

PERSISTENT POVERTY IN EUROPE IN 2015

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Summary

For the first time in its history the European Union put on the agenda of the March 2000 Lisbon summit and the December 2000 Nice summit “the elimination of poverty” as its prime objective for the next 10 years. It also affirmed that the European Union must “become the most competitive knowledge based economy and the world’s most dynamic”. These decisions attest to the considerable evolution over the past 40 years in the perception of poverty and of the means deployed to combat it. The European Commission launched the first European programme against poverty in 1975, under the impulse of voluntary movements. Another twenty-five years will be required to make the fight against poverty a European priority.

In order to ensure that this objective does not remain “wishful thinking” but is enacted upon in the acts and deeds of the European Union and of its member states, the Research Institute of the Fourth World Movement together with Futuribles, a think tank, and representatives of Fourth World families, organized a two day seminar on the theme “Persistent poverty in Europe in the year 2010” with the support of the European Commission, at the headquarters of the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels. The conclusions of this seminar were taken up by a group of experts, who participated in this seminar, in order to frame them in a strategic thought process based on alternative scenarios in turn based on the implementation of the European integration timetable.

This paper is a synopsis of the work done by this group of experts.

The four scenarios are based on the European Union integration timetable: in 2004, 10 countries are scheduled to join the European Union, increasing its surface by one third and its population to 454 million people. Two other countries, namely Bulgaria and Romania, are likely to join in 2007. During the period stretching from 2007 to 2013 the European Union is going to have to set new budgetary targets and this step is crucial.

The four scenarios do not have the same probability of occurrence and range from the dismantling of the European Union, with its inherent nationalistic approach towards the

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management of poverty, at one end of the spectrum to the most optimistic scenario, whereby “poverty is outlawed” and considered to be a violation of human rights leading to the eradication of chronic poverty to be enshrined in the European treaties. Intermediate scenarios are a “status-quo” scenario where poverty is managed at a limited cost and is a question of “social cohesion” and the ultra-liberal American type scenario, which breaks with European tradition and is a major departure from the present European socio-economic model.

The four scenarios will be further developed in this paper. Suffice to say at this stage that scenario #4 (the eradication of chronic poverty is enshrined in the European treaties and in the national legislation of the member countries) is the “standard” to be aimed at (too perfect to be entirely realistic). It has the advantage though of pointing in the right direction. For this scenario to happen, voluntary associations and trade unions will have to form effective partnerships in order to lean on the political establishment to enact laws in which progress is not solely defined in economic terms but which guarantee the development and dignity of all citizens in a given territory. Poor people and among those the poorest who are excluded from political life at local level will have to become full blown partners in the democratic political process and trained to become so, bearing in mind that training is a two way process. Cooperation between the business and the voluntary sector dealing with the reintegration of jobless must also be reinforced in order to build bridges to reconcile goals based on economic performance and human development.

As Christopher Winship, professor in sociology at Harvard, reminds us: *“As long as we see the poor as people “out there” – either as a result of some form of deficiency or as the result of structural oppression by others- we can never truly deal with those in extreme poverty, the Fourth World...This is a radical proposal. It suggests that giving charity, paying higher taxes, voting correctly and political advocacy are not nearly enough .It is only by fundamentally changing our relationship to the poor that true change will be possible.”*

A first milestone in the quest to achieve the conditions of scenario #4 has already been tentatively reached: art #3 of the Treaty establishing a European constitution (still to be approved by the Heads of State) states that: “the European Union fights against social exclusion and discrimination and promotes justice and social protection.” and art.#4 states: “ in its relationship with the rest of the world the European Union will strive to eliminate poverty and to protect human rights”.

European heritage: wealth and poverty

Several aspects of the European heritage were highlighted during this two-day seminar. In today’s world Europe is perceived as one of the continents, which has registered a fair amount of success in its fight against poverty. Europe embodies a “social model” of democracy, regulated economy and social security, which needs to be broadened and promoted. On the verge of becoming a Union of 25 countries, Europe must put forward its spiritual and cultural diversities and built on the foundations of a European humanism. Probably for the first time in its history Europe has the knowledge and the necessary resources to eradicate poverty within its borders and help to eliminate it outside of its borders. But does it have the will?

Problems still persist. Policies of dislocation of the family cell are not very well known and have not entirely disappeared in Europe and elsewhere but they tend to take on new forms, such as the adoption of children of poor families without parental consent; a practice which tends to grow in Great Britain.

The enlargement of Europe brings into the European family countries, which have been excluded from it by the Yalta treaty. They are coming back into the fold after having experienced totalitarian rule followed by painful years of transition. A recent study of the World Bank pointed out that the collapse of the social security system in Central and Eastern Europe has brought about an unprecedented increase in poverty in the region. Many, among whom there are nine million of gypsies, are leaving their country and seeking refuge in the West.

Let's not forget, as representatives of the Southern Hemisphere will no doubt remind us, that the prosperity of the West was partially built on the exploitation of the Southern Hemisphere and the plundering of its natural resources. Are we so sure today that this plundering of resources is a phenomenon of the past?

Poverty described by those living it

Excerpts from a workshop which took place at Frimhurst Centre, Surrey, England, in the summer of 2000, as recorded by Moraene Roberts, representative of Fourth World families in the group of experts.

According to families who live in persistent poverty in Britain,

“Poverty is:

Having people think I was in care because I was a bad kid, or had a bad mother;

Having all the same dreams for the future that everyone else has, but no way on earth to make them come true;

Dreading every Christmas and birthday because of the disappointment in the children's eyes;

Wondering what I ever did to deserve this life;

Making one big mistake and then paying for it forever by losing every baby before I can prove that I have changed;

Knowing that it is never going to get any better, this is it;

Wanting to die but being too scared to get on with it;

Needing help, but being too scared of being judged an unfit mother to ask for it;

Being treated like nothing, less than nothing, and accepting it;

Having not one person to talk to who isn't paid to listen;

Having no education, no skills, no job, and no value;

Being told that I have nothing to offer my own child, and believing it –then;

Everyone thinking that they have the right to have an opinion about me, just because I ask for a bit of help.

A new approach to poverty

There are two schools of thought that have been particularly influential these last decades in defining and analyzing poverty and in bringing remedies to it.

The first school of thought is headed by **Amartya Sen**, Nobel Prize winner in 1998.

Born in Bengal in 1933 his childhood was marked by two particular events: one was the murder of a Muslim day-laborer who by mistake and driven by hunger had ventured into hostile Hindu quarters at the time of tensions between the two communities and the other one was the sight of hundreds of emaciated men and women during the 1943 famine which killed three million people in Bengal. These two events never ceased to mark his

rigorous study on poverty and the economy, although through his life of researcher and of professor at the most prestigious universities he had been more in contact with the intellectual elite than with the poor.

By combining economic and philosophical tools Sen contributed to add the ethical dimension to the debates on major economic and social issues. Sen defines development “as the process of expansion of real liberties individuals enjoy” and considers freedom “as the ultimate goal of development but also its principal means to it.” He focused his attention on studying important expressions of freedom such as political freedom, economic wellbeing and social opportunities. They complement each other and contribute to the general capacity an individual has in living more freely. This is the reason why he considers individual freedom as a social commitment and insists on the overriding importance of democracy. According to Sen, in order to determine how much real opportunity an individual has in achieving his or her objectives, one must not only take into account his or her material assets such as revenues, housing, education, health, etc but the way he or she is willing and able to use these assets. The ability to use these assets to lead a life he or she wants is defined here as his/her “capacity”. As such, “poverty is then defined by Sen as being deprived of elementary capacities and not solely by having insufficient material means”.

The late **Joseph Wresinski**, who defines poverty as a violation of human rights, founded the second school of thought. Born in Angers, France, from immigrants, he grew up in a family marked by extreme poverty and exclusion. In 1956 he was appointed chaplain of the shantytown of Noisy-le-Grand, where 250 families were living in shacks. He spent 11 years there and founded with the inhabitants what eventually became known as the international Movement ATD-Fourth World. “The families of this camp inspired me everything I have done for their liberation. Everything is based on a shared life experience, not on a theory”. He never ceased during his life to meet the poorest throughout the world and to build solidarity among them and around them. Appointed member of the Economic and Social Committee in France he wrote a report on “Great poverty and economic and social precariousness” which was adopted in February 1987. This report proposes the following definitions: “Precariousness is the absence of one or more security features which enable people and families to take upon themselves their elementary responsibilities and enjoy their fundamental rights. The insecurity which flows there from leads to great poverty when it affects several areas of existence, when it tends to be persistent, when it compromises one’s prospects of conquer one’s rights again and to take upon one self again one’s responsibilities in the foreseeable future”. Great poverty has consequently three principal characteristics. It results from the accumulation of several precarious situations in all aspects of life (health, education, resources, housing, revenues etc). The chronic state of this situation has devastating effects by debilitating the people suffering from it. These people are consequently put in a situation where they are incapable of exercising their rights without outside help.

On the 17th of October 1987 Joseph Wresinski led a delegation to the Trocadero square in Paris, where the universal declaration of human rights was signed, to engrave in the pavement of the square the following sentence, which has since been reproduced at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, at the European parliament in Brussels and in other places: “Where men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human

rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights are respected is our solemn duty.” In 1992 the United Nations decreed that the 17th of October be “the world day for the elimination of poverty”. The United Nations Human Rights Committee adopted in 1996 the definition of poverty in the Wresinski report.

Despite their vastly different social background and life, Sen’s and Wresinski’s thought processes have common features: they both insist on the absolute necessity to take into account the aspirations of the most underprivileged people, to increase their freedom of action and to consider them as the principal actors of the fight against poverty. Their contribution to the debate on poverty however has as yet to penetrate current thinking

Methodology

1. Identification of components or fundamental dimensions of the system

The first stage consisted in identifying the components or fundamental dimensions of the system. Some 40 components or variable inputs, which could have a bearing on the development of insecurity and of persistent poverty in Europe, have been identified and regrouped in 10 components or fundamental dimensions of the problem. These are: the perception of poverty and of poor people by society at large, the technical-economic system, the world context, the European context, values and mentalities, the family and social context, education, governance, policies and enforceable rights.

2. Micro-scenarios or hypotheses on future development

The second stage consisted of elaborating micro-scenarios and/or developing hypotheses on evolution. Pertinent hypotheses of development over the next 15 years have been elaborated for each of the 10 fundamental dimensions. Three to five micro-scenarios have been retained for each dimension.

3. Global scenarios through the combination of partial micro-scenarios

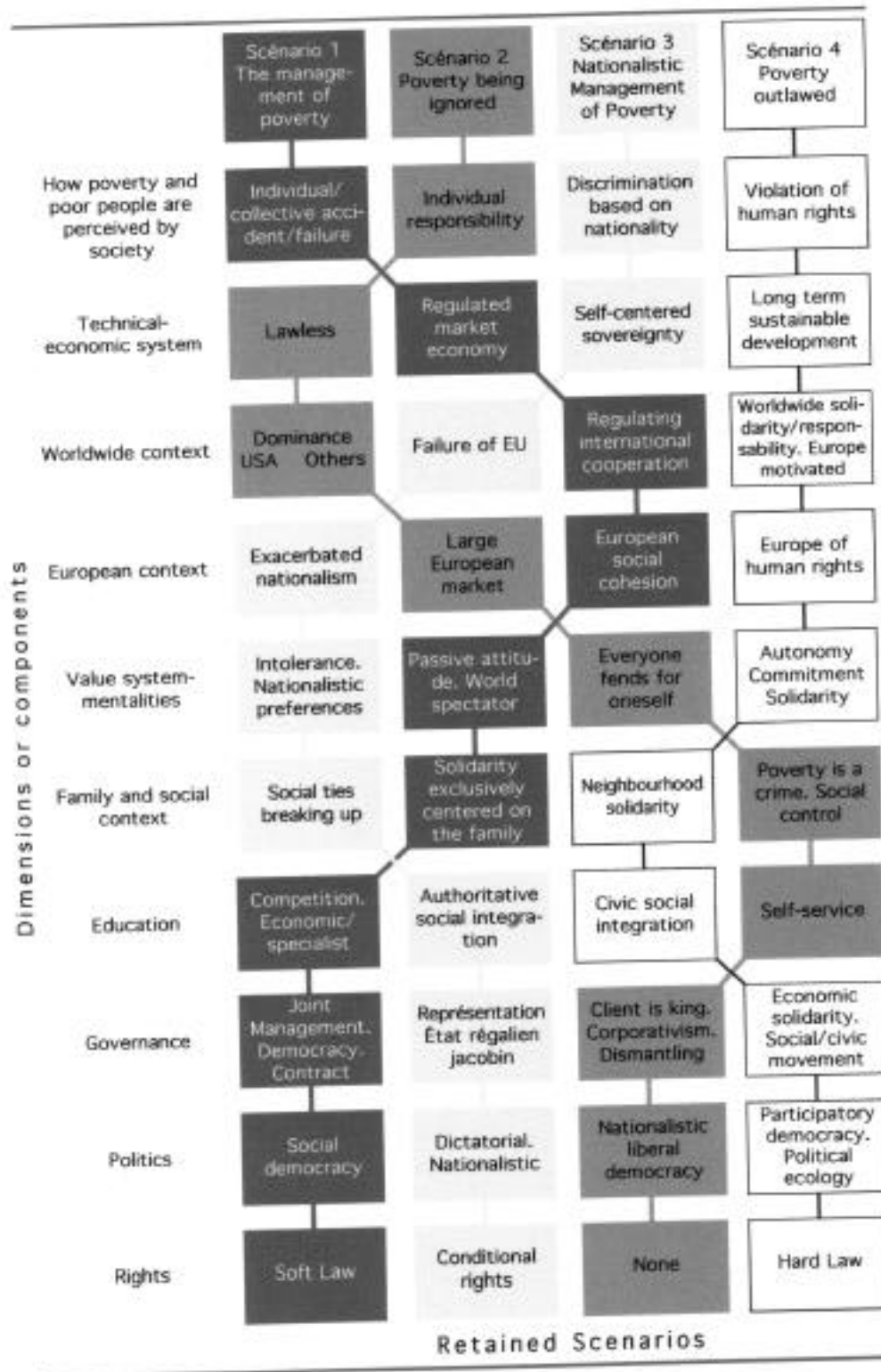
The next step consisted in exploring possible combinations of partial micro-scenarios, which would then lead to the global scenarios. Global scenarios are built by combining one micro-scenario for each fundamental dimension.

4. Strategic orientations

Finally, the necessary actors and their room for maneuver were identified together with the strategic orientations based on the scenarios, which were retained, and on the output of the Brussels seminar.

The scenarios’ grid (see below) represents the four combinations, which were ultimately selected to better describe the possible developments of insecurity and persistent poverty with the year 2015 horizon in mind. The ten dimensions or fundamental components of the system are in the vertical column. The contents which are applicable thereto and which are defined in this methodology as “hypotheses” are on the horizontal lines. A particular scenario consists of a pertinent combination of ten hypotheses, one each for each component of the system and identified by a specific color.

Scenarios' grid



Four scenarios of development of insecurity and persistent poverty in Europe at the 2015 horizon.

The four scenarios are built around the European Union integration timetable that has important deadline.

In 2004, ten new countries are scheduled to join the European Union, the surface of which will increase by one third and the population of which will be 454 millions.

Two other countries, namely Romania and Bulgaria, are scheduled to join in 2007.

During the period ranging from 2007 until 2013 the European Union shall have to determine new budgetary targets and this is a crucial stage in its evolution.

The four scenarios do not present the same probability of occurrence and represent four different postures ranging from compromise to virtuous take off with intermediate scenarios such as drifting and dismantling (of Europe).

The “muddling along” scenario, which “manages poverty”, has to be viewed at in the context of the present trend of alleviating and administering poverty at a limited cost.

The “drifting away” scenario whereby “poverty is ignored” is a clear departure from the current European model and leaves the poor to their own fate.

The scenario whereby “the European Union is dismantled” and “poverty is being managed along nationalistic lines” will lead to foreigners being sent back to their home country.

And finally the “virtuous take off” scenario whereby “poverty is outlawed” considers poverty as a violation of human rights and puts the eradication of poverty as a priority in the European treaties.

Scenario # 1: “The management of persistent Poverty”

This scenario, which follows the current trend, considers poverty as the result of a collective or individual accident. Poor people have been left “stranded” and need to be “reinserted” in the main stream of things. Poverty is the object of corrective measures of “social cohesion” which are the object of social policies, the cost of which must remain low. The socio-economic model is not being challenged and its drawbacks are alleviated by limited state support. Poverty is not ignored; by the same token its root causes are not being tackled: poverty is simply administered and some relief is being provided.

The European Convention of 2003 does not list the eradication of poverty among its objectives. The commitments made at the Lisbon and Nice summits of 2000 to fight against poverty and social exclusion are thereby seriously weakened and are losing ground each year.

Social forces do not carry enough weight to impose a more human economy and society at large shrugs off any guilt by occasional compassionate gestures of goodwill towards the poor.

The European Union member states rely on the safety nets they put in place and overlook the fact that their minimum income levels are now being looked at as maximums or ceilings, which should not be overshoot, lest sanctions are imposed. Unemployed people and people similarly relying on social welfare benefits are trapped in reinsertion mechanisms. In the South of Europe and the East of Europe they manage to have access to the parallel, informal market economy that enables them to survive based on their work. But how long is this going to last?

The duality of the education system increases with at one end of the spectrum an elitist few and on the other end of the spectrum youngsters who are relegated. In the absence of real insertion prospects the youth of underprivileged areas go on the rampage. Some countries, such as England, do not hesitate to go for the adoption of children of poor families by well off families against the will of the adopted children's parents.

The European Union ratifies the membership of those countries of Central and Eastern Europe that were scheduled to join. The decision is probably partially motivated by the need to have access to immigrant workers in view of the demographic outlook in the years 2006 and beyond, as the number of retiring people is greater than those who enter the labor market. However, only highly qualified workers are allowed to immigrate with their families, thereby increasing the "brain flight" out of the poorest countries. The European Union budget for the period 2007-2013 is slightly increased but the biggest increase goes towards financing heightened security measures.

On the international side, the European Union gives some credits and/or grants to poor countries provided the logic of a market economy prevails but does not stick, as in the past, to its commitment to increase its development aid program to 0.7% of its Gross National Product.

In the year 2013 chronic poverty in Western Europe has not diminished. This is no wonder as this has never been an objective that was matched by adequate measures. In the East, standards of living have increased but part of the population has not benefited from the development and moves into a chronic condition of poverty.

Scenario # 2:"Poverty being ignored"

Under this scenario the structural causes of poverty are ignored by public opinion. Poverty is a personal issue for which the individual is solely responsible.

To facilitate the creation of new enterprises and promote economic growth social contributions are drastically reduced and the right to work downplayed. The state dissociates itself from its "social responsibilities" which private insurance companies take over for those who can afford them and charities for the others. This ultra-liberal

“American type” model is a major departure from the current European socio-economic model and is inconceivable without a lot of resistance.

Under this scenario ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe are joining, as scheduled, the European Union, which is glad to see another 75 million consumers joining the common market. Liberal right wing parties gain a comfortable majority in the June 2004 European elections and push for the privatization of national retirement benefit plans and of the social security systems in the years ahead.

An elitist schooling system is developing with financially well off parents paying over the top to procure the best possible education to their children whilst, at the other end of the spectrum, in underprivileged areas the schooling system breaks down.

Poverty is being criminalized: more and more prisons are being built thereby reassuring public opinion and enriching the private companies that manage them. Local initiatives of solidarity are on the increase to fill the gaps left by inadequate social security and public services.

In 2007 the European Union budget is approved by its member states at a much-reduced level. Spending on public security is an exception though. Under pressure from the World Trade Organization export subsidies to farmers are abolished thereby improving somewhat the terms of trade with the countries of the Southern Hemisphere.

On the international front the USA remain the dominant force with which the European Union tries to compete in the economic field without seeking to promote in any way a different economic development model.

In 2013, when the situation of the enlarged European Union is assessed for the first time, the average unemployment rate is greatly reduced and economic growth is very satisfactory. Wealth though is more and more concentrated in the hands of a minority. Many workers earn a pittance and the number of people without social security and without a roof over their head has increased in every country.

Scenario # 3: “Nationalistic management of Poverty”

This scenario assumes the dismantling of the European Union and a withdrawal of the member countries along nationalistic lines. Public opinion is summed up by the statement: “Each country has got its hands full with its own poor people. Foreigners go home.”

Despite having public opinion against them the USA and the British governments fought a war against Irak. The very tense political situation made the world economic situation worse. The European Union is more than ever divided. The European Union ratifies the membership of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which were scheduled to join, but is unable to function properly because the heads of state are unable to agree on a much needed reform of the institutions.

At the European elections of 2004 far right political parties are making major inroads. Illegal immigrants are sent back home and economic sanctions are taken against those countries, which cannot contain immigration.

No consensus can be reached on the budget for the years ahead (2007-2013). Exasperated by endless debates the UK decides to opt out, followed by Denmark and shortly afterwards by the countries that joined in 2004.

Economic vitality is feeble. Outlook for 2010 and beyond looks bleak for the poor and/or immigrants in Europe and in the world. The entire world political system is indeed being challenged to rediscover the spirit of international cooperation if it wants to avoid falling into the vicious circle of instability with continuous riots caused by hunger, ethnic conflicts and wars.

Scenario 4: "Persistent poverty outlawed"

Under this fourth scenario the prevailing public opinion considers chronic poverty as a violation of human rights because it contravenes all economic, social, civil and political rights enshrined in the universal declaration of human rights. This leads the political establishment to "outlaw" chronic poverty and to set the eradication thereof as an objective in the European treaties and in the legislation of each country. This scenario assumes the "rehabilitation" of the political will, which sets itself free from a regime dominated by economics and fully takes on its fundamental task of guaranteeing the development and equal dignity of every single citizen in a given territory. This scenario is a major departure from the current trend; it is the only one that sets the eradication of poverty as a priority. This scenario, which sets the standard to be reached, is unfortunately not entirely realistic but has the merit of pointing in the right direction.

Under this scenario, the major proposals of the 2004 Convention are carried by the European Council, among which features article 3 of the new Union treaty that sets the eradication of chronic poverty as one of its priorities. During the succeeding years two judgments by the European Court of Justice completely overhaul existing case law. It rules in favor of parents who brought an action against the British administration on the grounds that their children's adoption against their will is in violation of their right to have a family life. The UK is called upon to change its legislation. Soon afterwards, France is called upon to change its legislation regarding forceful expulsion of families from rented premises: public authorities have got to make sure that in case of expulsion alternative decent lodging is provided.

MP's elected at the 2004 European Council elections vote for the Union to put in place a specific social model which is anchored in its tradition. In 2007, the European Council votes to substantially increase the European Union's budget up to 0.65% of the Union GNP. The money earmarked for structural adjustments are first allocated to the poorest regions, in Central and Eastern Europe in particular, without necessarily neglecting the others. Departing from the current community budgetary discipline regarding the

allocation of grants and/ or subsidies, a massive redistribution in the form of “credit facilities” is allocated to the countries that are scheduled to join. Development aid funds are used to unconditionally assist the most needed neighboring countries.

In order to better take into account the social and environmental benefits and costs of the economic activity, which were heretofore largely externalized, the European Commission sets in motion an ambitious program to promote research on accounting rules. New “greener” and more social accounting standards are introduced in business and in public services.

The presence of voluntary organizations, which take a stand against poverty, at the European Economic and Social Committee makes new synergies possible. Working closely with some of them, the European Confederation of Trade Unions takes the initiative of preparing a complete overhaul of labor laws: the object is to reinstate those who have been excluded from decent jobs and to progressively make, with the active involvement of public authorities, the right to have a job and training accessible to everyone.

Access to basic training (such as reading and writing, calculus, speech) and to professional qualifications is a priority. Various initiatives are taken to fill the gap between the school and underprivileged families: public authorities set up a loan scheme earmarked for long term training for the benefit of people out of a job and/or lesser qualified workers

The Economic and Social Committee is being asked by the European Council to come up with proposals regarding immigration and asylum seekers. The European Union recommends that the Convention of the United Nations on protecting migrant workers and their families, which was voted in 2003, be ratified by all member states.

On the international front the European Union sticks to its commitment of increasing development aid and of opening its markets to products from the Southern hemisphere, whilst at the same time reducing its own export subsidies.

The USA elects a new president in 2005. This opens up new prospects of international cooperation. Attention is being paid by the United Nations on how to reform existing international organizations or to create new ones to promote sustainable development in the world. A few years later its General Assembly adopts a vast program of complete overhaul of international institutions: a worldwide Council of Economic and Social Security is created; countries of the Southern hemisphere gain better representation at the Board of Directors of the World bank and the IMF; the latter institutions having the obligation to protect human rights in all their actions.

In 2013, poverty has not disappeared in the European Union but the enforcement of basic human rights has progressed in all its member countries. Shared professional training with underprivileged people and a growing partnership with parents in schools have greatly reduced illiteracy. Hopes are expressed that illiteracy would totally disappear if the effort is pursued.

Scenario dynamics

Scenario #1 is more likely to occur because it is essentially the maintenance of the “status quo”. Implementation of this scenario at national level could however show some marked differences depending on the history of each country. It could evolve in different ways and borrow elements from scenario#2 or scenario#4 or even from scenario#3. Its main characteristic is that it is a scenario of compromise: the logic of the system is not fundamentally changed or challenged; necessary compromises are being made to maintain the current social order.

Scenario #2, on the other hand, breaks off with the past: existing labor laws and social security systems are being dismantled. It is not very realistic in the short term because Western Europe is very keen to hang on to its specific socio-economic model. Medium term though the situation is very different for the dominant forces of globalization tend to push back regulations which attempt to take into consideration fundamental economic and social rights. Europe is going to have to resist the call from ultra-liberal voices.

Scenario #3, which is unlikely to happen in the medium term due to the lack of a clear majority of votes, reflects a recurrent tendency towards nationalistic drifting.

This scenario is all the more likely to materialize if the imperialism of the dominant states continues and maintains divisions instead of international cooperation. Current world news does not bode well in this regard. The USA, the dominant power, is fortunately still a democracy, albeit subject to contradictory undercurrents. Let's hope that its population frees itself from the fear gripping it and chooses a president determined to lead a different policy from his predecessor.

Scenario #4 is the only virtuous scenario with regard to those values which European democracies proclaim i.e. these democracies claim to subordinate market economics to the development of each and every person: an impossible project without institutions and regulations which makes the respect of human rights enforceable. The challenge is to prevent that these regulations act as a jugular stifling creativity but instead act as a springboard. Much progress can be made towards achieving the conditions of this scenario.

Moldova, the poorest country on the European continent

Sandwiched between Romania and Ukraine, Moldova used to be part of Romania before being integrated into the USSR after 1945. This small country of 4 million people became independent in 1991. Its GNP never ceased to decline ever since. According to the World Bank it was equivalent to \$400 per inhabitant in 1999; according to more recent estimates it was \$300 in 2002. At less than a dollar a day per person it is close to that of Bangladesh. Moldova has very close historical ties with Romania; ties which run the risk of being jeopardized by the Eastern limits of the European Union which run right across the two countries.

Poverty of the population has increased dramatically for the past 10 years. Nina Orlova ("Poverty. Challenge of transition. The case of Moldova") talks about a "monumental disaster". Moldova has seen its economy collapse along side that of the USSR within which it was very closely integrated. Unemployment has soared whilst the social security system ceased all payments.

International financial institutions were called to the rescue. Since 1992 Moldova has benefited from structural adjustments plans financed by the IMF and the World Bank.

In 2000, an interim plan to reduce poverty states that "more than 20% of the population could be classified as living in extreme poverty, two thirds of which live in rural areas. The situation could well have deteriorated in 2000 due to the draught which has hit the country." But the remedy could well have made the problem worse. External debt guaranteed by the government soared from being at 0% of GNP in 1992 to 90% of GNP in 1999, half of which being owed to the IMF and the World Bank. External debt service absorbs today one third of the state budget, thereby reducing education, health and social security expenses, which are already at a very low level.

The consequences of extreme poverty are terrible. 10% of the population suffers today of famine with less than 1500 calories a day, level qualified by the FAO as extreme mal-nutrition. Emigration is at a record level. A million of them are said to be moonlighting in Europe; their revenues helping the country to survive. Many Moldavians are through sheer desperation selling their kidneys to gangsters who operate in Turkey. In the village of Mingir alone, which is close to the capital city, sixty farmers sold their kidneys for \$3000. There could be several thousands of such cases in the country as a whole.

The necessary actors

Who are the actors who may bring about this "standard" scenario whereby "chronic poverty is outlawed" and development is sustainable? This scenario can only result from strong public opinion which refuses poverty and promotes human rights; public opinion which is in turn supported by "social forces" which are composed of two essential partners: the voluntary sector and the trade unions.

The voluntary sector is in the forefront to put forward the notion that the poor people themselves have got to be considered as necessary partners in a democracy. But what are the conditions that would enable the poor to be influential collective agents? Joseph Wresinski's definition of poverty states "poverty severely undermines one's chances of conquering one's rights again and of assuming one's responsibilities again in a foreseeable future." In order to enable underprivileged people, who are rejected by local communities, held in contempt and forgotten, to become agents, more privileged people must meet them half way and get involved with them without standing in for them. Very few people and organizations are capable of working in a participative way with the underprivileged and of relying on their experience and knowledge. Professionals and citizens must accordingly be trained to work in real partnership with the underprivileged (see below).

Relationships between underprivileged people and professionals.

Marc Couillard, militant of ATD Fourth World, participated in the Fourth World Partnership program which for two years brought together in the same training program professionals of various disciplines and people who had a living experience of extreme poverty and were engaged as volunteers in community life ("the activists"). He explains the reasons why relations between people living in extreme poverty and professionals are often difficult.

Relationships between families in our midst, i.e. very poor families, and professionals are often strained. We were asked to engage in constructive dialogue with professionals involved in health care, the police, justice, education, social security, youth care, etc. Our objective was to improve our relationships with them. We all have preconceived ideas due to our background. Personally, I thought that I would have a hard time in sharing views and discussing with members of the police force or the justice department. And lo and behold I found myself in the same workshop!

To start with we had to reflect on the preconceived images we have from each other. One cannot miss this crucial stage if we want to work together. For instance, very poor people are distrustful of all those who at one stage or another of their life interfered in their life and took decisions on their behalf. On the other hand, professionals are often fearful of our reactions, which they find aggressive.

We realized that based on our life environment and profession we do not have the same logical thought process neither the same logic driving us to action. For instance, professionals look upon us as case studies, as problems to be solved. This is their logical problem solving thought process. In addition, they need to be able to report rapid results to their respective institutions. That's the efficiency logic.

The activists on the other hand were able to demonstrate the logical thought process of people living in poverty. For instance, the concept of holism when dealing with a human being: because when dealing with a human being living in poverty the problem is not solely confined to a problem of housing or money or health. In addition, we need time to regain self-confidence and trust in others: and taking time does not square with the demands put on professionals of efficiency and of yielding quick results.

Very often people who do not live in poverty believe that people living in extreme poverty need foremost to eat, drink and sleep... We were able to demonstrate that we also have cultural and spiritual needs. We have a need to talk to others, to think about our life and about life in general. We have a need to belong somewhere and not solely to a group of people who experience the same difficulties. The fact that people living in poverty attach so much value to cultural aspects was as far as the professionals are concerned a major discovery, which might change their perspective.

One last point: to fight against poverty one has to have a thorough understanding of poverty. We, the activists, have been able to demonstrate in programs, such as the Fourth World-University and the Fourth World Partnership programs, how poverty is lived from within.

To conclude, in order to fight against poverty, one has to start from the knowledge base carried by the very poor. But more is needed. Making poor people to talk about their life is not good enough. Poor people need to be empowered to be change agents in their own situation and to participate with others in the progress of our society. During those two programs we had the means to achieve something: time and people who believed in us.

I hope it would inspire others to continue on the road where professionals and poor people meet. It is worth trying.

Traditional mechanisms of representation, voting polls, undertakings through the trade union movement or mass demonstrations are not sufficient to let the underprivileged take the floor. New forms of representation at all levels, be they local or international, have got to be invented. Time will be required to find the appropriate forms of representation; these will probably be outside the beaten tracks.

The voluntary sector is very heterogeneous because it covers various strata such as political, religious and cultural, and acts on several fronts. At European level it is basically organized in four major platforms, namely NGO's, which deal respectively with social, human rights, development and environmental issues.

Trade unions could also join in the fight against poverty as long as they take some distance vis-à-vis their factional mentality. Some of them federate the jobless and help them to organize themselves as true social agents. The European Confederation of Trade Unions, which regroups 67 confederations of trade unions from 29 countries and 15 European professional federations, represents 60 million workers. This heterogeneous group is now better equipped than 10 years ago to take into account the fight against poverty.

Cooperation between trade unions and NGO's and their capacity to create alliances or coalitions to strive for specific goals is key and one of the major challenges in the creation of a social movement capable of influencing major political choices in Europe. This alliance is as important as the creation of a network of friends in political parties, in public services or among MP's in order to be able to lean on collective choices.

Cooperation between companies and the voluntary sector dealing with the reintegration of jobless must also be reinforced in order to build bridges to reconcile goals based on economic performance and human development. The danger indeed exists that measures taken to reintegrate underprivileged lead to the creation, in between the public sector and the private sector, of a third sector which would employ a static population. It is to the contrary very important that reintegration remains a transitory phenomenon permitting training and leading to rights as close as possible to those enjoyed by those well integrated.

To view poverty as the result of an individual deficiency (a right wing concept) or as the result of unjust social structures (a left wing concept) is to regard poverty and the poor as external issues i.e. as problems which do not concern us directly and intimately. Christopher Winship, professor in sociology at Harvard, reminds us in a preface to a book written by the late Wresinski how the latter has developed a more complete analysis: *“Wresinski’s argument is that of an iconoclast. He suggests that as long as we see the poor as people “out there” – either as a result of some form of deficiency or as the result of structural oppression by others- we can never truly deal with those in extreme poverty, the Fourth World ... This is a radical proposal. It suggests that giving charity, paying higher taxes, voting correctly and political advocacy are not nearly enough. It is only by fundamentally changing our relationship to the poor that true change will be possible.”*

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