EU urged to do more to combat poverty

Written by Martin Banks on 18 October 2017 in News

Campaigners have joined forces to call for more concerted action to combat poverty and social exclusion.

The demand coincides with the UN International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on Tuesday.

A meeting in Parliament was convened on Tuesday to highlight current efforts to tackle the issue and raise awareness of those areas where more needs to be done.

Silvia Costa, an Italian Socialist deputy, who chaired the event, said that while most MEPs were committed to tackling poverty “this has not yet been overcome by a very long stretch.”
She said the upcoming review on the long-term EU budget had to “take into account” social problems such as poverty, adding, “Let’s remember that globally some three billion people live in extreme poverty. That means that in the EU, one in every four people are at risk of poverty. This shows that this is a widespread social trend and is not something that just happens to a few people.”

She also called for a “more ethical” approach to financing and more efforts to tackle child poverty.

The meeting was organised by the parliamentary intergroup fighting against poverty, with the participation of ATD Fourth World, a non-profit organisation which aims to eradicate chronic poverty.

Another speaker at the event, Clyde Kull, Estonia’s deputy permanent representative to the EU, said his country - current holder of the EU Council presidency - was “fully committed” to supporting social issues, including the fight against poverty, social inequalities and social exclusion.

He said, “We are all born equal but great inequalities still exist within the EU itself. It is estimated, for example, that some 23 per cent of European citizens live at risk of poverty and seven per cent suffer severe material deprivation. In this day and age this is not acceptable at all.”

He added, “The goal should be to empower people and our presidency welcomes adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The aim now is to ensure that this is signed off by the end of this year and implemented.

“The basic right of citizens to a dignified life must be respected.”

The European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) used the event to call on the EU to do more to tackle poverty, saying this is “about ensuring we can all participate in society on equal terms and have decent living conditions.”

To not do so is a “violation of human rights,” it said.

The EAPN called on “all people and political institutions to take up their duty to work for the realisation of a world free of poverty and social exclusion.”

Leo Williams, European Anti-Poverty Network director, said, “The European Pillar of Social Rights must be accompanied by ambitious legislative proposals to guarantee rights to social protection and minimum income for all, as a key way to impact directly on people’s living standards and reduce poverty and inequality.

“To effectively combat poverty and social exclusion, the Pillar of Social Rights will need to stop austerity undermining effective welfare states that underpin social rights, and ensure adequate financing, defending investment in social rights and social protection as an investment, not a cost.
“Let the European Pillar of Social Rights be a spur for us to truly eradicate poverty in Europe - it is simply unacceptable that in Europe, a continent with such riches at its disposal, that almost one in four of our citizens live at risk of poverty and social exclusion - the equivalent of a population 10 times the size of Belgium.”

Sérgio Aires, President of EAPN, said that despite the high numbers suffering from poverty “some hope is in the horizon.”

Aires says, “The discussions about the future of Europe are an opportunity for the EU to show we care about the 25 per cent of citizens living at risk of poverty.

“That’s the scenario that should drive the overall discussions. It is an opportunity to show we recognise our mistakes and restart the European project towards its original objective: peace and social cohesion. In November this year an important step towards poverty eradication can be concretised.

“The Gothenburg Social Summit must be able to show the political determination to make a definitive step forward in this direction by agreeing on a mandatory implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights - and not only for the Eurozone” says Aires.

The EAPN says the Pillar “must be implemented with good participative governance including civil society and those who are most affected by the current lack of social rights.”

It adds, “It must be backed by adequate financing, enabling governments to invest in adequate social protection systems, quality services and jobs and a stop to austerity cuts. Above all it must lead to concrete positive improvements in the real lives of people experiencing poverty across the EU.”

Another speaker at the event was Pascale Caron, the President of ‘Réseau des Accorderies de France’ which was set up to help people suffering from poverty and social exclusion.

She said the organisation, which has now spread to other countries, including Belgium, offered practical assistance on issues such as access to credit and loans.

She said, “It is not a ghetto for the vulnerable but comprises people from all sorts of backgrounds and walks of life. However, five years after it was founded, 70 per cent of our members remain in a very precarious position.”

She added, “The aim, though, has to be to help such people across the river. Once they have done that they usually find their own way in life.”

Elsewhere, Isabelle Pypaert Perrin, Director General of ATD Fourth World International, noted, “For once, people in poverty can be sure that they do not stand alone. Their unrelenting resistance to injustice continues in the shadows every day.

“On this international day, when they step into the spotlight, they can be encouraged when they see that people from all walks of life have chosen to stand together with them.”

Anti-poverty marches took place throughout Belgium on Tuesday - including two in Brussels - with the goal to “make visible the invisible”.

One in five people in Belgium suffers some form of poverty or social exclusion, according to official figures, and Tuesday’s demonstrations coincided with the UN’s 30th International Day.