

[4] The EU's contribution to breaking the hereditary chain of poverty

The importance of child poverty has grown steadily as the EU Social Protection Social Inclusion Process has developed. It is now one of the key issues and has also become a much more important political concern for the European Union.

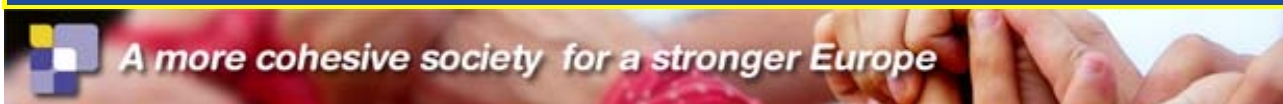
■ Why is the issue of child poverty a top priority for the Social Protection Social Inclusion Process?

- Across the EU, 19% of children aged 0-17 and 18% of those 18-24 are in the highest at-risk-of-poverty category. Fifteen percent of the 18 to 24 year olds leave school early, thus increasing the risk of being socially excluded while youth unemployment is particularly worrying at 18.7% (2004 figures) – twice the average unemployment rate.
- Growing up in poverty means that children are less likely than their better-off peers to do well in school, enjoy good health, have no involvement with the criminal justice system and, later in their adult life, find a foothold in the labour market and in society more broadly.
- Member States are well aware of these facts and the vast majority have set as a key priority the need to develop a strategic, integrated and long-term approach to preventing and addressing poverty and social exclusion among children.

■ The nature of child poverty and social exclusion: lessons from the EU's Social Protection Social Inclusion Process

A lot has been learned since the launch of the Social Inclusion Process in 2000.

- Child poverty is a complex and multi-dimensional issue and thus requires coordinated and integrated action across a broad range of economic, social and cultural policy areas.
- Child poverty involves inequality of access to resources and opportunities. Reducing child poverty entails reducing extremes of inequality whether in terms of income or access to services.
- Child poverty limits personal development and has long-term consequences. Early intervention is essential to reduce its long-term impact.
- Child poverty is often closely linked to discrimination and some children are at special risk such as those from ethnic minorities, particularly Roma children, children from migrant families, children living in institutions and children with a disability. Enforcing strong anti-discrimination legislation is thus essential.
- The largest group of children at risk are those in single-parent, jobless or large families. Improving the financial and employment opportunities of these families and their access to social services is therefore crucial.



- As child poverty is a denial of children's rights, it is essential to put the specific needs of the child at the heart of policy-making.

■ Child poverty in the EU process

Recognising income poverty among children as a matter of a serious concern, the European Council asked Member States in March 2006 "to take necessary steps to rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty, giving all children equal opportunities, regardless of their social background". Member States have taken this invitation to heart; the vast majority has selected as a key priority the need to develop a strategic, integrated and long-term approach to preventing and addressing poverty and social exclusion among children. (cf. 2007 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion). Ensuring access to quality education and training for all, focussing especially on pre-schooling and on tackling early school leaving, is vital.

■ What role does the European Commission play to support the action of Member States?

Child poverty has been a key priority of the Community Action Programme on Social Exclusion and has been highlighted in successive reports produced by the European Commission. Several European projects on mutual learning, peer reviews, Round Tables and Presidency events have addressed various aspects of the issue. The European Union also provides support for the operating costs of European networks, such as Eurochild, which are devoted to the fight against child poverty,

■ What are the challenges ahead?

It is therefore imperative to intensify the efforts already deployed. Amongst other things, this should involve:

- Mainstreaming a focus on child poverty in national and EU policy making;
- Strengthening the indicators for measuring and evaluating progress across the EU on tackling child poverty and improving children's well being;
- Monitoring and reporting in more detail on the progress being made by Member States and making recommendations on how to strengthen their efforts;
- Deepening the involvement of children experiencing poverty and the organisations that represent them in the process locally, nationally and at EU level; and
- Developing an effective strategy for raising public awareness about child poverty.

■ The EU Social Protection Social Inclusion Process

Through the EU Social Protection and Social Inclusion Process, the European Union coordinates and encourages Member State actions to combat poverty and social exclusion, and to reform their social protection systems on the basis of policy exchanges and mutual learning. As such, it underpins the achievement of the Union's strategic goal of sustained economic growth, more and better jobs, and greater social cohesion by 2010.