



DIALOGUE SEMINAR

Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion
in the Framework of the EU 2020 Strategy

COMBATING POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE EU 2020 STRATEGY

Key note speech by Archbishop emeritus Jukka Paarma

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First of all, let me congratulate the organizers – the European commission, the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches and COMECE for selecting such a current and important topic for this dialogue seminar.

In today's Europe, poverty and social exclusion affect the lives of millions of people of all ages in all Member States in the EU. It is estimated that 16 % of the citizens in Europe - around 85 million people – currently live at risk of poverty. In Finland, the number is about 700 000 persons. During the last years, the gaps between rich and poor have increased, despite an economic growth. Due to the current financial and economic crisis, the situation has become even worse. The enlargement, demographic development, migration, climate change and energy security also bring about additional challenges in this respect.

Poverty deprives people from living a life in dignity, enjoying fundamental social rights and participating in society. Injustice, exclusion and a sense of voicelessness keep people in poverty trapped in deprivation. As Churches we believe that every human being is blessed with human dignity, being created in the image of God. Consequently, everyone should be able to live in dignity and play a full part in society.

Poverty also tends to inherit, forming vicious circles, depriving generations from hope. This intergenerational transmission of poverty limits opportunities and options from early childhood. This is especially the case for certain ethnic groups, suffering from multiple discriminations. One example are the Roma, who are at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion than most Europeans. The Roma suffer from multiple discrimination including high rates of unemployment, lack of education, substandard housing and inadequate access to social and health service. This

creates a vicious circle of marginalization and poverty, affecting especially Roma children. The Roma are in all EU Member States a visible reminder of poverty and exclusion, that we cannot close our eyes from, but which needs joint action on an European level.

The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland will, during the ongoing European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, focus especially on Child Poverty; that is inherited poverty, depriving millions of children in today's Europe from hope and from living in dignity.

The European union is committed to combating poverty and social exclusion. For example, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights sets out a number of civil, social, economic and political rights that should be available to everyone. It also aims to protect those at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and prohibits discrimination on a range of various grounds. The Charter has, following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, binding legal force. The ongoing European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion aims at highlighting that everyone shall have the right to live a dignified life, and to implement the goals of the Charter.

And some weeks ago, the European Council adopted the Europe 2020-strategy. One of the aims of the EU 2020-strategy is promoting social inclusion, in particular through reduction of poverty, by aiming to lift at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and exclusion.

But treaties, Charters and strategies are - although important - not enough. What is needed is a true will and commitment to combat poverty and social exclusion, including a will to deal with the roots and causes of poverty. The fight against poverty and social exclusion must receive a higher priority on the EU agenda. The social and value dimension must be mainstreamed and enhanced within all policy areas. And our European common values have to be translated more strongly into both economic, social and environmental policies.

In our statement regarding the Europe 2020-strategy, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland regrets that the strategy concentrates almost solely on economic growth and competitiveness, and that for example issues relating to climate change, migration, education, employment and exclusion are dealt with merely from an economic perspective. We find the social dimension of the strategy too weak, and would have liked to see a stronger emphasis on solidarity, participation and social inclusion, the main aim being a life in dignity for all.

There seems today to be an overemphasis on profit and growth. Consequently we tend to forget that economic growth and competitiveness can never be ends in themselves – only means to *improve the well-being of people*, which also should and must be the principal aim of the Europe 2020-strategy. Instead of focusing on profit and increased consumption, I think Europe really needs to focus more on responsibility for the common good and on the well-being of all people and of the world we live in.

In the fight against poverty and social exclusion, long-term efforts are needed, involving all levels of governance. In this respect, also Churches and religious communities have an important role to play.

For Churches, combating poverty and social exclusion is an obligation, raising from our Christian belief, our mission and our diaconal task. Churches have a duty to speak for those who do not have a voice of their own, and to protect and support the most vulnerable members of society

I would now like to focus on four points, where I think Churches have a value to add and a specific contribution to make.

These are engaging in practical work, promoting solidarity, promoting 'a good life' and spreading the message of faith, hope and love

Engaging in practical work

Churches are, following their mission, engaged in working on the practical level with the most vulnerable including people living in poverty and exclusion - by co-suffering, by giving practical support, by providing pastoral care and by spreading the message of hope.

For example, in Finland around 1 500 diaconal workers around the country work on a daily basis with people in poverty, providing practical help, for example in the form of foodbanks but sometimes also in the form of monetary assistance and by giving spiritual care and trying to spread the message of hope. Everyone who is in need is entitled to this help from the Church, regardless of Church membership or conviction.

Promoting solidarity

In combating poverty and social exclusion, solidarity is needed - both on a global and European, but also on an inter-generational level, and between different clusters of society.

For example, the Roma issue needs joint, long-term solutions on an European level.

The problem of intergenerational transmission of poverty also needs coherent solutions based on solidarity, taking into account family policies, social policies and education policies. The future of children in Europe must not be determined by their social and/or ethnic origin. The right of children to spirituality must also be taken into account.

Promoting 'a good life'

The Christian message has for centuries emphasized that the prerequisites of a good life are not primarily dependent on material consumption. Providing that certain basic needs are satisfied, real joy in life comes from people we love and the richness of the creation around us. Christianity is thus a counterforce to over-emphasized consumerism and profit-thinking, promoting a good, simplified, moderate and responsible lifestyle.

A good life is also a meaningful life, characterized by involvement, inclusion and participation – that is enabling all members of society to recognize their individual talents and to develop and use them fruitfully for themselves and others. One example is volunteer work, which forms an active expression of citizenship and contributes to the welfare of society.

Spreading the message of faith, hope and love

But maybe the most important contribution from Churches to the fight against poverty and social exclusion is to spread the message of faith, hope and love to all – including those suffering from poverty and social exclusion.

This message of faith, hope and love is also based on the perspective of eternity – *sub specie aeternitatis* – instead of short term, quarterly statistics.

In line with these guiding principles – engaging in practical work, promoting solidarity, a good life and participation and by spreading the eternal message of faith, hope and love – we are as Churches committed to combating poverty and social exclusion. Our vision is a life in dignity for all and the well-being of all people and the world we live in – a vision that I am convinced is shared by the Europeans institutions.

In the fight against poverty and social exclusion, all means and methods are needed, including well-functioning cooperation and collaboration between all levels of governance and stakeholders involved.

As Churches we are ready to share our expertise and practical experience in combating poverty and social exclusion. We also look forward to entering into an open, transparent and regular dialogue on these issues with the European union. We hope, for instance, to be concretely involved in the work of the European Platform against Poverty. We call for a stronger political commitment to combat poverty, enabling all people to live in dignity, promoting common good and focusing on the well-being of both present and future generations.