these people every day.

The issue of exclusion has become a crucial challenge to our society. Poverty and financial insecurity in Europe are of serious concern to us and Jean-Pierre GOLLÉ’s report highlights this diagnosis while contributing ideas and describing INGOs’ practical activities as part of their efficient partnership with the Council of Europe.

The Council of Europe’s international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) act as watchdogs and draw attention with serious and appropriate concern to the unacceptable living conditions of people experiencing extreme poverty. The INGOs’ ideas and eyewitness accounts are conducive to generating a real change in perception and making the general public truly aware of these people’s distress.

INGOs have skills in areas such as participation by people experiencing exclusion and the decision-making process concerning them. This spirit of dialogue and consultation helps people experiencing extreme poverty to become independent. Access to social rights is a key priority in the Council of Europe’s work and that of the INGOs in the “Extreme Poverty and Social Cohesion” Grouping. Acting to

reduce poverty means taking forceful steps to improve training, employment, housing, health care and services.

The main aim of the Grouping's INGOs is to call on all Council of Europe bodies, especially the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the Committee of Ministers and all other decision-makers to draw up recommendations to ensure greater dignity for people experiencing poverty and to address their real hopes. I should like to stress the importance of the INGOs' work in promoting the existing legal instruments, especially the revised European Social Charter, whose Article 30 includes "the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion".

Our approach is inspired by what we learn from the very poor, from our dialogue and discussions with them and from the new forms of solidarity we build up in order to take more effective and more successful action. Our aim is to ensure that each individual's equal dignity is recognised and respected, including that of the poorest and most excluded.

It is a long road, but we are firmly resolved to move towards the measures advocated in this practical and realistic report.

Maritchu RALL

International Association of Charities (A.I.C.)

President of the "Extreme Poverty and Social Cohesion"
Grouping

INTRODUCTION

What do we know about poverty in Europe? Who are the persons worst affected by this tragedy? How do NGOs contribute to the fight against poverty and social exclusion? What are their actions? How do they help change society's perception of persons who experience poverty in their daily lives to one of respect for the dignity of each person, including the most fragile and severely excluded? Here are some of the questions that this memorandum seeks to answer.

Its objectives are both modest and ambitious. They are modest because we simply seek to present the findings of the various studies and practical experience of NGOs active in many different countries in Europe¹. The first objective is therefore to present a synopsis of the information provided by NGOs represented at the Council of Europe and active in the Extreme Poverty and Social Cohesion Grouping (see Annex). We are aware that the information collected by no means gives a complete picture of the manifold actions of NGOs. Our hope is that this study will encourage other NGOs to make their actions better known, particularly in countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and to reach out to persons living in poverty.

The goal is also ambitious because overviews of NGO actions in the field of poverty eradication are rare, and their multiple contributions are too often underestimated. We hope

¹ The field of study is the European continent, specifically those 850 millions inhabitants of the 47 countries members of the Council of Europe from Western Europe to Russia and the Baltic states and up to countries of Eastern and Central Europe.

this work will gain in the future from exchanges between NGOs and lend greater visibility to their contribution to the building of a more social, supportive Europe.

To set the stage, we shall start with a review of the state of poverty in Europe based on statistical studies by several international institutions, then take stock of qualitative aspects by referring to the experience of the poorest people. Next, we shall examine several of the NGOs' main fields of action in their fight against poverty, and the lessons that they yield. Going on to a more overall level, we shall review the varied contributions of NGOs to poverty eradication policies, which have provided more insight into complexity and dynamics of the poverty process and helped identify basic conditions for in-depth action. In conclusion, we shall identify several themes that we consider essential to effective action against poverty.

I. Poverty in Europe – some indicators

1. *The difficulty of measuring poverty*

What is poverty? How is it to be measured? To size up a situation, its deep-seated nature must be understood. For a long time, the concept of poverty was reduced to a monetary dimension; a person was considered poor if his or her income was not sufficient to ensure a standard of living considered a minimum in society. Thanks largely to NGOs, researchers came to understand over the past thirty years that poverty could not be reduced to an income level. NGOs have shown the complex and dynamic nature of poverty and helped improve the framework for poverty eradication policies. Through their understanding of the qualitative aspects of poverty, NGOs showed the shortcomings of the purely quantitative, often simplistic, indicators used by the international community. They helped establish a sounder basis for understanding and measuring poverty. This work of building up knowledge remains too unfamiliar to politicians and institutions; it should be pursued further and with the participation of persons who experience poverty.

Thanks to NGOs, the notion of poverty has now evolved from a very narrow concept defined in terms of insufficient income to a broad concept that reflects the multidimensional aspects and the dynamics of poverty². Poverty is now

² See for example publications of ATD Fourth World, Caritas Internationalis, and the Robert Schuman Foundation. The multidimensional aspect of poverty has been better understood at the international level since the World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen in 1995, and has been further developed

recognised as the outcome of a combination of several kinds of insecurity or handicap that affect several aspects of daily life such as access to employment, housing, health care, education, culture, justice and family protection to name just the main ones. “When these insecurities last, they reinforce each other and spoil the chances of those concerned to assume their responsibilities and reassert their rights by themselves”³. Hence, those affected move from poverty to extreme poverty, characterised by the accumulation of disadvantages over a long period; they become excluded from society and no longer consider themselves subjects or holders of rights.

This progress in defining poverty helped the concepts of interdependence and indivisibility of human rights to be better understood. Indeed, poverty hinders or even prevents access to social rights. A person shows signs of how insecurities accumulate and combine to reinforce each other and plunge the person ever deeper into poverty. “*Without housing, without drinkable water, without minimum resources, it is simply not possible to be in good health, to ensure that children go to school, to participate in local activities or even to see one’s family respected.*” In other words, to be poor can compromise access to good health, education and public life, so poverty compromises the free

in the various studies of the Council of Europe, including the excellent report “Access to social rights in Europe”, October 2002

³ Definition of extreme poverty proposed by the Conseil économique et social (France) in the Wresinski report “Grande pauvreté et précarité économique et sociale, February 1987. This definition was used by L. Despouy in the work of the Sub-Commission for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights at the United Nations in Geneva.

exercise of the rights and fundamental liberties that every human being should be able to enjoy.

Despite some definite progress in the design of poverty indicators, the NGOs must admit that to them, Europe still does not possess satisfactory indicators of poverty. Therefore, let us work with what exists. Two main types of indicators are available, indicators of absolute poverty and indicators of relative poverty.

- Indicators of absolute poverty are based on the notion of a threshold of monetary poverty below which a person is considered poor, his income level not being sufficient to cover the basic necessities of life. The World Bank, the United Nations and several countries such as the Russian Federation rely on such absolute indicators for their studies and international comparisons.

- Indicators of relative poverty are also monetary indicators but, instead of relying on a minimum threshold of income, they are defined according to an income level considered representative in society, such as the average income or the median income⁴ of households. Such concepts of relative poverty are used by EUROSTAT, the statistical office of the European Union, which sets the poverty threshold at 60 per cent of the median income in each country.

⁴ The median income is the income earned by 50 percent of the population, unlike the average income which is total income divided by the number of persons.

These most widely used absolute and relative poverty indicators allow international comparisons, but remain limited to a monetary assessment of poverty. Since they consequently do not reflect the multidimensional aspects of poverty, they provide a partial and incomplete view of poverty.

Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that in many countries the official measurement of poverty does not correspond to people's perception of their own poverty situation. Often, a greater proportion of the population considers itself poor than official indicators would suggest. In the Russian Federation, for example, according to data provided by the Rosstat Institute at the end of 2003, about 44 % of the population considered itself poor (subjective indicator, reflecting perceptions by people), a proportion more than double the official estimate of absolute poverty.

2. What do the indicators tell us, even if they are imperfect?

European Union: The proportion of poor people in the European Union (25 countries) is estimated by EUROSTAT at 16% in 2004⁵, women being more affected (17%) than men (15%). There are large differences between countries: countries with relatively low levels of poverty, including the Nordic countries and Hungary (about 11%); countries with average levels (14 to 17 %) including France, Belgium,

⁵ Proportion of the population with a disposable income below the poverty threshold set at 60% of the national median disposable income, after social transfers. Countries of the European Union spend some 28% of GDP on social protection programmes (2003), ie 13% for retirement, 8% for health and 5% for other cash transfers.

Germany, Poland; and countries with higher levels including countries of Southern Europe with proportions of 19 to 21% (Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal), Ireland and Slovakia (21%) and Turkey (26%).

World Bank: A World Bank study provides interesting information on poverty in Central and Eastern Europe⁶. The study uses the concept of absolute poverty (income level of less than \$ 2.15 per day), a concept not directly comparable with EUROSTAT indicators of relative poverty. According to the study, the proportion of poor persons in Central and Eastern Europe increased from 4% in 1990 after the fall of the Berlin wall and the transition from a planned to a market economy to 20% in 1998, reflecting the fall in output and the major structural reforms undergone by these countries. With the resumption of growth from 1988 and the application of institutional reforms, the proportion of poor persons would have decreased to 13% of the population in 2003, or about 60 million fewer poor; the decrease concerned all countries except Poland, Lithuania and Georgia, with poverty prevalent mainly in rural areas.

As indicated above, it is difficult to compare levels of poverty through measurement of income in countries where standards of living are very different⁷. Other indicators are therefore needed, such as, for example, access to hot water and toilets. The proportion of households without direct

⁶ Growth, poverty and inequality in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, October 2005, Asad Alam (team leader). The report covers a somewhat wider area than the Council of Europe, including non-member countries of Central Asia (Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan)

⁷ Russia also uses a concept of absolute poverty, estimated at 17.8% of the population in 2004 (Rosstat).

access to hot water is estimated at 2% in France as against 30% in Poland, 23% in urban Russian Federation and 47% in Romania⁸. The rate of non-availability of toilets within the living unit is 2% in France, 16% in Poland, 17% in urban Russian Federation and 33% in Romania.

Let us note that the concept of poverty is by nature relative, and that to understand and eradicate poverty, we need to see and understand it from the viewpoint of the actual persons concerned⁹.

What can be gathered from this various information? Despite increased wealth and growth in Europe, poverty continues to afflict a great number of Europeans. Some progress is being made in the fight against poverty and in the design of indicators, but the scandal of poverty remains as ever a challenge for civil society.

⁸ Study of l'INSEE, Economie et Statistique, Les approches de la pauvreté à l'épreuve des comparaisons internationales, Numéro 383-384-385, 2005.

⁹ See "Another approach to poverty indicators in Belgium". In: Godinot Xavier, Wodon Quentin (ed.), *Participatory approaches to attacking extreme poverty. Cases studies led by the International Movement ATD Fourth World*, World Bank working paper No. 77, The World Bank, April 2006, pp. 107-115.

II. The main fields of action of NGOs

NGOs act in many different ways to fight poverty, from emergency programmes for persons in distress to long-term support actions to enable persons to rebuild their lives if necessary and find their place in society as actors and thus recover their fundamental right to a dignified life. NGOs also seek to inform the public, to mobilise society, to make proposals and to eradicate poverty. They often work in partnership with persons living in poverty and social exclusion, and with public institutions and local structures to facilitate access by the poor to different social services.

NGOs are present in all countries of Europe. The example given below of the European Conference of Churches concerns its actions in countries in Eastern Europe, where NGO actions remain little known.

Examples of actions against poverty: The European Conference of Churches¹⁰	
Poland Social centres for persons in difficulty and centres for young persons Scholarship program and summer camps for young persons Assistance to drug addicted persons	Hungary Shelters for persons in difficulty, elderly persons, drug addicts and homeless. Assistance to Roma Latvia Assistance to street children Collection and distribution of clothes

¹⁰ The European Conference of Churches includes 126 churches of protestant, orthodox, Anglican and Christian traditions. The examples are taken from the book "European Churches Confronting Poverty, Social action against social exclusion", Herman Noordegraaf and Rainer Volz editors, 2004, SZI Verlag

Medical assistance, distribution of medicine Assistance to the elderly Czech Republic Centres for the homeless and unemployed Collection and distribution of clothes Slovakia Accommodation centre for homeless persons Food aid Distribution of clothes and medicine Assistance to Roma	Bulgaria Assistance to Roma and Turkish minorities Social centres Medical assistance Romania Food aid Support for youth at school Rehabilitation programmes for unemployed women
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1. Situations of extreme poverty

Extreme poverty is a situation where several types of insecurity exist at the same time and for a long time, leading to social exclusion. Programmes designed to help persons in such situations therefore need to include numerous components and to be delivered over an extended period of time, recognising that the notion of time for persons in severe difficulty is not the same as for society as a whole. Persons who have lived for years in very precarious housing conditions, for example in caravans or ad hoc shelters, cannot join a social housing project without preparation. Rejoining society after months or years of social exclusion requires that the person finds some self-esteem, some dignity, an ability to express his views orally and to relate to others.

The two examples provided below at the family housing project (Cité de promotion familiale) at Noisy-le-Grand (France) and the Barka Foundation (Poland) illustrate programmes that are both comprehensive and respectful of human dignity and help excluded and poor persons and families become reintegrated into society. These programmes show in a practical way the necessity of work on several fronts, from the reconstruction of the person to access to work, housing, community life, health, education, etc. Since fundamental rights are interdependent, actions to help and mentor those in need are also interdependent and need to be given time to succeed.

The Centre for the promotion of family life at Noisy-le-Grand, France¹¹

The centre for family, social and cultural promotion seeks to enable families who experience extreme poverty to move from a situation of no access to social rights to a situation where they can regain their rights and exercise their social and family responsibilities, and, after some time, to become autonomous. Families with a long life history of transience are in danger of breakup. The centre is a pilot project between a public social housing programme (Société de logements d'Emmaüs) and the ATD Fourth World Movement, taking in some 35 families for periods that can last up to several years.

Participants take over their apartment and the responsibilities of any tenant such as paying rent, taking care of the unit and establishing relations with neighbours. Starting from access

¹¹ www.atd-quartmonde.org

to housing, other actions are undertaken at the centre to help people become self-reliant and learn skills required to exercise their rights and obligations in all areas of daily life (education of children, health, culture, social and professional life.)

Each family signs a contract which sets out the rules and undertakings for the family and the centre. Activities include programmes of community development (the link with the neighbourhood being very important), a pre-school programme, a cultural centre, various rehabilitation schemes combining paid employment, training and culture.

The Barka Foundation, Poland

The foundation was established in 1989 near the city of Poznan; it offers structures for the social integration of the most excluded. It welcomes homeless persons, former drug addicts, persons with social problems and other persons excluded from society. The foundation offers a roof, a social centre, a structure where each participant can rebuild confidence in life and dignity. The main characteristic is mutual help. Participants attend workshops for professional training, programmes to recycle goods and restore old items, and various services to help others in the local community. The foundation currently operates some 30 centres in Poland, housing more than 750 homeless persons and training about 5000 persons each year. Its most recent project is a social housing program which provides small individual houses that come in kits built out of wood and are ready to be installed by the future residents. The Barka model is reproduced in

Ukraine and Belarus. A centre for Polish migrants is also operated in the United Kingdom (www.barka.org.pl).

What is the point of these examples? The importance of respecting the dignity of the poor; the active participation of those targeted by the programme, who thereby become actors of their future; the need to work on several fronts to eradicate poverty (access to housing, a job, a social life, education, etc.) and the critical role of partnership with other institutions, not only public but also local structures such as neighbourhood associations.

2. Groups that suffer most from poverty

Several population groups are particularly affected by poverty. Referring to actions most often cited by NGO representatives at the Council of Europe, we have identified the following groups: children and youth, families, migrants and women.

Beyond the concepts of groups, however useful, it is essential to be aware of those most deprived of rights within each group. By focusing only on groups, we run the risk of forgetting the necessity of a global approach. For example, insight into poverty among children requires understanding of their parents' poverty; combating long-term unemployment also requires attention to health and housing issues. An approach based too much on groups carries the risk of leaving out the most deprived, as the most dynamic persons free themselves from exclusion and the most excluded remain even more destitute and excluded.

a. Children and youth

Children constitute a group severely affected by poverty in Europe. EUROSTAT estimates that in European Union countries, some 20 % of dependent children under 16 years of age were living in poverty in 2005, compared with 16 % of adults. Countries most affected include Slovakia (30%), Italy (26%), Spain (24%), Poland (23%), Ireland and the United Kingdom (22%). Poverty among children is also prevalent in countries of Central and Eastern Europe not members of the European Union.

A study by the European Anti-Poverty Network EAPN¹² identifies several decisive factors in child poverty: social and family changes and the increasing number of single-parent families, changes in labour markets (slow growth, migration of non-specialised workers and job insecurity) and changes in social policies which become harsher towards beneficiaries.

Based on the input of NGOs, the study shows the following:

- Child poverty is not only a violation of fundamental rights of children, but jeopardises the future well-being of European societies.
- Health problems of parents impact negatively on their children. Poverty and social exclusion of parents impair the cognitive development and education of children.
- It is essential to recognise the poverty of parents and to give them the key role in their children's

¹² European Anti-Poverty Network, European network of associations involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion, Network News , November 2006; "Child Poverty in Europe" www.eapn.org

- future development by providing the help they need.
- Poverty must be seen as a form of violence towards children.

Dynamo and street children¹³

Dynamo international was created by Dynamo Belgium, an organisation assisting young persons in difficulty. It specialises in street work and deals mostly with underprivileged persons.

Dynamo identifies three main groups of street children: those who live in the street during the day and live with their parents; those who have temporarily left home and those going through a crisis, and those who permanently live in the street, often clearly at odds with society. Many of these children are exploited (prostitution, slavery, begging, human trafficking).

Some key recommendations made by Dynamo and its partners¹⁴:

- Recognise street work as a social necessity, and invest resources in actions that help create social relations between people
- Encourage prevention and education
- Promote co-operation and prevention actions between countries

¹³ Based on a presentation to the Extreme Poverty and Social Cohesion Grouping on 6 October 2004.

¹⁴ See www.travail-de-rue.net et www.enscw.org (European network on street children worldwide).

- Support social networks despite the unfavourable tight budgetary environment.

Precious children, precious parents¹⁵

The study presents what children and their parents teach us about the poverty of children in 10 European countries. Four aspects of youth are addressed: the importance of family life, the challenge for schools to foster development and success, the need for children to participate in the world of children, and the importance of building friendships and of support networks for children and their families.

Some of the main political messages from the study:

- **Include children and their families in programmes of knowledge and their monitoring**
- **Recognise and support children in their strategies**
- **Invest in the family as a network for social links and competence**
- **Help professionals contribute to the evolution of practices**
- **Better understand the links between the protection of the child and the fight against poverty.**

¹⁵ International Movement ATD Fourth World, November 2003, www.editionsquartmonde.org

Protection of children in Eastern Europe, Nobody's Children Foundation¹⁶

Poland, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Macedonia, Ukraine

The Nobody's Children Foundation launched in 2005 a project in the above countries seeking to improve the system of child protection against abuse and violence. The objective is to strengthen the competencies of professionals and to make parents and children aware of child abuse issues. The project establishes a system of support and protection for children by working in networks and in partnership with concerned institutions. The role of partner NGOs is to denounce violations of the rights of the child, to establish programmes of violence prevention, and to participate in their evaluation.

Prostitution and abuse of minors– against the exploitation of misery¹⁷

At the initiative of the International Abolitionist Federation, the Extreme Poverty and Social Cohesion Grouping adopted a motion in late 2006 in which NGOs denounce the increasing number of poverty and exclusion cases, in particular poverty of women, children, migrants, and the exploitation of the most vulnerable persons: prostitution, pimping, crimes against children, traffic in human organs, traffic in migrants, undeclared work, etc.

¹⁶ www.fdn.pl ; presentation to INGOs at the Council of Europe on 19 April 2007.

¹⁷ See the website of the Extreme Poverty and Social Cohesion Grouping, under www.coe.int, NGOs.

NGOs ask that the voice of the most excluded be heard and taken into account by those in positions of political and social influence, that health and sex education be a permanent reference for all because such education is necessary for a world without violence, that the fight against all types of trafficking be intensified, that prostitutes be considered legally as victims, and that rich countries develop actions enabling persons from poor countries to live and work decently in their countries, toward a economy of solidarity.

b. Families

State authorities, the Council of Europe and NGOs all recognise the important role of families for social cohesion and the fight against poverty. The legal instruments of the Council of Europe and its social cohesion strategy describe the family as the basic unit of society with rights to social, legal and economic protection to ensure its development.

Families face multiple structural changes in Europe as elsewhere, among which are demographic decline and aging of population, a greater variety of family models (more single-parent, reconstituted and multiethnic families) and increasing participation of women in the workforce. Despite these changes, the family in its various forms remains the foundation of our societies.

NGOs emphasise the following points in their work and actions related to families who experience poverty.

- The family is the ideal place to learn solidarity and to build social relations
- The family unit is the last defence against poverty
- Families who experience poverty should be recognised as participants in the fight against poverty and their contribution and experience are necessary to design policies concerning them
- All social agents must work together and “with”, not “for” families.

The Council of Europe, in association with NGOs, has worked extensively on family issues. Its studies and policy recommendations emphasise the need to consolidate and develop support to families through general measures, support for positive parenting¹⁸, support services for parents and assistance to parents at risk of social exclusion.

The Council of Europe has also worked on the specific theme of families who experience poverty. The Committee of Experts on Children and Families (2005-7) studied the case of families at risk of social exclusion. The main conclusions of the expert group (in which NGOs participated) are summarised below, together with other examples of NGO actions related to families.

¹⁸ “Positive parenting”: refers to parental behaviour based on the best interests of the child that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child.”, Recommendation Rec(2006)19 of the Committee of Ministers adopted on December 13, 2006.

Poverty and families : A study by Caritas Europe

The study focuses on the precarious situation of poor families in 42 European countries¹⁹.

Families most affected by poverty:

- Single-parent families, in particular those headed by a single mother
- Large families
- Families with one or more members suffering from a chronic or mental illness or dependent on drugs or alcohol.
- Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers
- The unemployed and those affected by job insecurity

Among the recommendations:

- Evaluate the impact on poor families of any proposed legislation, particularly related to employment, education and health
- Address the issues of single-parent families by means including improvement of pre-school structures and support for children (care facilities, tax relief)

Parenting in situations of social exclusion²⁰

The Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Children and Families studied situations of parenting in Europe, including families who experience poverty and those at risk

¹⁹ Poverty has faces in Europe: The need for family-oriented policies, 2nd report on poverty in Europe, 2004, Caritas Europa

²⁰ See Report of the Council of Europe 2006 coordinated by Prof. Mary Daly "Positive parenting in Contemporary Europe".

of social exclusion. The committee report formulates the following recommendations for families who experience poverty:

- Appropriate means should be provided to support parents and enable them to develop the competencies necessary to exercise their parental responsibilities towards their children
- It is essential to develop a partnership between professionals, parents and their children.
- The contribution of informal resources, traditional educational networks and community support actions should be encouraged.
- Projects which provide for the participation of parents and families in the new relational networks are important; as are the structures that enable parents to share their experience with other parents who face similar situations.
- Parents should be treated with respect and play an active role as actors and contributors rather than as recipients of assistance.
- Professionals play a critical role in facilitating parental access to services – to inform parents is not sufficient; professionals should speak “with” and not “at” parents.
- Each service provider should work in partnership with parents.

NGO study: When poverty separates parents and children²¹

This case study covers 6 countries on 4 continents; it presents the dramatic choices that very poor families are forced to make when they do not receive the support necessary to remain together (parents requesting the placement of their children because they do not consider themselves fit to raise their children, children forced into crime, child labour, drugs or even prostitution).

Too often, the conventional approach is to remove the children from distressed circumstances in their family “for their own good”. The study shows that such solutions are not what the children want and that separating children from their parents is not always in their long-term interests. The study shows that the best way to support children is to enable parents and children to be protagonists of their own future.

c. The feminisation of poverty

Women constitute a group particularly affected by poverty, and it has become common to speak of feminisation of poverty. According to EUROSTAT, the poverty risk (after social transfers) in the European Union is 16%, ie 15% for men and 17% for women. The rate for women is significantly higher than for men in Germany, Austria, Ireland, Estonia, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. Poland is one of the few

²¹ “When extreme poverty separates parents and children – a challenge for human rights”, study by ATD Fourth World prefaced by the United Nations and Unicef, 2004. www.atd-quartmonde.org

countries where the poverty rate for women is lower than for men.

The concept of poverty feminisation has evolved along with social changes. In the 1970s, the concept referred principally to single women raising a family (today, it is estimated that four out of five single-parent families are headed by a woman); later, the concept was used to reflect the large number of women employed in low-paying jobs and more recently it has been used to show that there are more women than men who experience poverty.

It should also be noted that poverty indicators based on income and applied to women are not very relevant. Indeed, in households where the woman does not work, the income is generated by the man but it is the woman who manages the household expenses, and in so doing, she gives priority to the children, then to the man, and last to herself.

The feminisation of poverty is present in several major challenges and tragedies facing our societies: migration, human trafficking and prostitution, and diseases such as AIDS.

Fighting the feminisation of poverty

The first two priorities of the INGO Gender Equality Grouping in 2005 and 2006 were violence towards women and the feminisation of poverty.

At a hearing before the Parliamentary Assembly Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in March 2006,

Mrs. Karine Henrotte, President of the Gender Equality Grouping, stressed the need for the following actions

- The importance of reconciling work and family life; promoting access to day nurseries and other parents' support services
- Fighting discrimination against women at work and in society

International Council of Women and poverty, Kyiv

At a workshop during their general assembly in September 2006, members of ICW discussed situations of poverty, stressing the point that poverty is a violation of human dignity that excludes the poor from society. The workshop stressed the importance of effective participation by the poor in those programmes that concern them, and that the approach should be bottom-up. The participants identified 5 essential requirements for eradicating poverty: peace, education, training of girls and young women so that they can become independent, access to knowledge and access to micro-credit.

d. Migrants

According to the World Commission on International Migration, there were 56 million migrants in Europe in 2000, 5 million of them in an irregular situation. Close to half of migrants were women. The European countries that receive most migrants are the Russian Federation (13 million, or about 20% of the world's migrants), Germany and Ukraine (7 million).

Migrants are among those persons most at risk of poverty. Many NGOs assist migrants and work for their integration in Europe. The following examples illustrate the work of NGOs as well as types of actions and issues.

**Migrant integration : Forum of INGOs at Messina,
November 2005²²**

The objectives of the forum were to give NGOs a sense of responsibility about migration, to reflect on obstacles to and good practices for integration, to promote the legal instruments of the Council of Europe, and to present recommendations for action. Participants debated concepts such as integration, assimilation, ethnocentricity and multiculturalism, noting that migrants are often parents and children. They underlined the critical role of women in the integration of migrants, women often being the first victims of human rights violations.

The integration of migrants being a mutual adjustment process for migrants as well as for the receiving society, integration policies must facilitate both parties' adjustment and contribute to mutual understanding of the respective cultures and values. Migrants must be recognised for their cultural heritage and should not be discriminated against on account of their differences and the fact that their integration is a challenge to society. Young migrants should be able to

²² The Forum was organised by INGOs enjoying participatory status with the Council of Europe, the North South Center of Lisbon, and Intercenter of Messina on November 11 and 12, 2005 in Messina, Italy, on the theme Integration of migrants in Europe – what role for NGOs?

http://www.coe.int/t/f/ong/public/Messine_rapportgeneral.asp#TopOfPage

take pride in their roots. School and employment are focal points of integration.

Participants were made aware that it is difficult as well as necessary to integrate all migrants, men, women, and children, not only for the migrants themselves but also for the construction of European societies. They noted that the values and legal instruments of the Council of Europe provided essential tools to support the integration of migrants, and undertook to make them better known.

Further to the proceedings of the forum, the NGOs issued the Messina Declaration which calls on various forces of society to implement targeted actions the better to further the integration of migrants. Member countries should sign and ratify the legal instruments of the Council of Europe (without which the proposed measures are useless), and NGOs are encouraged to display more determination and commitment in concrete actions which contribute to migrants' integration.

Migration, a passport to poverty?

Caritas Europa published in June 2006 the third part of a major study on poverty, called "Migration, – a journey into poverty? A study on poverty and exclusion of immigrants in Europe".²³

The report identifies poverty traps in several sectors, employment, housing, education, health, and participation in

²³ www.caritas-europa.org

public life, and shows what it calls the “domino effect” that perpetuates poverty from generation to generation.

Many countries draw a distinction between the right to reside and the right to work, denying some migrants access to employment and thereby pushing them towards insecure forms of employment and the likelihood of discrimination by unscrupulous employers. Migrants have difficulty qualifying for social housing (increasingly operated by the private sector in Europe), having access to health care (most countries do not provide migrants with basic care and assistance in case of medical emergencies), access to education and training, and access to public life (no right to vote). These disadvantages are exacerbated by discriminatory practices, or even exploitation over many years. Migrants most at risk of poverty are those whose situations are not in order, and asylum seekers.

The recommendations of Caritas:

- Guarantee the ratification and application of international and national laws upholding migrants’ rights
- Open channels for legal labour immigration
- Implement policies for social inclusion of immigrants
- Strengthen education policies as a powerful tool for reducing poverty
- Promote the participation of migrants in public life.

Integration of migrant women in Italy – AIC programme in Milan²⁴

AIC's action with migrant women focuses on aiding their recovery of self-esteem and confidence, socialisation, adaptation to their environment, pride in the ability to speak and write and to feel more in control of their own development.

AIC is represented in more than 55 countries and brings together 250 000 women volunteers who are committed to working with women suffering poverty in order to fight all forms of poverty and injustice and give them an active and recognised social role, in a spirit of solidarity in society.

www.aic-international.org

3. Some remarks on Central and Eastern European countries

INGOs represented at the Council of Europe have increasing ties with local associations in Central and Eastern Europe, but their work and their view of the social challenges in these countries are not well known. This memorandum affords an opportunity to focus on actions in these countries.

The change from a controlled and centralised economy to a market economy in the 1990s shattered social structures and caused many hardships for the most vulnerable. Within the

²⁴ Presentation to the Extreme Poverty and Social Cohesion Grouping on 26 April 2005

former planned and centralised system from 1950 to 1980, the State was responsible for and delivered all social services. State enterprises provided virtually free of charge many services in kind such as housing, heating, water, home electricity, and access to education, culture and health. With the transformation to a market economy and the bankruptcy of numerous public enterprises in the 1990s, access to social services was less and less subsidised. In addition to these changes, national populations were aging (particularly in the Russian Federation), pensions lost their purchasing power year after year, unemployment increased, there were large inflows of migrants, and access to social services become ever less subsidised; the very poor could not maintain their access to social services for want of means and public support.

The restructuring of economies in Central and Eastern Europe did enable these countries to resume growth after many years of recession during the transition. But it also created a growing gap and large inequalities between those with the capability and knowledge to operate in the new structures and those living under precarious and difficult conditions, often without social protection. Pensioners and the unemployed were among those most severely affected. NGOs often had to back up and sometimes supplant state services to help those most in need. Another challenge was to establish new relations with public authorities and to ensure the political independence needed for their actions.

The difficult construction of social services in Eastern Europe

According to a study by UNCCAS²⁵, local public authorities must often face tremendous social needs without having sufficient resources. In Slovenia, the State establishes the framework for general social services and their financing, and local governments manage individualised services and support for the elderly or disabled. In Koper, a city of 54 000 inhabitants and the largest port in the country, the local government is rather privileged by a more favourable social structure than other localities. It is responsible for its own organisation and relies on the private sector and NGOs for the delivery of services. Other localities are not so privileged and do not have the human capital necessary to establish and run social programmes; as a result, there are large inequalities between localities.

East-West Forum for a European Community, Germany

The forum, also called Haus Neudorf, is the result of a partnership between ATD Fourth World Movement, a group of friends incorporated in an association, local residents and local authorities in the Uckermark region, Land of Brandenburg. At a crossroads with Poland, an old area of transit, the region is traditionally rural with considerable depopulation since 1990 and a high unemployment rate (30%). The forum was established in this area to provide

²⁵ Dossier « Où en est l'Europe sociale ? », Union nationale des Centres communaux et intercommunaux d'action sociale, UNCCAS, November 2006, www.unccas.org

exchanges and training in civic responsibilities for all interested, regardless of nationality, age and social background.

Haus Neudorf especially pursues the ideal of justice and commitment of young persons through exchanges and meetings of young persons from different countries in Europe (workshops, study tours, seminars, internships); the objective is that participants meet others from different origins, run projects together and think about how they can become involved in their local communities. In association with other partners, Haus Neudorf also receives, for moments of encounter and revival, small groups of persons who experience a difficult life. The team that manages the house also contributes to local life and its opening to exchanges with other localities in Germany, France, Poland and the Russian Federation.

The house organises several events annually for the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on October 17, with seminars on poverty alleviation policies attended by local citizens, persons who experience poverty and political leaders.

Access to social rights – Co-operation between NGOs and public authorities
Moscow, September 2006²⁶

NGOs participated at the European conference “Ensuring social rights” organised by the Council of Europe, INGOs and the International Federation for Peace and Conciliation.

²⁶ See website of NGOs represented at the Council of Europe
http://www.coe.int/t/f/ong/public/Moscou_2006_r%E9sum%E9.asp#TopOfPage

More than 100 representatives of Russian NGOs, international NGOs, and Russian public authorities debated for two days on the issue of access to social rights and the necessary co-operation between civil society and public authorities.

Several workshops focused on issues of family and children, health, elderly and disabled persons, consultation mechanisms between NGOs and public authorities, and international co-operation.

Russian NGOs discussed their actions and challenges, among which were the severe problem of street children (abandoned or orphaned by regional conflicts, juvenile delinquency, handicapped children), violence to women, the great difficulty for the disabled to enjoy their fundamental rights, and access to information on social rights and available support structures.

Participants stressed the importance of collaboration by all players to ensure access to social rights, and the need for NGOs to establish networks to influence public authorities and society.

III. Main contributions of NGOs

This section describes the main contributions of NGOs to the fight against poverty. Items We have been grouped under the following themes: knowledge and understanding of poverty, essential to ensure that policies rest on a firm and substantial basis; the link between poverty and human rights, and its social policy implications; the political role of NGOs in changing societies and in monitoring the commitments accepted by European institutions and States.

1. Knowledge and understanding of poverty

One of the most important contributions of NGOs has been to change the way society and researchers view poverty and persons who experience poverty. As indicated at the beginning of this memorandum, building on their direct knowledge of persons who experience poverty, NGOs demonstrated the multidimensional aspects and dynamics of poverty. They showed how different hardships (lack of housing, unemployment, lack of access to health, education, and justice) mutually reinforce each other and plunge those concerned ever more deeply into poverty and exclusion. Today, it is accepted that poverty is much more than just a lack of income.

This progress in understanding the processes of poverty influenced the work of researchers and institutions, which have sought to develop indicators that reflect the complexities of poverty better. The United Nations, the European Union and the Council of Europe have each developed indicators that set out to register the various aspects of poverty; such efforts are important but still tend

too much to place the main emphasis on quantitative indicators at the expense of qualitative aspects, which are indeed more difficult to measure.

2. Poverty and human rights

NGOs have played a critical role in the understanding that poverty conditions are a violation of human rights. Studies at the Council of Europe, the United Nations in Geneva (Human Rights Council and Sub-Commission for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights) and other forums where legal issues are reviewed have shown that poverty denies those who experience it their fundamental rights. The poorest people have taught us to understand the concept of indivisibility of human rights. Extreme poverty detracts from the free exercise of fundamental rights such as civil and political rights and other rights such as the right to housing, health, education, culture and justice, to name but the most important. When these insecurities continue, they impair people's capacity to fulfil their responsibilities and to win back their rights by their own endeavours. These persons no longer feel that they have rights.

Arguing that poverty conditions represented a violation of human rights was not well received in the 1980s. However, how could the relevance of international and national treaties not be questioned when persons experiencing poverty were denied their rights? Now, poverty is seen as a violation of human rights, and this notion is included in numerous treaties²⁷, including the revised European

²⁷ It is interesting to note the adoption of "Guiding principles- extreme poverty and human rights" by the Sub-Commission for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights in Geneva in August 2006. These principles, which will be submitted to the General Assembly of the United Nations, are based on the universality, indivisibility and

Social Charter which sets forth the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion in Article 30. More recently, the Sub-Commission for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights at the UN in Geneva adopted draft guiding principles on extreme poverty and human rights²⁸. These guiding principles apply the human rights approach to the fight against poverty; they will enable states to develop and implement coherent global policies to combat poverty and should result in the adoption of a convention by the UN General Assembly.

The message that poverty violates human rights is also carved in the commemorative stone laid in 1993 in front of the Council of Europe. The stone bears these words of Father Joseph Wresinski: “*Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty*”²⁹.

Why is it so important to link poverty and human rights? Human rights are the fundamental rights necessary to guarantee human dignity, and represent the highest level of international law. They apply to all human beings and therefore have universal value. Placed in a human rights context, the fight against poverty moves from the level of assistance and charity to the higher level of a duty; it becomes an obligation of social justice. The fight against

interdependence of human rights. They provide a coherent legal framework for guiding countries in the fight against poverty.

²⁸ Human Rights Council, Sub-Commission for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, Resolution 2006/9, 24 August 2006.

²⁹ There are some 30 such commemorative stones in the world, all celebrating the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on October 17.

poverty and human rights are no longer two distinct projects, but projects that reinforce each other³⁰.

To state the law is good, as long as the law is effective. This brings us to the question of access to social rights, a subject extensively treated at the Council of Europe, with the support and active participation of NGOs. A major joint achievement of the Council of Europe and NGOs has been the publication of the report “Access to social rights in Europe”³¹. This report analyses access to social rights with a focus on access to housing, social protection, employment, health and education. It reviews obstacles to access, provides examples of ways to overcome these obstacles, identifies general principles for improving access to social rights, and sets out guiding principles for an intersectorial approach to access to social rights.

A key principle attached to human rights is the right of participation. Without participation, it is not possible to exercise one’s rights as a citizen. Participation is necessary to ensure access by all to fundamental rights. This right means that persons concerned by a policy have the right to participate in the design, implementation and monitoring of the policy.

This right to participation is recognised by the international community and in major treaties, but is rarely applied. The revised social cohesion strategy of the Council of Europe (2004) includes

³⁰ These changes in perception and understanding are also evident in the evolution of Amnesty International, a well-known NGO in the field of human rights, which for several years has been working to ensure that social rights and the fight against poverty are recognised at the same level as civil and political rights.

³¹ Access to social rights in Europe, report prepared by Mary Daly, Council of Europe Publishing, October 2002

the right to participation and specifies that the voice of the excluded should be heard.

Examples of effective participation by the poor in programmes and policies concerning them are rare. One such example was the hearing of families who experience poverty by the Committee of Experts on Families and Children of the Council of Europe in February 2006 in the context of the work on parenting and children at risk of social exclusion.

It is necessary, though not easy, to arrange for the poor to participate in programmes concerning them. What right do we have to speak on behalf of others? Why deprive society of the contribution, knowledge and experience of the poorest people who daily live in poverty and face its consequences? Organising participation requires that a number of obstacles and insecurities be overcome on all sides. It implies building a relationship of equality, where all partners are free to contribute their experience, opinion and thought, as the following study shows.

**The challenge of participation – “What we say
should change our lives”,³² »**

This study is the result of exchanges over several years and several countries with persons experiencing poverty and other partners (such as the European Union and the Council of Europe, and the meeting “A Europe for all” held in Warsaw in 2004). It seeks to identify critical conditions for the effective participation of the poorest people.

³² ATD Fourth World, “What we say should change our lives- Extreme poverty and access by all to fundamental rights”, February 2006, 111 pages, Editions Quart Monde.

Why include the poorest?

- It is their right, and for them the opportunity, to act as citizens
- The poorest are the first experts on poverty; their knowledge and experience should enrich policies.

How are they to be included? Some practical examples

- Organise contact in a way which respects the dignity and equality of each participant.
- Start from a shared will to build a society that respects the rights of each person.
- Treat the poorest as real partners
- Understand the importance as a partner of the community built around people
- Capitalise on efforts and actions already undertaken by the persons, and seek to make the joint work during the project a training opportunity for all participants
- Involve professionals and those who assist the poorest
- Allow each participant to proceed at his own pace and recognise differences among them
- The poorest need to be accompanied and supported
- All participants should be co-responsible for results and accountable for follow-up actions.

Women in action against poverty

The main objective of the International association of charities (AIC) is to fight all forms of poverty³³. Through self-promotion and empowerment, the AIC involves the most deprived in their own development and that of their community. At a workshop in Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium) in November 2005, the AIC addressed the poverty of women with several testimonies of actions in Madagascar, Bolivia and the Congo. Participants noted, among other matters, the importance of the AIC commitment with the poorest women, the role of education and training of women but also of men, and the need to organise the participation of women in the formulation, execution and evaluation of projects and official policies guaranteeing justice and equity.

3. Political role of NGOs

INGOs represented at the Council of Europe help alert and challenge European political leaders so that Europe makes social cohesion and the fight against poverty central to its policies and programmes. The INGOs website reflects their multiple and varied actions. Here are some examples:

- NGOs addressed and questioned Heads of States and Government at the 3rd Summit of the Council of Europe in Warsaw in May 2005. Among the themes, NGOs noted the irreplaceable role of the Council of Europe for a Europe without dividing lines; they called on the Heads of States to reaffirm that social cohesion, the eradication of poverty and the refusal of social exclusion are among the main priorities

³³ www.aic-international.org

of the Council of Europe. The Action Plan adopted by Heads of States includes the following statement: “To guarantee social cohesion: the essential task is to define together remedies and solutions that could prove effective in the fight against poverty and exclusion. To ensure equitable access to social rights and to protect the most vulnerable groups”

- NGOs regularly recall the above declaration in meetings with officials of the Council of Europe (European Committee for Social Cohesion, Parliamentary Assembly, for example) and representatives of member countries.
- NGOs support the objectives of the Council of Europe and its values in their work in the field and in the context of their national activities and public campaigns.
- NGOs also help bring together different social agents in some countries. A recent example was a seminar on the participation of Romanian civil society in the construction of Europe, organised by the Conference of INGOs in the context of the Romanian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers in Bucharest in May 2006
- NGOs organise public campaigns to mobilise the public in the fight against poverty, for example the Declaration of solidarity (2006-07) and support for the World Day for the Eradication of Poverty on October 17.

NGOs are also very active in the European Union³⁴. In 2000, the European Union adopted the Lisbon strategy to reinforce social cohesion in Europe. The Union has set common objectives for the fight against poverty and social exclusion and decided that these

³⁴ NGOs contribute to the work of the European Union in the fields of social cohesion and the fight against poverty, notably through the European Anti-Poverty Network EAPN and the European Platform of Social NGOs.

objectives would be implemented by each country in the context of National Action Plans. To bring countries to work together, share practices and improve the impact of policies, an Open Method of Coordination was established. The fight against poverty and social exclusion was thus identified in 2000 as an essential element of European Union policies, with the objective of giving a decisive impetus to the elimination of poverty.

The Lisbon strategy was revised in 2005, with the focus on employment and growth policies, and incorporating the National Action Plans into Programmes of Structural Reforms which relate chiefly to employment and growth policies. Numerous NGOs interpreted the change as a symptom of weakening of European social objectives. NGOs reaffirmed that growth was no guarantee against poverty and exclusion; they called on the Heads of States to retain the eradication of poverty among the priority objectives of the Strategy. At the Summit in the spring of 2007, the Heads of States reaffirmed the social dimension of the Lisbon strategy and insisted that the social objectives common to member States should be more fully taken into account in the Lisbon Agenda.

In the context of the Social Agenda 2005-2010, the European Commission has proposed to designate 2010 as European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, and thus to renew the political commitment made by the Union in 2000 and give a decisive impetus to the eradication of poverty by 2010.

NGOs also contributed to the drafting of the proposed treaty to establish a Constitution for the European Union. The project, currently stalled, includes among its objectives the fight against social exclusion, but combating poverty does not appear as such among the objectives for the Union. It only appears among the

objectives relating to relations with the rest of the world. NGOs consider that the European Union cannot affirm its will to eradicate poverty in the world without affirming the same will to pursue this goal within its borders.

Another role for NGOs is the monitoring and review of public policies and actions to ensure that social commitments undertaken by States are met. One such clear example at the Council of Europe is the role of NGOs to monitor the implementation of the instrument and ensure that commitments under the Revised European Social Charter are met by member States. In 2006, two NGOs lodged two collective complaints for non-fulfilment of commitments accepted by a country under Articles 16, 30 and 31 of the Revised European Social Charter.³⁵). NGOs are in regular contact with the Commissioner for Human Rights on situations in Europe where human rights are not respected. NGOs engage in similar actions in the European Union where they help to monitor the national action plans for social inclusion and other commitments accepted by member States.

³⁵ Partly owing to the influence of NGOs, the Revised European Social Charter includes Articles 30 (right to protection against poverty and social exclusion) and 31 (right to housing).

IV. Final remarks

The main messages conveyed by this synopsis of NGO actions in the fields of social cohesion and poverty eradication are the following:

- Poverty remains a tremendous disgrace to Europe.
- European policies should prioritise the fight against poverty and social exclusion. Actions should be coordinated at the European level. The recent memorandum of understanding between the Council of Europe and the European Union should provide a framework for increased collaboration on these important topics.
- Social commitments made by States should be implemented in practice.
- Persons who experience poverty should be able to participate in programmes and policies that concern them, from the design to the implementation and review phases.
- Civil society, public authorities and social services should work in partnership in their actions to eradicate poverty.
- NGOs should seek to meet poor persons, include them in their programmes, and help to enhance society's knowledge and understanding of poverty and social exclusion.

In sum, Europe should give higher and better co-ordinated priority to social policy and the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

Annex

Grouping ‘EXTREME POVERTY AND SOCIAL COHESION’

President : Maritchu Rall

Approximately 400 international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) that enjoy participatory status with the Council of Europe organise their work through ten thematic groupings or commissions. This grouping gives priority to the fight against extreme poverty and social exclusion through political and legal commitment, basing its work on the experiences and thoughts of very poor people.

The grouping is made up of more than seventy international non-governmental organisations recognised for their competence in this area and their capacity to influence social policy. It is a forum for consultation and discussion among all the players committed, each in their own area, to fighting all forms of injustice by voicing the legitimate aspirations of people experiencing extreme poverty and exclusion.

The grouping’s special focus makes it a key talking partner in the various Council of Europe bodies that draw up legal texts and recommendations designed to improve the lives of people suffering from poverty and exclusion. Its INGOs also help to carry out and monitor the governments’ social commitments and to publicise the Council of Europe’s work and case-law.

A real partnership has developed in the European Committee for Social Cohesion (CDCS), an intergovernmental body working to

promote access to social rights for everyone. The INGOs take part in the work of new committees of experts such as the ones on “empowerment of people experiencing extreme poverty” and “low-income workers”; they provide the grassroots expertise which allows the governments to frame policies geared to people living in extreme poverty.

The grouping’s INGOs also cooperate with other Council of Europe bodies including the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Parliamentary Assembly.

One of their main aims is to promote the Council’s existing legal instruments, especially the revised European Social Charter.

