



Awareness Raising event, European Parliament, Brussels, 30 November 2009
"POVERTY AND MENTAL HEALTH IN THE EU: A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE"
POLICY BACKGROUND

The importance of combating poverty is widely recognized as international and European organizations have undertaken actions to address this issue.

In 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the **Millenium Declaration**¹ in a resolution setting eradication of poverty as a **Millenium Development Goal**². It meets international human rights standards³. The right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health⁴ is also acknowledged in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966. The right to be protected against poverty is also acknowledged in European Conventions such as the European Social Charter⁵ of the Council of Europe.

Moreover, **the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**⁶ specifies the rights of access for persons with disabilities to health services and underlines the fact that the majority of persons with disabilities⁷ lives in conditions of poverty, and in this regard recognizes the critical need to address the negative impact of poverty on persons with disabilities.

The importance of addressing the links between mental health and poverty as well as between mental health and human rights are acknowledged by the World Health Organization. WHO recognises the importance of good mental health and the link between mental health and human rights⁸. WHO emphasizes the need for countries to pay particular attention to human rights of vulnerable people including people living in poverty. Countries have to adopt specific measures in order to safeguard and protect their right to mental health.

On European Union level, **the fight against poverty and social exclusion** is one of the central objectives. At the launch of the Lisbon strategy in March 2000, EU Member States and the European Commission agreed to take steps to make "a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty" by 2010. In the frame of the **Open Method of Coordination**, common indicators to measure progress in related areas such as social inclusion, poverty, health and long-term care⁹

¹ <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>

² <http://www.endpoverty2015.org/goals> <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

³ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 25(1); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights article 11

⁴ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights article 12

⁵ Article 30 European Social Charter :The right to protection against poverty and social exclusion

⁶ <http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

⁷ Article 1, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

⁸ Report of WHO Promoting Mental Health: Concepts- Emerging Evidence- Practice
http://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/MH_Promotion_Book.pdf

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/common_indicators_en.htm

have been set up, but not been translated in concrete enough actions yet. Through its **Active Inclusion Strategy**¹⁰, launched in 2008, the EU aims to tackle poverty and social exclusion through the inclusion of vulnerable group, the provision of an adequate minimum income, the promotion of quality jobs, prevention of "in-work" poverty, access to lifelong learning as well as to quality services. Yet a lot would need to be done to implement the Recommendation in all EU member states' policies.

A positive step is the European Parliament and Council of the EU joint decision to claim 2010 as the **European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion**¹¹. The European Year will complement the goals of the Lisbon Strategy and will help to consolidate the political commitment of the EU and its Member States to making a decisive impact on eradicating poverty and fighting social exclusion. 2010¹² policies will aim at recognizing the fundamental right of people in a situation of poverty and social exclusion to live in dignity and to play a full part in society.

Furthermore, the European Commission submitted in 2008 a proposal for a new **directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation**¹³. The aim is to provide a European legal framework containing a right for everybody not to be discriminated against on different grounds in every area of life and the right to access social and health care services.

The recent Commission Communication "**Solidarity in health: Reducing health inequalities in the EU**"¹⁴, acknowledges that health inequalities are still very widespread and need to be tackled urgently. The Communication encourages EU and national levels to address the needs of vulnerable groups such as people experiencing poverty. It refers to the right to social and housing assistance to ensure a decent existence for all those who lack sufficient resources. The European Commission has therefore called upon EU Institutions to carry out activities on health inequalities as part of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010.

Furthermore, the **European Pact on Mental Health and Well Being**¹⁵, launched on 13 June 2008, among other key priorities recognizes that access to good mental health is a human right for all and that there is a need to overcome the taboo and stigma still associated with mental illness. The issue of combating stigma and social exclusion by promoting active inclusion of people with mental health problems in society will be specifically addressed in a high-level thematic conference in the second semester 2010.

The issue of poverty and social exclusion is also high on the agenda of the last Trio **Presidency of the Council of the EU** as the Swedish Presidency of the EU (ending end of December) put a focus on reducing the negative effects of the current crisis and aimed at aims contributing to the work on the EU's new strategy for growth and jobs which will replace the Lisbon Strategy. The issue of social inclusion and combating poverty is still considered as being of key importance for the next Trio Presidency.

¹⁰ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:307:0011:0014:EN:PDF>

¹¹ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:298:0020:0029:EN:PDF>

¹² Website of the European Commission on European Year for combating poverty and social exclusion
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=637>

¹³ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0426:FIN:EN:PDF>

¹⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/socio_economics/documents/com2009_en.pdf

¹⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/mental/docs/pact_en.pdf