
1363rd meeting, 11 December 2019

6 Social cohesion

6.1 European Social Cohesion Platform (PECS)

Abridged report of the 4th meeting (Rome, 10-11 October 2019)

Item to be considered by the GR-SOC at its meeting on 26 November 2019

Opening of the meeting and adoption of the agenda

1. The Platform took note of the opening remarks by Mr Jan Malinowski, Head of the Department of the European Social Charter, Directorate of Human Rights, DGI – Directorate General Human Rights and Rule of Law.
2. Mr Malinowski underlined the importance to continue the work of the Platform, as the only Council of Europe intergovernmental committee on social cohesion and social rights matters. He mentioned that, during the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers 129th session held in Helsinki on 16-17 May 2019, social rights were high on the agenda with the support of the outgoing Council of Europe Secretary General who also prompted discussions on the subject of growing inequality. The newly-elected Secretary General, Ms Marija Pejčinović Burić, has also expressed support for social rights issues.
3. The Platform adopted the agenda as it appears in the document PECS(2019)OJ1 and the order of business.

Matters of general interest to the PECS

4. The Platform took note of the most important developments in the Council of Europe and member States, since its previous plenary meeting, as presented by the Secretariat.
5. In addition to document PECS(2019)2 reflecting recent developments in the Council of Europe bodies and committees and other international fora, the Platform took note of the oral presentations by representatives from member States on developments in their respective countries in the field of social cohesion since its previous plenary meeting. Some representatives identified areas of possible activity of PECS on issues such as demography, loneliness among old people, regional social policies and social rights.
6. The PECS representatives agreed to send updated information on recent developments to be included in the PECS documents, such as the document PECS(2019)2, by 1 November 2019.

PECS terms of reference 2020-2021 and the work plan for 2020-2021

7. The Platform took note of the PECS draft terms of reference for 2020-2021, which should be adopted by the Committee of Ministers by the end of 2019. The PECS representatives welcomed positive member States' support for the continuation and funding of its important work.

¹ This document has been classified restricted until examination by the Committee of Ministers.

8. The Platform agreed that it would be desirable to include the revision of the Council of Europe's 2010 "New Strategy for Social Cohesion" among its specific tasks. Some PECS representatives indicated their intention to propose via their Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Permanent Representations in Strasbourg that this item be included in the specific tasks of the new terms of reference for 2020-2021 and encouraged other representatives to do the same.

9. The Platform discussed the draft work plan for the biennium 2020-2021. It agreed to proceed with the development of a detailed work plan after the adoption of its terms of references for 2020-2021.

10. It was agreed that the draft work plan would be finalised for approval during the next PECS meeting in 2020.

Committee of Ministers draft Declaration on Addressing Child Poverty

11. The Platform exchanged final views on the draft Declaration of the Committee of Ministers on Addressing Child Poverty. Subject to certain changes, it agreed to submit it to the Committee of Ministers for consideration and possible adoption.

Draft Council of Europe Strategy for Social Cohesion (2020-2024)

12. The Platform exchanged views on the draft background paper on the revision of the 2010 "New Strategy for Social Cohesion" prepared by Mr Joseph Gerada, the PECS Vice-Chair, together with the working group 3 which he chaired.

13. The Platform welcomed the paper which the participants considered a valuable background and resource for the revision of the "New strategy on social cohesion". It was agreed that the member States would provide further comments and, if necessary, propose amendments to the background paper by 1 November 2019.

14. The background paper will be revised and finalised by the Chair and the Working Group 3 following the comments by the member States.

Report on middle class and social cohesion

15. The report on middle class and social cohesion, prepared at the request of the PECS, was presented by its author, Paolo Graziano, professor at the University of Padua. The presentation of the report was followed by a general discussion. Particularly, issues on lower middle class, definitions of middle class and social cohesion were underlined.

16. The Platform took note of the report. It expressed the view that it is desirable to pursue work on the middle class from a social cohesion perspective and agreed to consider the issues raised in the report when identifying topics for the work during the next biennium.

Date and venue of the next meeting

17. The Platform took note that, according to the draft terms of reference 2020-2021 to be adopted by the Committee of Ministers, PECS would have two meetings per year. It was suggested to have one meeting in Strasbourg and one meeting in a member States should one propose to host the meeting. It was agreed that the next PECS meeting would take place in Strasbourg, preferably in April 2020, the exact date to be confirmed.

Adoption of the abridged report

18. The Platform approved the abridged report as it appeared in document PECS (2019)7.

Appendix

Draft Declaration of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on Addressing Child Poverty

*(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 2019,
at the ... meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)*

Child poverty remains a major concern in Europe. The austerity measures that were taken following the economic crisis of 2008 have affected children the most. They incur a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion than the adult population and the elderly. Almost 385 million of the world's children, or 19.5%, live in extreme poverty, compared to 9.2% of adults.¹ In 2017, an estimated 24.9 % of children (17 years old or younger) in the 28 member States of the European Union (EU) were living in poverty, compared with 23% of adults (between 18 and 64 years) and 18.2 % of the elderly (over-65 years old).² Although there are no reliable consolidated statistics for Council of Europe member states outside the EU, it is estimated that the proportion of children living in poverty in these countries could be even higher.

Poverty affects the rights of children in many ways. It can have a deleterious impact on both the lives of children at the moment and on their future chances in life. Children living in poverty are often subject to discrimination. Their rights to education and health care, proper housing and living conditions are often not respected. Over 11% of children in the EU leave school before completing secondary education, a prevalence that increases when a child lives in poverty. They are deprived of equal opportunities and frequently have limited access to recreational and cultural activities in comparison with their peers from better-off families.

Children growing up in poor families are three times more likely than those from better-off families to become low earners as adults, be employed in poorly paid jobs or be members of the working poor with little prospect of a better future. The level of education of parents and the composition of the household, particularly single-parent households with dependent children, are also important factors influencing child poverty.³ Similarly, the proportion of children at risk of poverty is considerably higher among children of Roma and migrant families.⁴ The intergenerational transmission of poverty poses serious risks to social cohesion and political stability.

Moreover, children living in poverty are at a higher risk of being subjected to violence and exploitation, including child marriage (and early pregnancy), harmful employment or bullying and stigmatisation. Poverty is also a factor that increases the likelihood that at some point in their lives they will have problems with the criminal justice system. Poverty can be both a cause and the result of disrespect for human rights. Living in poverty may lead to human rights violations, while human rights violations may, in turn, result in social exclusion and poverty.⁵

Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted on 20 November 1989) states that: "States Parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development".⁶

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is built on the principle of "leaving no one behind" and endeavouring to reach the furthest behind first. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 aims to: "End poverty in all its forms everywhere" and "by 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions".⁷

¹ . See at: <https://data.unicef.org/>.

² . Indicateur AROPE, Eurostat 2017 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Children_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion#General_overview.

³ . Ibid.

⁴ . European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights report "Combating child poverty: an issue of fundamental rights".

⁵ . European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights report "Combating child poverty: an issue of fundamental rights".

⁶ . The Convention on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations adopted on 20 November 1989:

www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx.

⁷ . The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>.

The Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021) acknowledges child poverty as one of the key challenges for children's rights.⁸

Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 1995 (2014) "on ending child poverty in Europe calls on member States to give "sufficient political weight and priority" to ending child poverty.⁹

The European Social Charter (revised) (ETS No. 163, the Charter) provides a set of minimum standards protecting the rights of children. It provides for rights such as health care, education, childcare services, social and medical assistance and social welfare. In addition to these rights, Article 30 of the Charter stipulates the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion. Poverty is also an obstacle to housing of an adequate standard, which in turn is a precondition for living in dignity and for the enjoyment of both social and human rights. Article 16 of the Charter requires States to ensure the economic, legal and social protection of the family by appropriate means. Article 17 clearly states the right of children and young persons to social, legal and economic protection.¹⁰

The European Committee of Social Rights has produced findings on these and other important aspects of the conformity of national law and practice with the European Social Charter as it relates to the rights of the child, including the rights to health, to social security, to social and medical assistance, to protection from poverty and social exclusion, to housing and the right to benefit from social welfare services.¹¹

Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights (proclaimed on 17 November 2017 by the European Union) stipulates the right of children to affordable early childhood education, care of good quality and protection from poverty.¹²

Against this background the Committee of Ministers:

- expresses great concern about the very high levels of child poverty in Europe and increasing levels of inequality which affect children, in particular, and is alarmed by the erosion of the fundamental rights of those concerned and the damage that it entails both for the individual and for society;
- invites member States to consider concrete measures towards the implementation of the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021), particularly its paragraph 28;
- underscores the need to re-align, as a matter of urgency, objectives and funding of services such as child welfare, education, social services and social protection programmes towards the eradication of child poverty;
- encourages member States to target and improve child welfare services, taking due account of children in vulnerable situations (for example, children without parental care or in single-parent households, children with disabilities, Roma children and refugee and migrant children);
- invites member States to consider child-impact assessments, child budgeting and other relevant tools, when developing policies and practices on child welfare, social services and social protection programmes, and to ensure, as far as possible, the participation of children when developing such policies;
- emphasises the importance of close collaboration of all responsible stakeholders, at all levels (national, regional, international), in eradicating child poverty.

⁸. The Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021): <https://rm.coe.int/168066cff8>.

⁹. Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 1995 (2014) on ending child poverty in Europe: <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=20894&lang=en>.

¹⁰. The European Social Charter (Revised), adopted on 03 May 1996: www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/163.

¹¹. *Handbook on European law relating to the rights of the child* (Chapter 8) jointly published by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and the Council of Europe: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-ecthr-2015-handbook-european-law-rights-of-the-child_en.pdf.

¹². The European Pillar of Social Rights, proclaimed on 17 November 2017: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en.