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POVERTY AND MENTAL HEALTH: A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE

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MHE CONFERENCE REPORT

On 30 November 2009, Mental Health Europe (MHE) held a debate on "Poverty and Mental Health: a human rights issue" at the European Parliament in Brussels. The event was hosted by Milan Zver MEP. The debate focused on the issue of poverty and mental health as well as their link with human rights. The aim was to foster discussion between EU Institutions representatives and key experts in the different fields.

The event was opened by the hosting MEP Milan Zver. Mr Zver welcomed the participants to the fourth debate organised jointly by Mental Health Europe and the European Parliament. He opened his speech by pointing out the importance of combating poverty in the EU at this present time and the impact of poverty in every society. He reminded the participants of the ongoing work on the issue of poverty, putting the focus on 2010 European Year on Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. He underlined the fact that there is a higher risk of poverty in vulnerable groups including people with mental health problems or with a disability. Furthermore he highlighted the elevated risk of discrimination due to their mental illness and their social situation. He reiterated the importance of recognising the rights of people living in poverty, and called for actions from EU policy makers to make the right to live in dignity a reality for people with mental health problems living in poverty.

This opening speech was followed by an address to the participants from Mr Nace Kovac, MHE President. He thanked Mr Zver and gave statistics at international, European and national levels regarding mental health and poverty. He explained the importance of the work done by Mental Health Europe in those fields and he briefly reminded the participants of the important achievements that were made possible through this work during the last twenty years of MHE's existence. Mr Kovac underlined the important need for people with mental health problems to be included in society and called upon policy makers to design special measures and policies in order to better include people with mental illness in society. He called upon MEPs to influence other politicians on all levels to protect the mental health and well-being of the population in the EU. He underlined the fact that MEPs can also encourage national governments to place the fight against poverty and exclusion higher on their political agenda and to ensure and bring forward positive legislation in the field of mental health, poverty and basic human rights, such as the implementation of the Mental Health Pact. To conclude he called upon MEPs to encourage cooperation and interaction between the EU institutions, the Member States, the regional and local authorities and the social partners in this area.

Ms Elizabeth Mottershaw, Independent Human Rights Consultant and Associate at Global Partners and Associate in London, gave a presentation related to the link between poverty and human rights based on the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's report "Poverty, inequality and human rights" to which she had contributed. After underlining the "missing" link between human rights and mental health in the report,

she stressed the importance of adequate living conditions for everybody in international legal texts like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) explaining that poverty has a broader sense than just low income. Incorporating the fight against poverty in the human rights frame is of key importance in order to better tackle poverty. Using the frame of human rights allows the use of a powerful "antidote" to poverty situations and empowers people living in poverty. Ms Mottershaw stated that the potential of human rights is linked to the fact that they are universal and therefore address all people. She gave some explanations about how human rights are a common language to address various important issues linked to the fight against poverty. The participation of people remains a key point in the human rights approach since it changes relationships and is furthermore a key issue in the mental health field and in the promotion of social inclusion and fight against poverty. Rights like the "right to life" have an important meaning in terms of quality of life. Human rights have to remain a key tool for NGOs in order to put the fight against poverty through human rights promotion high on political agendas. Ms Mottershaw finished her presentation by reminding the participants of the key importance of promoting human rights for everybody including people living in poverty and people with mental health problems.

Preben Brandt, founder of Projekt UDENFOR (project "outside") and Chair of the Council for socially marginalized groups from Denmark, gave a presentation on social inequalities. Preben highlighted that people with mental health and social problems have a higher suicide rate and a greater risk of suffering from physical health problems, addictions, unsatisfactory permanent housing opportunities and even homelessness. At the same time, poor and excluded people are much more likely to experience mental health problems, and frequently experience barriers to accessing health care systems and therefore do not get adequate treatment. Preben Brandt called for the elimination of poverty and social exclusion and to enhance the exchange of best practices, and the vulnerable groups in society should be directly involved in this exchange, focusing on empowerment as well as on treatment. Partnerships across sectors should be established, housing with suitable support must be ensured and access to education, work and culture be guaranteed. He also emphasised the importance of physical health and the necessity to improve social and economic conditions and furthermore called for the establishment of relevant research programmes.

Brian Howard, CEO of Mental Health Ireland, gave an overview on the mental health situation in Ireland and the activities of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The Society acts as a short-term safety net for those who fall outside the care of the welfare state or need emergency financial support. This year a strong rise in calls for help has been noted, which is, to a large extent due to the current economic crisis that has hit Ireland hard. Brian Howard reported that there has been a great increase in suicide rates during the last months. He furthermore pointed out that the hospitalization rate for mental illness is 6 times higher in lower socio-economic groups than for wealthier people. The Irish Government refers in their definition of poverty to a state when people's incomes as well as material, cultural and social resources are inadequate in comparison to the Irish "norm", often leading to their marginalization and exclusion. Factors contributing to poverty are unemployment, low-paid employment, health problems, a low level of education, growing up in single-parent families and living in a disadvantaged area with few employment opportunities. Brian also described Mental Health Ireland's fruitful cooperation with Amnesty International in the context of Art. 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), aiming to guarantee "the right of all persons to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health". For organisations with limited financial resources, joining forces can be extremely beneficial for both sides. Furthermore, Brian demanded better coordination from the side of the government to effectively implement the reforms that were launched in Ireland in 2006; even and especially in times of economic recession.

In his speech, Mr Jan Jařab, from the Cabinet of Vladimír řpidla, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, welcomed the fact that issues of mental health are also defined as human rights issues. After mentioning the growing but slow progress made in getting the rights of persons with mental health problems into the mainstream of human rights protection, he underlined the growing awareness and activism about the human rights of people

with mental health problems. The emphasis is increasingly addressing the questions of dignity and autonomy. Mr Jařab mentioned some important issues in both fields of mental health and the fight against poverty, including the violation of the right to work for people with mental health problems. He highlighted that vulnerable groups are more at risk of poverty due to their social conditions. He presented some common actions undertaken by different DGs at EU level in the diverse fields related to mental health and social inclusion. He also presented the report of the Ad hoc Expert Group on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care, set up by Commissioner Spidla's Cabinet at the beginning of 2009. The Ad Hoc Group's report further identified a set of Common Basic Principles for sound de-institutionalisation policies and created a set of recommendations to the Member States and to the European Commission which were broadly based on the Common Basic Principles. Mr Jařab underlined that the agenda of mental health - with a clear human rights perspective - will certainly be transferred to the next Commissioner as Mr Spidla will leave his portfolio soon. He stressed the importance of the European Year 2010 for combating poverty and social exclusion which seems an excellent opportunity to increase public awareness of the fundamental rights of persons living in poverty and social exclusion.

In the following debate which was chaired by Dr Lynne Friedli, Mental Health Promotion Specialist, many interesting points were raised:

- Health inequalities and strong differences regarding access to health care due to the financial situation of the individual, especially the ill, weak and excluded members of society, were discussed. Policy-makers should take this into account when designing new policies.
- The issue of child poverty was raised; poverty can destroy families and this has a huge impact on the mental health of all family members. Children often end up in institutional care due to a distinct lack of support (and) structures in the community.
- In Croatia, expected to reach EU membership in the near future, the de-institutionalisation process is currently not practicable due to the severe lack of capacities in community care. EU institutions should engage more in mental health care and social welfare and support the governments in the implementation of mental health promotion.
- The problems of overly powerful institutions and the pharmaceutical industry was raised; cases of overpaid psychiatrists and overmedication have resulted in an inefficient performance of big psychiatric institutions. The move towards community-based as the best solution has to be fostered.
- From the aspect of the mental health service users, questions on the rights to employment were raised. Employers are reluctant to employ people with a history of mental health problems and a corresponding sickness record. Training plays a crucial role to improve employment prospects and should be better targeted to the person's skills and professional background. Furthermore, many users are not aware of their right to financial support and training. An efficient information management therefore plays a crucial role.
- Undocumented migrants as a particularly vulnerable minority were highlighted. In some countries doctors are "encouraged" to report patients without "papers"(official immigration status) to the police, a serious human rights breach.

Lynne Friedli summarized the outcomes of the event in three main recommendations to policy-makers: The social inclusion of people with mental health problems has to be brought forward. Access to quality mental health services needs to be secured and the fundamental rights framework needs to be mainstreamed in order to make rights for all a reality!

Milan Zver MEP and Nace Kovac, MHE President thanked the speakers and the audience for their valuable contributions and expressed the wish to hold more such debates in the European Parliament.

*Mental Health Europe,
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