



FOURTH WORLD EUROPEAN COMMITTEE COMITÉ QUART MONDE EUROPÉEN

Minutes of the Fourth World European Committee Intergroup meeting
Wednesday 10 March 2004, 17:00-18:30, Room N1.3, LOW Building, European Parliament, Strasbourg

Members present: Mr Gérard Caudron (EUL/NGL, F), Mr José Maria Gil-Robles Gil-Delgado (EPP-ED, E), Ms Martine Roure (PES, F)

Observers present: Mr Andras Kelemen (EPP-ED, Hungary), Mr Kestutis Kuzmickas (ELDR, Lithuania), Mr László Surján (EPP-ED, Hungary), Ms Birute Vesaitė (PES, Lithuania)

Assistants present: Mr Stefan Beazley (ass. R. Howitt PES, UK), Ms Rita Higgs (ass. P. De Rossa PES, IRL), Ms Ode Jacquemin (ass. O. Zrihen PES, B), Pernelle Richardot (ass. M-H Gillig PES, F), Mr Tobias Teuscher (ass. EPP-ED).

Other participants: Mr Paul Collowald (ATD Fourth World), Ms ZsuZsanna Dienes-Oehm, Mr Jean-Pierre Gollé (ATD Fourth World), Mr György Hölvérgi (EPP-ED, Press), Ms Melanie Mignot (ATD Fourth World), Mr Andrew Perfect. **Secretariat:** Ms Sarah Kenningham (ATD Fourth World)

The meeting was chaired by Ms Martine Roure.

1. The agenda and the minutes of the previous meeting were adopted

2. Echoes from the ATD Fourth World European Meeting in Warsaw, "Acting Together for a Europe of Dignity for All", 6-7 February 2004

Ms Kenningham summarised the main aspects of the meeting.

The event gathered together more than 300 participants from 16 European countries and from very different horizons: People living in poverty, representatives from NGOs, European and national politicians, civil servants, cultural and religious officials.

The principle objective was to enable a real dialogue between everyone and a mutual recognition of the contribution that everybody can make for a Europe of dignity for all.

The main organiser was the International Movement ATD Fourth World in collaboration with Professor Andrzej Zoll – Commissioner for Human Rights in Poland, the European Economic and Social Committee, the University of Warsaw and with the support of funding from the European Commission.

The meeting was divided into three main parts. Firstly, time was devoted to creative workshops (painting, singing and language workshops...) which allowed people to approach each other and express themselves in another way and for more informal discussions to take place. Then, the majority of the dialogue took place within 11 Discussion Groups¹ that were based on the experience of people who live or have lived in poverty. Finally, two plenary sessions took place during which messages and contributions of participants from very different countries and horizons were heard.

This ambitious event required two years of preparation. A part of its success was due to the presence of volunteers from Warsaw University, more than 100 students speaking various European languages, who allowed participants to feel welcome and helped people coming from such different horizons to meet. Ms Kenningham added that a publication gathering different presentations given during the meeting will be available shortly.

¹ There were 11 Discussion Groups on the following themes : "Building Inclusive Communities and Societies", "Getting to Know Each Other to Overcome Divisions and Respect Differences", "Participation and Representation of the Excluded", "Support Instead of Dependency", "Everyone's Experience is Essential: Finding Solutions Together", "Everyone Needs to be Active and Feel Useful", "Spirituality as a Source of Freedom and Strength", "Access to Beauty, Art and Culture: Enrichment for All", "Valuing Children, Valuing Parents - Encouraging Appropriate Family Support", "Supporting Families and Young People within Communities", "Poverty - A Violation of Human Rights".

Ms Roure, who was present on the first day, said that she really appreciated the event because people from the Fourth World had the opportunity to meet and talk about what they are living. She then read the message prepared by Ms Zrihen (see annex) who had taken part in the two days and chaired a workshop on support for young people and families.

After hearing these accounts, Mr Gollé highlighted the **importance of creating a real partnership between people living in extreme poverty, politicians and professionals**. This event was an opportunity to put into practice a meeting between human beings from different horizons who could nonetheless enter into dialogue with each other over several days. Despite the difficulty of reaching the poorest, it was an example of discussion where something was attempted “with” people and not “for” people.

Ms Roure agreed on the importance of working in partnership “with” people who wanted to play a role in shaping their own lives. Mr Caudron pointed out that over 30 years, the European society constituted by these people living in great difficulty had changed dramatically. Despite this, there were always very poor people and families. When he became a mayor in 1977, what was called the Social Help Office existed and whilst talking with both his predecessors and their parents, he realised that it was almost always the same families who had been “clients” of this social assistance for half a century. At the same time, our societies were witnessing the development of loneliness and the sudden emergence of new citizens who had not previously been poor but who hadn’t received adequate assistance after either a family break-up, or loss of employment, or even a series of difficulties. This has resulted in a **Fourth World population in rapid evolution** which calls not only for more solutions but also better adapted preventive solutions based on research to identify those that do not naturally come forward to ask for help.

In relation to the theme of the meeting, Mr Caudron felt that there had been a sort of apparent equality in **former communist countries**: the richest didn’t see each other a lot, they were isolated, and the poorest were “looked after”. Today, inequalities are much more obvious, if not much stronger, and we have **new people discovering extreme poverty**. The arrival of these new inequalities and injustices, adding to what we already know from our own countries, raises the problem of a achieving a future European society that won’t simply collapse. At the same time, there is a feeling of revolt against this situation that even greater. With enlargement and the emergence of this new poverty, we have an issue that it would be “healthy” to take into account at a political level. It is not a marginal phenomenon but a problem at the heart of European evolution.

3. Discussion:

“Towards a Better Understanding of Poverty and Exclusion in an Enlarged EU”

With presentations from European Parliament Observers:

Ms Birute Vesaite (Lithuania), Mr Kestutis Kuzmickas (Lithuania), Mr László Surján (Hungary)

LITHUANIA

Ms Vesaite is attached to the Socialist group at the European Parliament and heads the National Delegation. **The issue of poverty is very close to her heart partly because of her former career**: She worked for an NGO which dealt with employment issues for women in the years 1993-95 in the context of the end of the planned economy, bankruptcies and the closing of big companies that were formerly producing for the USSR. Many people lost their jobs as a consequence and many of them were women. Her NGO worked as an employment agency. Ms Vesaite was also involved in the Commission for “monitoring” poverty in Lithuania established by the former President. Finally, she felt mobilised by the question of poverty as both a socialist and a women.

Ms Vesaite then drew a picture of the **extent of poverty and exclusion in Lithuania**. There are 16% of people living under the poverty threshold, mostly lone parents (especially women), large families, inhabitants of rural areas or former prisoners. There were no homeless people before the collapse of the former regime but today there are many. There is a **huge gap between rich and poor**. 10% of Lithuanians are considered to be rich and the middle-class is practically non-existent. Most people are living hand to mouth, with their wage as their only revenue: if they lose their job, they have nothing. Normally, two members of the household are working because one wage is not enough and many of those who have a job are still living under the poverty line because of low wages. With the rise of the GDP, around 8% a year, poverty would seem to be decreasing. However, the direct benefits of economic growth do not automatically reach the poorest people.

Concerning **policies implemented to fight poverty**, Ms Vesaite pointed out that in her opinion, if poverty was an infectious disease affecting rich and poor alike, the politicians would have found a solution long ago.

Ms Vesaite believes that **we have to prioritise the fight against deep poverty**. Several NGOs are involved at this level. Some charities strive to distribute free meals, collect clothes, offer housing to the homeless and enable access to some services (such as the Internet). In addition, the tax system now promotes donations of a percentage of income tax to an active charity or NGO. Another measure is the support of social enterprises in order to favour the integration of vulnerable groups (for example, the

former prisoners or disabled people). Finally, in order to reduce the gap between rich and poor, the tax system is being reformed and moving in the direction of progressive tax based on revenue.

Mr Kuzmickas intervened more specifically on the **strategies being implemented in Lithuania** to fight against poverty and social exclusion.

The government implemented a Poverty Reduction Strategy for the 2002-2004 period prepared in line with the Copenhagen Declaration of the United Nations Social Summit.

The preparation of the Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion was an opportunity to take EU experience in the fight against poverty into account and the Joint Report on Social Inclusion was used as a reference document. This process also encouraged a dialogue between States, NGOs and different social groups.

Mr Kuzmickas then outlined the **main challenges and priorities**:

- **Increase the level of employment**, notably through special programmes for vulnerable groups, training programmes, support for small enterprises, and the implementation of social enterprise for disabled people.

- **Reduce poverty in rural areas**. Special rural development plans are to be prepared for the 2004-2006 period.

- **Reach adequate income levels** through reform of the social protection system, reduction of income tax rates for those on low income and the extension of social support to vulnerable populations.

- **Reform the education system**, notably to integrate children with special needs into mainstream schools.

- **Increase access to Information Technologies**, with an increase in the number of public Internet connections and special programmes for disabled people.

- **Adequate investment in education and social programmes**, with assistance from the European Social Funds.

The Lithuanian Government and Parliament agree on the importance of these changes and the need for inter-departmental co-operation in order to implement the objectives.

In the course of 2004, Lithuania will work on a **National Action Plan for Social Inclusion**, the priorities of which will be reduction of the absolute poverty rate; improvement of social housing, health care and education systems; and the reduction of relative poverty for vulnerable groups (disabled people, unemployed, large families, lone parents, inhabitants of rural areas).

HUNGARY

Mr Surján began by introducing himself: He was Minister responsible for Health and Social Security from 1990 to 1994, that is to say in the first freely elected government after the political change. Mr Surján is particularly concerned by the question of poverty because his constituency is one of the poorest in the country. For him, **poverty is always one of the government's preoccupations, whatever its political colour**, only the tools being used to combat it may vary. The **transition from socialism towards a market economy gave rise to an enormous crisis** in Hungary. Both the number of people living in poverty and the nature of poverty were affected. If the poverty line corresponds to 50% of per capita income, 14% of the population is affected. If children from 0 to 5 years as a group are taken into account, this figure reaches 26%. For the uneducated it reaches 22%, whilst for university graduates it is only 0.8%. For people living in villages the figure reaches 20%, whilst in the capital it is only 4.5%.

How should this data be interpreted?

For Hungary, the fall of the USSR meant the **loss of a major part of its market**. It was not easy to find new markets, especially for the low-quality products that had been sold in the USSR. Another factor is **privatisation**. Even if in theory privatisation is a good thing, there must be nuances when putting it into practice. Theoretically there was no unemployment during the previous regime, it was "indoor" or "hidden". The figures changed dramatically from 0 to 15% and today, it is at 5%. The cost has been very high.

Concerning **inflation**, in the past there was no official data published and only estimates were available putting the annual rate at around 2 - 5%. In a 3 to 4 year period this rate reached 27% which came as a real blow. Cheap goods disappeared, more luxury items were available but were less affordable because prices went up as wages remained the same. A joke from the 1980s clearly illustrates this problem: "How do you know that you are in Central Europe? When you have Western prices and Eastern salaries". This joke came true in the 1990s.

Mr Surján detailed some of the problems he encountered when he was Minister responsible for Health. Medical equipment and pharmaceuticals had to be bought at international prices whilst medical staff continued to be paid as in the past. Hungarian prices are more or less harmonised with those of the EU 15, apart from that of the labour force. How can this problem be resolved? This kind of incoherence remains a challenge.

Who are the **people suffering the most from poverty**? In the past, it was mainly older people and large families but today other considerations have to be added such as social class, education level, ethnicity (Roma), gender, family status (lone parents) and regional disparities.

What are the **strategies** that need to be adopted in order to fight poverty and social exclusion? The point of view of experts, decision makers and the public are varied. Government experts know the answers but only a small number of decision makers know where to find the experts. Public opinion is divided: For some, we will live in paradise when the day of adhesion comes whereas others think that things will worsen, and finally, most are not concerned EU related matters.

Mr Surján considers himself to be a realist. If social affairs are tackled at a national level then the EU could support Ministers in several ways, mainly through the sharing of good practice or discussing the implementation and results of National Action Plans. In the long term, however, **social policy overall needs to be reviewed**. Unfortunately, whilst the needs and the problems are huge, the available means are small. How can this contradiction be overcome?

It is too easy to say that charities will solve all the problems. The new rich class has to be aware of its new responsibilities and still this is only one aspect. The old adage "Don't give a man a fish but teach him how to fish" is still relevant but is not implemented. Even in extreme situations when money has to be given, it is more important to **give opportunities and responsibilities**. This can be giving access to education, continuous training or funding support to launch business. Social allowances make slaves instead of citizens.

Mr Surján then went back to the **challenges and differences between Hungary and EU of 15**.

Before social transfers, 44% of Hungary's population would have lived in poverty, and in the EU 15 this figure reaches 40%, which is very similar. This figure represents only 10% if all transfers are taken into account and in the EU 15 it represents only 15%. According to these figures, Hungary is about average in relation to the EU 15. However, talking in percentages is always very dangerous. If the percentages are changed into Euros, then the poverty threshold represents 1641 Euros a year for a single person in Hungary, and 7805 Euros a year for the EU 15. That is to say 4.7 times bigger. The average income in Hungary is only 35% of the poverty threshold of the EU 15.

Mr Surján added in reaction to the political events of the previous few days, that despite these huge differences, very few Hungarians had decided to leave the country after adhesion. This had been assessed several times. The decision of governments from the 15 to officially close their doors gave rise to a real anger and effectively made **Hungary a second rate member** of the EU. This kind of attitude is not what could be called a good start.

Mr Gollé highlighted how important it will be to share these concerns in the future: the desire for a social Europe, the different conditions, the challenges to be met, the attempts to implement various policies between countries, this wish to be in a Europe of solidarity.

Mr Collowald welcomed this meeting that was taking place under the auspices of enlargement. Mr Collowald, journalist in Strasbourg, was present during the birth of the Council of Europe and then worked for 30 years at the European Commission and Parliament.

He remembered that on the eve of the first enlargement, in the spring of 1972, Father Joseph Wresinski, founder of the ATD Fourth World Movement, came to Brussels to question the European Commission. Professor Albert Coppé, Commissioner in charge of Social Affairs at that time, declared that he had been very impressed by Father Wresinski who had asked him what he was doing to fight poverty in Europe. Later, in autumn 1986, when Father Wresinski came to the European Parliament, he met with the President of the Parliament at the time, Pierre Pflimlin, whose head of cabinet was Mr Collowald. Here again, the quality of the discussion was extraordinary. These different elements lie within a **long process**, and Mr Collowald welcomed the next enlargement whilst remaining aware that there was still a long way to go. He concluded by sharing his emotion upon having the opportunity to participate in this meeting with guests from the new Member States.

In reference to the presentations that had been made, Mr Gil-Robles underlined that **extreme poverty is an accumulation of many difficulties**. It is not only a question of money coming in or insufficient wages but also of shortcomings in education, housing and the family situation. He asked for more details regarding housing in the participants' countries. In Eastern Europe, in the past, there was poor quality housing but it was available to everybody and he wanted to know what the situation was after the transition to a market economy. He also asked about children who were not in school.

Mr Caudron began by asking the participants if they were optimistic or pessimistic on the eve of entering the EU. He then wondered to what extent they were aware that even if adhesion resulted in increases in general wealth and opportunities to exchange experience, **inequality and poverty wouldn't be solved through adhesion** and would remain strictly a national issue. He emphasised the fact that even if being richer would mean that some problems could be solved more easily, it was still essential to have true political will in order to fight inequality and poverty.

In response to the question about **housing**, Ms Vesaitė explained that social housing was still available in Lithuania although mainly in the big cities. Young families have the possibility to obtain credits but have to be earning enough money to use them. Those who can not afford this may still benefit from social housing and some unoccupied buildings have been adapted for this purpose. Nevertheless, demand exceeds supply and there are waiting lists.

Concerning **unschooled children**, there are about 500 in Lithuania which is a very small number. Various initiatives are in place to bring these children back to school including places in special schools. She added that secondary school education is obligatory for all in the Constitution.

Concerning **attitudes towards adhesion**, she felt that people are largely optimistic. For example, 80% say that they will vote in the European Parliament elections, which seemed a lot to Ms Vesaitė. Older people do not have many illusions because their pensions will not increase much, but they are confident for their children and grandchildren. The Structural Funds, “quick start” projects are promising elements and it is hoped that they will create jobs. In terms of trade and production growth, a huge market is opening up and companies are preparing for increased competition which will bring about as many challenges as it does possibilities.

She knew that it was **certain that inequalities and poverty won't be solved automatically**. Benefits from growth do not automatically reach the people who are really suffering so special measures will be implemented.

Ms Vesaitė also expressed the deep disappointment felt regarding **restrictions on labour mobility**, even if this attitude could be somewhat understood in the context of upcoming European Parliament elections, media and trade union pressure. She felt that people who wanted to earn more in any case did not choose the EU 15 but the United States, and that the pertinence of such measures was questionable considering the current demographic situation. In her opinion, given the immigration trends of the whole world towards Europe, priority should be given to Europeans. Ms Vesaitė added that she hoped these measures would be temporary and that after 1 May, this violation of the freedom of movement would end. She was convinced that reality would show that people with low mobility wouldn't go to these providential states and would instead hope that there will be more work in their own countries.

In relation to housing, Mr Surján referred to what had been said previously. He mentioned particularly the case of **homeless people** and added that there were no homeless families but rather homeless single persons. This was often due to problems of alcohol and divorce and although it was not easy to cope with, there were ways to resolve the problem.

Concerning attitudes towards **adhesion**, Mr Surján said he felt **optimistic**.

With regards **enlargement and policies to fight against poverty**, Mr Surján recalled that only 2.5% of European public spending was devoted to the EU as an institution. He felt that it was obvious that with these resources, it would be impossible to solve the local problems of all current and future Member States. This said, in this year's budget, 95% will be used by the 15, and only 5% for the 10. Considering that the population of the 10 new Member States represents 16% of the EU population, he was of the opinion the **budget of the first year did not illustrate a spirit of solidarity**. The explanation for this put forward is that it is impossible to implement certain projects in the first year. This is understandable but Mr Surján was convinced that the European elections, internal political reasons and the Council's stakes also had a part to play in explaining this distribution. All the same, he felt that the Copenhagen agreements put the new Member States in a temporary box which was not altogether honest.

Nevertheless, Mr Surján knew that the example of former Member States (Portugal, Spain, Ireland) showed that there were excellent prospects, notably thanks to the Structural Funds. He hoped that during the next period, in 2007, the European resources would allow for more development. He emphasised that even if there are many indirect ways to fight poverty, the responsibility remaining at a national level, instruments to activate the economies of the new Member States are nonetheless significant.

Mr Kuzmickas simply added that both his political group and himself were considered to be **Euro-optimistic** and reminded the meeting that all Lithuanians are Europeans.

Ms Roure **concluded the meeting with the reminder that it was the last meeting of the current term and thanked those Members who were always present, in particular Mr Gil-Robles**.

Ms Roure hoped that the next term would see the reconstitution of the Intergroup as many Members were registered. Unfortunately their schedules were often full but there were many who read the minutes and who were interested by the Intergroup's activities. As a rule, the actions initiated had been effective and the Members were sensitive to the positions taken. Even if it was optimistic of the Lisbon Summit to ask for the eradication of poverty by 2010, Ms Roure emphasised that we have to keep this ambition. In this spirit, the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion should have a greater impact than they

currently do. She concluded with a demand: **An appeal to all governments for the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion to live up to the ambition of eradicating poverty.**

Mr Gil-Robles gave his final farewell as it was **his last meeting of the Fourth World Committee**. He will not be a candidate at the next European elections. He reminded the meeting that he had belonged to the Intergroup since 1989, when he was first elected and that the moments of friendship he experienced had compensated for the moments of anxiety felt when facing the extent of the problem and the task in hand. He has become aware that poverty is not a phenomenon that cannot be fought and highlighted the role of the ATD Fourth World Movement and the Intergroup. Mr Gil-Robles thanked Ms Roure for her diplomacy and persistence during this term. The Intergroup was created in 1980 and in his opinion, we could be proud of what had been achieved over nearly a quarter of a century. He concluded by thanking all of the friends he had met and wished them the best.

Ms Roure added her thanks to Ms Kenningham for her work.

Ms Kenningham in turn expressed her appreciation for the commitment and work of Ms Roure as President and looked forward to the diverse discussions that would be held with 10 new Member States in the future. **She hoped that the Intergroup would remain a source of strength within the Parliament and be a place where people living in poverty could voice their opinions and be listened to.**

ANNEX

ATD Fourth World Meeting in Warsaw Message from Olga Zrihen MEP
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During the ATD Fourth World meeting in Warsaw, I had the great pleasure to chair and co-facilitate a discussion group on "Supporting Families and Young People Within Communities". Several associations from France, Romania and Poland shared their experiences and discussed for 4 hours around the table. The first step was to present oneself, present the associations and to explain the reasons for our presence.

The tone of the meeting was immediately set by the listening quality of all the participants, this was despite the difficulty of consecutive interpretation in English and Polish. At the very beginning, everybody gave examples in which the family structure played an essential role but which also showed the difficulties in maintaining this group when it came under pressure for various reasons.

Several elements came out of the discussion:

Housing is an essential asset because it permits either the building or collapse of the family unit depending on whether it is adequate or not, in a hostile or friendly environment.

The second element is the relationship with professionals when there is a problem.

The feeling of not being listened to or understood was often raised by the participants and is experienced as a blow or a humiliation.

On the contrary, when professionals (teachers, educators, doctors) are committed individuals, it becomes possible to have incredible results; such as the person who placed her own children in a school that she had created for street children, or the initiative taken by a gynaecologist to support the mothers of twins.

The meeting allowed the emphasis to be put on the solidarity that is also built at the very heart of the family. We must not forget that 'the family' is not necessarily the biological one, it is sometimes the family that we choose and ATD Fourth World allows for this possibility.

Children remained at the heart of our discussion because it is clear for everyone that they are the ones that have to be protected or supported all the way, some have to fight in order to do this which requires a great amount of energy. School is a key factor for all.

The importance of training for professionals was also mentioned and needs to be built in terms of citizenship.

Indeed, when someone who has a problem meets a professional, then the technical answer they offer is often not the solution to the problem. The citizen behind the professional needs to be approached in order for them to understand the complexity of reality. The solution expected must be full of citizenship and values rather than being technical and expert.

This meeting impressed me a lot thanks to the richness of the human exchanges and the cultural environment in which it took place; all kinds of arts were present: music, writing, theatre, sculpture, painting etc.

A moment of true solidarity and humanity.

Thank you for allowing me to live this moment in your company.