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Poverty today

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Europe is one of the richest regions in the world. But does this mean that poverty has been eliminated? No, of course not, and if it has been reduced over time, at least on part of the continent, we cannot speak of a continuous improvement. The most recent figures available for the European Union alone predicted that in 2019 there will be 72 million people who are poor in the sense of these statistics, i.e. whose income reaches only 60% of the median income, i.e. 17% of the total population. A larger number are considered to be at risk of poverty or exclusion, and there are significant differences between categories: for women, this risk is 22% compared to 20.2% for men in 2019. The share of young people aged 18 to 24 is 27.8%. Persons whose income is only 50% of the median income, the threshold at which the risk of social exclusion increases rapidly, are also found in the richest countries of the continent in 2017, 11% of persons in Germany and 12% of persons in the United Kingdom had an income of only 50% of the median; with a contrasting situation on the continent as they were a little more than 5% in Finland but more than 17% in Romania.

The most recent surveys are alarming: the health crisis caused by the pandemic has seriously affected the most vulnerable populations and a significant proportion has fallen into poverty: one million more have been affected in France, according to charities, and in Spain, according to a report by Philip Alston, former UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, 26% of the population and 29% of children are now threatened by poverty and exclusion.

This is the way to look at the problem: becoming poor is not only having difficulties at the end of the month, it is falling from precariousness into a situation of permanent unmet need. These are worrying times. In France, associations reported that 45% of people who, since 2020, have sought help from Secours Populaire (an NGO that helps those in need) were previously unknown to the association. In Belgium, food banks report that they have had to increase the amount of food distributed by a third. The pandemic has impoverished certain groups previously untouched: temporary workers, small craftsmen, students living on "odd jobs". The improvement of the health situation alone will not be enough to overcome poverty,

old or new. In France, associations continue to see long queues of students looking for a free meal at the start of the new academic year.

The most obvious sign of poverty is, of course, difficulty in accessing the basic elements of everyday life - food, housing, basic amenities such as heating or access to water. But that is not the end of the tragedy: poverty also, and perhaps above all, means the loss of a significant part of social ties. When people struggle to feed themselves properly, cultural life is reduced to a minimum. Cinemas, theatres and concerts become inaccessible. People give up going out, going on holiday, going to bars and restaurants, important places for meeting and socialising. We are therefore faced with the serious risk of exclusion that accompanies precariousness and want. Above all, the most worrying aspect of this exclusion is that it affects with full force children, whose future is also threatened. Parents struggle to buy school supplies. Transport to school can be a problem. Extra-curricular activities become an unaffordable luxury: team sports require an outfit; music requires an instrument. This risk of de-socialisation and loss of a child's normal life is one of the greatest tragedies for poor families. And that is without even mentioning the pleasures that make up the daily life of other children, such as having 3 good meals a day, nice clothes, invitations to friends' houses, birthday parties...

The European Committee of Social Rights has pointed out that while living in poverty and social exclusion generally violates the dignity of human beings, for children their whole future is threatened: Being deprived of the legal and social protection to which they should all have access results not only in a less comfortable life, but also in barriers to access to quality education, health care and decent housing. Children in this situation may even have to work to support the family, at the risk of growing up missing opportunities to play and learn at school; all the while being exposed to various risks linked either to participation in dangerous or tiring work, or to exploitation and other dangers that the child living on the street may suffer, as is the fate of far too many of them.

As the European Committee of Social Rights indicated in a recent statement on the state of the health crisis "In addition to its implications for Article 30, the ECSR considers that the prevalence of poverty in a State Party, whether defined or measured in monetary or multidimensional terms, is an important indicator of the effectiveness of States Parties to ensure the right of children and adolescents to social, legal and economic social, legal and economic protection guaranteed by Article 17§1 of the Charter. The obligation of States Parties to take all appropriate and necessary measures to ensure that children and adolescents receive the assistance they need is closely linked to measures closely linked to measures to ameliorate and eradicate child poverty and social exclusion of children. This also applies where child poverty and social exclusion are poverty and social exclusion are caused or exacerbated by a public health crisis such as the current such as the current Covid-19 pandemic."

The health crisis has helped to highlight the persistence of the basic problems that the Committee is working to address. firstly, too many countries have not accepted all the relevant articles of the Charter, including Article 30, which is the one dealing with all aspects of the fight against poverty, by which states commit themselves "With a view to ensuring the effective exercise of the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion.... to take measures within the framework of an overall and coordinated approach to promote effective

access, of persons who live or risk living in a situation of social exclusion or poverty as well as their families, in particular, employment, housing, training, education, culture, social and medical assistance

However, if the ratification of the European Social Charter is conditional on acceptance of at least one set of specific articles, Article 30 is not one of them. Helping countries that have not yet accepted it to do so is one of the ongoing efforts to be pursued under the Committee's special relationship with States Parties.

Further not all State Parties that have committed themselves to implementing this article manage to fulfil this commitment. For example, during the last round of monitoring of compliance with Article 30, in its Conclusions published in January 2018, the Committee found the situation not to be in conformity for a series of countries, including Belgium, Ireland and Italy, on the grounds that there was no comprehensive and coordinated policy to combat poverty and exclusion commensurate with the problems observed in the key areas that fall within the scope of such a fight: In particular, the right to enter freely into the labour market and earn a living, to receive a fair wage, to obtain adequate social benefits and to have a home or at least a shelter. However, these States, aware of the problem, have adopted action plans to this end, but the Committee could only note that the expected progress had not been made.

Priority should be given to vulnerable populations where poverty and precariousness take root, such as women, the long-term unemployed, low-income pensioners, unemployed young people, people living in rural areas and deprived neighbourhoods. This is generally the case, but with often insufficient success. Over a period of 10 years (2006/2016), the proportion of unemployed people at risk of poverty has risen continuously in Europe, from 41.5% to 48.8%. Obviously, these averages mask contrasts within the continent, but this evolution remains worrying. According to Eurostat, Germany has the highest rate of unemployed people at risk of poverty in the European Union (70.8%), followed by Lithuania (60.5%). In many other countries, rates above 50% are also recorded: in Latvia (55.8%), Bulgaria (54.9%), Estonia (54.8%), Czech Republic (52.3%), Romania (51.4%) or even Sweden (50.3%).

Furthermore, associations have stressed that populations theoretically protected from poverty tend to find themselves in it more frequently, in particular a proportion of employed person. Thus, they noted the persistence of a significant percentage of working poor: in 2014, 17.2% of workers in the European Union earned 60% or less of the national gross median hourly wage. The very wide variation in this proportion from one country to another shows a multi-speed Europe. It is in Eastern and Central Europe that the proportions of low-paid workers are most visible (Latvia, Romania, Lithuania or Poland). Conversely, Sweden, Belgium and Finland have the lowest rates on the continent. However, according to Eurostat in the case of Germany, the significant reduction in unemployment, due essentially to the rise of "mini jobs", was accompanied by an increased precariousness of employees, to the extent that a significant proportion of them had to hold several jobs to "make ends meet".

This shows that there is no easy solution. The fight against unemployment is certainly important, but not at the cost of increasing inequality, which pushes the most vulnerable further into the most precarious situation and brings them into daily contact with want and exclusion.

So what should we do? First of all, always insist on knowing the problem: publish the figures, make the specialists' analyses widely known. On the basis of these documented and argued facts, campaign for solutions that have proved their worth:

- focus all efforts on education and training, which help people to have a rich social life and to enter the labour market with more skills;
- finance social benefits which, as the European Committee of Social Rights regularly recalls, must be sufficient to meet basic needs, either in the central form of social security systems providing insured persons with protection against the risks of life, or in the complementary form of assistance benefits which must be paid solely on the grounds that a person is in need;
- take the necessary targeted measures for the most vulnerable groups: single-parent families, travellers, people with disabilities.

EU countries have different approaches to this issue. According to Eurostat social transfers have an important role in reducing income poverty. Thus, they have reduced the relative poverty rate from 24.5% (before social transfers, excluding pensions) to 16.5% after social transfers, a fall of 8 percentage points. In the best cases, social transfers have reduced the relative poverty rate by 16 percentage points in Ireland (2018 data), by 13.5 percentage points in Finland and by 12.9 percentage points in Austria.

Of course, eradicating poverty, even if only in Europe, is more of a long term goal than a short term objective. But thanks to the efforts of associations that never cease to help those in need and constantly remind governments of their duties, and thanks to the work of the international bodies that help and monitor states to ensure that essential human rights are respected, such as the European Court of Human Rights and the European Committee of Social Rights, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights or the International Labour Organisation, we can hope to move forward with the prospect of an ideal situation where everyone has what they need, where the poverty of one person is a permanent concern for all. We can still dream...