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POVERTY AND MENTAL HEALTH IN THE EU: A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE
POLICY POSITION OF MENTAL HEALTH EUROPE

*"Ending poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice."
Nelson Mandela*

INTRODUCTION

In the European Union, 78 million people are currently living at risk of poverty¹. In all Member States, part of the population is subject to exclusion and deprivation, often facing limited access to basic services. In addition to this, there are indications that extreme poverty has become more of an issue and that the number of people suffering from poverty has increased. People with low income are more likely to suffer from poor mental health and poverty effectively causing or contributing to poor mental health. Mental Health Europe believes that attaining a good quality of life is a prerequisite for positive mental health.

Mental Health Europe (MHE) has growing concerns about the increase of poverty. The bi directionality of mental health problems and poverty are known. Poor mental health can lead to unemployment, isolation, social exclusion, low education and frequently homelessness for a number of people. Conversely, poverty can lead to the development of mental health problems. Some groups of people in the society are more at risk of suffering from mental health problems like women, young people and children, migrants and older people. Subsequently, they can be further excluded from society and be at risk of greater violations of their basic human rights such as the right to full participation in the society. People experiencing mental health problems and poverty at the same time are often victims of discrimination on the double ground of mental illness and poverty (EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Article 21).

MHE underlines **the urgent political need to implement cohesive policies and services at all levels and to guarantee human rights for all including people with mental health problems living in poverty**. MHE calls for **engagement and responsible political leadership of Members of European Parliament**. Breaking the vicious circle of having a mental health problem and a low income will require the concerted efforts of governments, health and social services, the employment service and the voluntary sector, working together in partnership.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM MENTAL HEALTH EUROPE

Mental Health Europe calls on the European Union to address the links between mental health, human rights and poverty. Poverty can affect the full enjoyment of fundamental rights for all, including people with mental health problems. At the time of the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty which gives an important legal value to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, MHE calls upon policy makers to:

1. Guarantee the right to social inclusion of people with mental health problems by

→ **Ensuring adequate social protection systems** as a basic citizen's right to protect the most vulnerable groups in society (women, young people and children, migrants, older people) from falling into poverty, social exclusion and homelessness.

→ **Implementing the EU Active Inclusion Strategy in all EU member states** to effectively achieve its

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=1694&langId=en>

goals: providing an adequate minimum income, making labour markets truly inclusive and guaranteeing access to social and health quality services.

→ **Launching anti-stigma campaigns and targeted training and support schemes.** People with mental health problems face stigma and discrimination by employers who are reluctant to recruit someone with a known record of mental health problems. Vocational training, in-service training and mentoring systems can facilitate access to the labour market.

→ **Strengthening the Open Method of Coordination** to foster cooperation of the EU member states in the fields of social inclusion and social protection. Further developing a monitoring system to measure social exclusion and poverty is an important step to achieve the development of targeted policy measures.

2. Ensuring access to good mental health for everybody by

→ Guaranteeing that policies aimed at the reduction of **inequalities in health** are part of a comprehensive plan that includes social equality policies in all areas relevant for everybody, equality of information, education, and work.

→ Implementing the **European Pact for Mental Health and Well Being** by creating measures to fight exclusion of people living in poverty from mental health services as well as to fight stigma attached to mental health.

→ **Making the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities a reality** by supporting EU Member States in the ratification and the implementation of the Convention and its optional Protocol and establishing guidelines in the field of access to health for people with mental health problems.

→ **Supporting the role that the Fundamental Rights Agency** could play in studies on access to health care and on health inequalities with special attention to people living in poverty and/or with mental health problems.

3. Making rights for all a reality by

→ **Implementing the rights contained in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights** including the right to work (Article 15), right to health care (Article 35), the right to access justice institutions (Article 47) and the right to live a dignified life (Chapter 1) **at EU and national levels.**

→ **Adopting a broad EU directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment** between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.

→ **Ensuring the right to civil and political participation for people experiencing mental health problems or poverty.** Involving and empowering people with mental health problems is of particular importance as they have the expertise and can help policy makers to identify key challenges and good practices.

With specific regards to European Parliament activities, MHE would like to remind Members of the European Parliament that the policy work of the Poverty and Fundamental Rights Intergroup² at the European Parliament should be continued and made sustainable. The fight against poverty and its links with mental health and human rights must be kept high on the agenda of the European Parliament.

About Mental Health Europe

Mental Health Europe (MHE) is an organisation committed to the promotion of positive mental health, the prevention of mental distress, the improvement of care, advocacy for social inclusion and the protection of human rights for people with mental health problems, their families and carers. MHE vision is of a Europe where mental health and well-being is given high priority in the political spectrum and on the European health and social agenda, where people with mental health problems live as full citizens with access to appropriate services and support when needed, and where meaningful participation is guaranteed at all levels of decision-making and administration. MHE's values are based on dignity and respect, equal opportunities, freedom of choice, anti-discrimination, social inclusion, democracy and participation.

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² Fourth World European Committee