

# Poverty **and** Inequality in Societies of Human Rights → **the paradox of democracies**

CONFERENCE  
**THURSDAY 21**  
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PROSPECTIVE WORKSHOPS  
**SATURDAY 23**  
COUNCIL OF EUROPE



## CONCLUSIONS OF THE CONFERENCE



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# Conclusions of the Conference

On 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2013, the Council of Europe in collaboration with the European Commission held a major international conference on poverty and inequalities. More than 400 people from a wide variety of backgrounds, coming from over 55 countries and representing more than 100 civil society organisations participated in the event, thus showing that within European societies there is a strong interest to find alternative paths to reduce inequalities and precariousness.

The Conference, opened by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Thorjörn Jagland, and the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, László Andor, did not only seek to analyse the current situation in Europe but also aimed at designing new paths and putting forward proposals to build inclusive societies for the future.

As stressed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur Magdalena Sepulveda, the conference has come at a very timely moment. Poverty, impoverishment and inequality are on the rise in all European countries and have been reinforced by the crisis and strict austerity measures. These dramatic phenomena not only weaken the Social Cohesion of European societies but they also violate human rights - social as well as civil and political rights - and question the functioning of democracy. Traditional measures against poverty are showing their limits and demonstrating that there is a need for a renewed and more progressive strategy to fight poverty and inequalities.

## 1. Analysis of the current situation in Europe

The interventions, discussions and exchanges that took place in the context of the conference enabled participants to

a) observe that:

- *Poverty and inequalities are rising across Europe.* As it was stressed by the Secretary General Thorbjörn Jagland, there is a growing gap between rich and poor and an unequal distribution of not only salaries and wealth but also of the “capacity to access quality education, housing, public services”. How can there be equality, he asked, “when more than 40 per cent of assets and 20 per cent of revenues are held by 10 per cent of the population?”. Commissioner László Andor underlined that these phenomena not only “run counter to our European values of fairness and dignity”, but they also “pose a threat to democracy”. Moreover, he indicated that inequality “corrodes the legitimacy of government” and “undermines the foundations of society”.
- *Impoverishment and precarisation are affecting a growing part of the European population,* including groups that, until now, were considered to be safe from poverty. Guy Standing underlined the emergence of a « precariat » class characterised by insecure labour relations, the members of which have access to a limited range of rights.
- *Increase of poverty is due to structural problems and political decisions,* the origins of which are to be found before the crisis. For Luciano Gallino, today's poverty is the consequence of an excessive inequality - due to years of redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top as well as to the financialization of the economy - and the degradation of working conditions. The speakers of the plenary on “New Strategies to Fight Poverty and Inequality” stressed that the approach to economic policy in Europe has mostly been devoted to promoting competitiveness with the objective of achieving economic growth but leaving aside other key objectives such as the eradication of poverty and a change in approach to worsening inequalities.
- *Austerity measures have worsened the situation,* transforming the crisis into a prolonged recession affecting yet more people in poverty as well as middle-income groups, not only through the dismantling of the welfare system but also through increased privatisation of services and enclosure of the “commons”. The experience of Iceland made clear that limiting state expenditure wherever possible

can be considered good practice to fight this crisis but it is of paramount importance to shield the social welfare systems by all means possible.

- *Inequalities are costly to society.* Economic inequality leads to multiple social and health-related difficulties which in turn cost greater expenditure for the community as a whole. Unemployment, especially long-term unemployment, leads to serious individual and social consequences, resulting in social isolation, poverty or disability, factors which can become a serious generational problem. Moreover, Luciano Gallino stressed that increasing inequalities as well as fiscal policies and cuts in social spending have contributed to the contraction of the aggregate demand, reinforcing therefore the recession itself.
- *Social protection and policies are being restructured towards means-testing, targeting, selectivity and conditionality,* preventing people from accessing rights and leading to violations of fundamental rights. The United Nations Special Rapporteur Magdalena Sepulveda observed that policies based on stigma and prejudice against people in poverty, which have been increasingly adopted in the context of the current crisis, “punish, humiliate and undermine the autonomy of people living in poverty”, and discourage them from approaching public officials to seek for support.
- *Policies implemented so far have not been able to tackle poverty and inequalities.* The need for change and for a shift in policies was stressed by many of the participants. Fintan Farrell mentioned the need to challenge “unsustainable capitalism”, which according to Anna Coote undermines efforts for (creative) local action and innovation. In a context where “economic policies are given priority over the social”, the resetting of priorities was also seen as a key issue.
- *Collective institutions and policies of social solidarity have been neglected.* Claudia Menne emphasised that there is a need for social dialogue, stressing that “where there are high levels of bargaining coverage, inequalities are reduced”.
- *The “commons”, including the resources and services that are needed to live in dignity, are being commodified and privatized,* reinforcing exclusion and increasing polarisation of wealth (e.g. access to water, education, health, etc.).
- *Resources, including human resources, are being wasted,* at a time when people are suffering from poverty and lacking access to them. According to discussions arising from the workshop on “Avoiding waste and making resources available”, the process spreads over all possible types of resources, be they material, financial, cognitive or even human resources. In this regard, Guy Standing stressed that “there are more educated people experiencing status frustration and deprivation than at any other time in history”. Further investment in education cannot therefore be the only answer to increasing poverty and inequalities.

b) recall that:

- *Human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent.* Poverty not only violates social rights but also civil, political, cultural and economic rights. Participants of the workshop on “How should Human Rights be implemented to protect people from poverty?” stressed that there was a strong link between poverty and discrimination: poverty exposes people to discrimination, and discrimination can lead to poverty (i.e. Roma and homeless people).
- *Protection against poverty is a right and the fight against poverty a legal obligation of governments.* It was underlined that this right is acknowledged by the European Social Charter (art. 30) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Art. 34 para. 3).

- *Social cohesion is defined by the Council of Europe as society's capacity to provide well-being for all, including future generations through the co-responsibility (or shared social responsibility) of public and private actors (New Strategy for Social Cohesion, 2010)*

c) take note that:

- A *Social Investment Package* was adopted by the European Commission on 20 February 2013, based on the following principles: 1) using social policy budgets “more effectively”; 2) improving people's chances of participating in society and the labour market, which includes ensuring access to quality services, adequate income support and inclusive labour markets; and 3) putting into place preventative measures to safeguard against risks and prevent disadvantage from compounding.

## 2. Policy proposals for an inclusive society

The conference created a space for fruitful exchanges between participants from different backgrounds who discussed potential paths on renewing the strategy to fight poverty and create more inclusive societies in Europe. The proposals that were formulated included:

- Concerning the present environment and the tackling of **issues that cause poverty and inequalities**
  - Set full employment and decent working conditions as one of the primary concerns of the European Union, which involves halting the redistribution from the bottom to the top and placing among the priorities of the European agenda the revision of the link between finance and the real economy
  - Set a target for human development spending at a domestic and European level
  - “Re-regulate” and protect the labour market, which includes addressing the declining wage share, high wages and bonus payments to executives
  - Move away from austerity measures by limiting cuts in public spending – highlighting the destruction and pain it is causing to the poor, and that it has not helped to reduce government debt as it undermines growth – and by considering the possibility of cancelling some part of the public debt.
  - Define a new coherent strategy together with civil society and social movements - addressing austerity properly against growing inequalities
  - Develop social knowledge, with the contribution of people experiencing poverty and civil society, and promote the training of (new) economists in « real life » and « sustainable economics »
  - Address the precarisation of both living and working conditions by paying specific attention to various types of redistribution:
    - a) redistribute material and immaterial security
    - b) redistribute control over time and combat “time poverty”
    - c) redistribute public quality spaces and the commons;
    - d) redistribute knowledge in general, through the decommodification of education
    - e) redistribute financial capital.
- Concerning **human rights**
  - Adopt a human rights based approach to policy making, which implies a paradigm shift to consider the fight against poverty as going hand in hand with the respect of every person's dignity, autonomy and freedom to make one's own choices
  - Reinforce existing laws and legal instruments that fight against poverty
  - Adopt a legal approach that includes the “common efforts and shared responsibilities” of all
- Concerning **democracy**
  - Put into place participatory channels that enable people in poverty to influence policy decisions: involve actors at all levels, particularly at the grassroots level, with the provision and support of new spaces for local projects and democratic participation – based on dignity and well-being for all

- to grow and evolve, and to give all persons a voice, especially those who might not be heard otherwise
  - Further develop democratic processes inside institutions
  - Encourage, support and include in the decision-making process self-organised groups and networks of people experiencing poverty, e.g. European Union of Homeless, All African Women Group, Black Women's Raped Action Project, etc.
  - Develop intermediary institutions where people in poverty's interest are represented such as the council of marginalised people in Denmark
  - Recreate social dialogue and provide a stronger representation in social agency and in institutions for the "group that is more at the front of the challenge", i.e. the "precariat"
  - Encourage the use and development of participative/collaborative methodologies with a bottom-up approach, such as the SPIRAL methodology, developed by the Council of Europe
- Concerning the **de-stigmatisation of policies**
    - Adopt a human rights-based approach to policies that consider people experiencing poverty as Rights holders rather than as a group to be stigmatised
    - Educate and raise public awareness in order to recognize the obstacles that people in poverty face
    - Ensure that policies aimed at combatting poverty are not based in on negative stereotypes and prejudices
    - Build social solidarity and challenge stigmatizing rhetoric
- Concerning access to **financial resources**
    - Minimum income: a) Introduce minimum income schemes in countries that do not have one yet; and b) Raise its amount up to national poverty lines.
    - Minimum wage: a) Set a standard on minimum wage that goes above the threshold of 60% of the national median salary; and b) Link the minimum wage and the minimum level of income (by a mechanism ratio), so to link wage negotiations of "insiders" with the condition of the "outsiders", and thus strengthen social cohesion
    - Introduce a basic income that breaks the perverse effects of targeted minimum income and recognized non-market and domestic work and, as a first step, establish a European family allowance, that is to say a European basic income for children
    - Introduce a maximum ratio in the gap between the highest and lowest earnings of the labour market, to be implemented by law
- Concerning **taxation**
    - (Re)Establish real progressivity in redistribution policies as being fundamental to tackling inequalities
    - (Re)Establish taxation on wealth
    - Coordinate action at European and global level to fight against tax havens and fiscal evasion
    - Implement the financial transaction tax, following the European Commission proposal
    - Simplify the tax and transfer system
- Concerning **common goods**
    - Prevent privatisation and commodification of public patrimony and services (ig. health, education, etc.)
    - Establish a right to the provision of services (ig. water, electricity, heating, etc.)
    - Promote public-common partnerships and *ad hoc* public funding
    - Provide a legal framework for commons, i.e. having constitutional protection
- Concerning **sharing and the common pooling of resources**
    - Generalise and multiply the existing practices of communing and sharing, i.e. Time Banks, Urban Gardening, Local Exchange Trading Systems, Community Land Trusts, etc.
    - Recognise and value these experiences
    - Provide *ad hoc* legal instruments and adequate financial means so that they can develop themselves

- Concerning the **waste of resources**
  - Identify waste and redundancy, locate resources and produce maps in different fields as well as in their interconnectedness.
  - Educate and raise public awareness on the issue providing special attention to:
    - a) Children and young people – to be socialized with the idea that waste is wrong, especially in a situation where there are people starving and deprived of resources;
    - b) Decision-makers at different levels – to become aware that it is among their obligations and responsibilities to take enlightened measures to avoid waste and make resources available;
  - Develop strategies (platforms) to encourage recycling, re-use and sharing of discarded or abandoned resources.
  - Prevent waste by:
    - a) Encouraging the production of materials that can be re-used and recycled, and promoting the importance of long-term goods;
    - b) Introducing taxes on waste, following the “waster pays” principle, and encouraging enterprises to redistribute unsold items free of charge to citizens who lack purchasing power;
    - c) Questioning the current trend of exclusion of huge numbers of people from social exchanges and the pressure to label them (unemployed, discouraged and poor people) as liabilities because they cost money.
  - Improve social bonds and social relations and increasing the adaptability of public authorities to the ground so that they do not prevent grassroots organization from acting

## Plenary 1: Combating Poverty or Inequalities?

The aim of the first plenary was to discuss the current trends in Europe regarding poverty and inequalities by 1) tracing a map of the causes of contemporary poverty; 2) discussing whether the fight against poverty is first of all a problem of market regulation or a problem of changing the rules of social organization; and 3) formulating proposals to contrast poverty and precariousness.

The plenary was moderated by:

- **Emilio Santoro**, University of Florence and L'altro diritto, Italy.

After an introduction by:

- **Gilda Farrell**, Council of Europe
- and **Emma Toledano**, European Commission

The floor was given to distinguished experts that are currently working on these issues, namely:

- **Luciano Gallino**, University of Turin, Italy
- **Guy Standing**, University of Bath, United Kingdom
- **Peter Kenway**, New Policy Institute, United Kingdom
- **Claudia Menne**, European Trade Union Confederation
- and **Magdalena Sepúlveda**, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights

### 1. Tackling the causes of contemporary poverty

Speakers of the first plenary agreed that there is an increase in poverty and inequalities in Europe today. Most of the interventions stressed that this phenomenon is due to structural problems and political decisions, the origins of which are to be found before the crisis. Guy Standing linked the current situation to the “nature of globalization” in the last three decades indicating that it was a period “of liberalization, of mass commodification of every aspect of life and of re-regulation”, which has produced massive indebtedness and weakened the power of workers in “rich countries”. According to Luciano Gallino, it was not the economic crisis of 2007 which created poverty but rather, relative poverty was produced by stagnant wages and rising inequality which is at the root of the crisis. For him, today's poverty is the consequence of an excessive inequality - due to years of redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top as well as to the financialization of the economy - and the degradation of working conditions. Most of the speakers agreed that current austerity policies have transformed the crisis in a prolonged recession where, according to Peter Kenway, people in poverty are “under huge attack”. Luciano Gallino stressed that increasing inequalities as well as fiscal policies and cuts in social spending have contributed to the contraction of the aggregate demand, reinforcing therefore the recession itself.

To fight against the identified causes of poverty, speakers formulated different proposals:

→ Luciano Gallino believes that full employment and decent working conditions should figure among the primary concerns of the European Union, which involves halting the redistribution from the bottom to the top and placing among the priorities of the European agenda the revision of the link between finance and the real economy.

→ In the same vein, Peter Kenway stressed that people who are considered to be experiencing poverty should not bear the burden of the crisis and that there is a need to change the behaviour of corporations.

→ Guy Standing called for the implementation of a basic income in Europe.

→ Claudia Menne stressed the need to “re-regulate” the labour market, i.e. protect the labour market, and to use redistribution policies to fight poverty through high taxes to high incomes.

→ Also Guy Standing stressed that “activation policies” are used to treat “precariat” as “objects to be changed for the benefit of other people”, Claudia Menne considered that special measures related to active labour market and targeted measures are to be taken in order to facilitate younger and older persons’ access to work.



## **2. Impoverishment and “Precariat”**

Speakers referred to the impoverishment of the European population which is also affecting groups that, until now, were considered to be safe from poverty. Guy Standing underlined the emergence of a « precariat » class characterised by insecure labour relations, the members of which are treated as *denizens* in the sense that they have access to a limited range of rights that are not equal to those of *citizens*. He stressed that this is an emerging class whose education and qualifications are above the labour which they are expected to perform. He therefore considers that investing in education cannot in itself be the answer to the crisis.

Proposals on this field are related to the ones mentioned previously, but include further actions regarding redistribution:

→ For Guy Standing, “every new forward march toward more equality, freedom and fraternity” should be defined by this emerging “mass class”, paying specific attention to various types of redistribution: 1. redistribution of security; 2. redistribution of control over time; 3. redistribution of public quality space or the commons; 4. redistribution of knowledge in general, through the decommodification of education; and 5. redistribution of financial capital.

## **3. De-stigmatisation of Public policies**

Many of the speakers referred to the restructuring of social protection and policies towards mean-testing, targeting, selectivity and conditionality which is creating not only poverty traps but also what Guy Standing called “precarity traps”. Magdalena Sepulveda observed that policies based on stigma and prejudice against people in poverty have been increasingly adopted in the context of the current crisis. By imposing excessive restrictions and conditions on access to services and benefits, the Special Rapporteur believes that the states not only “punish, humiliate and undermine the autonomy of people living in poverty” but they exacerbate the challenges these people are facing to overcome their situation. Moreover, due to these policies, people in poverty are often discouraged from approaching public officials and seeking the support they need.

Some proposals were formulated by speakers in order to de-stigmatise policies:

→ Magdalena Sepulveda proposed to adopt a human rights based approach to policy making, which implies a paradigm shift to consider the fight against poverty as going hand in hand with the respect of every person’s dignity, autonomy and freedom to make one’s own choices and to put into place participatory channels that enable people in poverty to influence policy decisions.

## **4. The need for social dialogue**

Speakers of the first plenary also observed the “dismantling” of collective institutions and policies of social solidarity. Claudia Menne emphasised that there is a need for social dialogue and stressed that “where there are high levels of bargaining coverage, inequalities are reduced”. In this sense, Guy Standing called for a stronger representation in social agency and in institutions for the “group that is more at the front of the challenge”, i.e. the “precariat”.

## Plenary 2: Mobilising resources at local level: SPIRAL Methodology

**Samuel Thirion**, from the Council of Europe, moderated the session. He opened the plenary with the key Council of Europe concept of social cohesion, defined as “society’s capacity to provide well-being for all, including future generations through the co-responsibility (or shared social responsibility) of public and private actors”. He stressed the added value of a co-responsibility approach as implemented through the SPIRAL methodology in several hundred towns, villages, public (schools, hospitals, etc.) and private (businesses) institutions in different countries. It is a participative/collaborative methodology with a bottom-up approach guaranteeing an “equal right to expression for all, regardless of the social status of the individual”; from the definition of the citizens, dimensions of wellbeing are various, including immaterial ones, such as social relations in the local community, self-confidence, etc. He then invited the representatives engaged in setting action plans at a local level namely:

- **Françoise Coulot** from Mulhouse, France
- **Io Chatzivaryti** from Kavala, Greece
- **Giusto Manischalchi** and **Marianne Boegaerts** from Charleroi, Belgium
- **Mihaela Vetan** from Timisoara, Romania
- **Paulo Tourais** from Covilha, Portugal

to give a brief presentation on their city, the local processes they implemented and finally, their political perspectives for the future.

### 1. Presentation of the cities and local processes

**Mulhouse (France):** Françoise Coulot explained that in 2005 the city’s mayor put on the political agenda “co-responsibility”, confronted today with an industrial crisis, unemployment and recent migration flows to the city. Actions launched by the city targeting people experiencing poverty and exclusion to make them actors in the local community include the Multipartite Social Contract, and actions which promote active citizenship and co-responsibility by making local inhabitants actors in the community are, for example, the Albert Schweitzer Secondary School, Mulhouse’s Zoological and Botanical Park, the Rouffach Hospital Centre, the Youth Council.

**Timisoara (Romania):** Mihaela Vetan stressed that in 2007 Timisoara was the first city in Romania to adopt a social cohesion and co-responsibility approach in its political agenda by implementing the SPIRAL methodology. The city has set up coordination groups composed of local government representatives, members of NGOs and citizens. It has also devised, together with its citizens, numerous indicators of wellbeing and launched several pilot projects which involve citizens.

**Covilha (Portugal):** Paulo Tourais stated how the city, based in the highest mountain of the country, has been able to develop a local industrial and touristic sector. He stressed that, thanks to a national law, a formal local partnership between private and public bodies has existed for 15 years, collaborating together to promote wellbeing and to reduce the level of poverty and social exclusion in the city, but with many problems arising from the crisis in the last years.

**Charleroi (Belgium):** Giusto Manischalchi explained the tough social situation of this town which was industrial in the past, but is in complete recession today with high unemployment and social problems. The city has adhered to a Social Cohesion Action Plan launched by the Wallonie regional government, which includes several pilot projects and initiatives to promote social cohesion and, alongside 13 other cities in the region, has developed indicators of wellbeing with the support of the CoE. Like Mulhouse, Timisoara and Covilha, the city has been involved in a pilot action “Human Rights of People Experiencing Poverty” where it has drafted a Social Charter and Action Plan aimed at reducing poverty and increasing well-being for all.

**Kavala (Greece):** Io Chatzivaryti presented her city of 20,000 inhabitants on the North coast of Greece, far from tourism and other services. The city joined the URBACT responding together project and was able to apply the SPIRAL methodology. She noted that after having mapped the needs of the citizens, two indicators of well-being appeared to be important, i.e. employment and health. Since then the city has set up a social pharmacy.

Samuel Thirion noted that all the presentations given by **the five cities had as common elements a coordination group** composed of public/private sector representatives, citizens and NGOs and **a charter of shared social responsibility**.

## **2. Concrete actions at local level**

**ASAT, Timisoara:** A non-profit association which promotes co-responsibility between farmers and consumers. It was launched in order to reduce the level of people experiencing poverty and increase shared social responsibility locally: consumers or local inhabitants are “engaged” in a contract with small scale producers who are guaranteed the financial compensation since it is made in advance. It is a model of co-responsibility since it promotes confidence among local inhabitants, creates dialogue across social divides, consumer and producer share the risk, etc.

**“Social shops”, Covilha:** There are two such shops in the city, engaging with the private sector since they provide items such as clothes, electronic equipment, household appliances etc. The aim is to improve the living conditions of the most vulnerable by providing them basic material goods free of charge, which are first repaired by a team of volunteers if in bad condition. Finally, the city has signed the CoE’s Charter of Shared Social Responsibility as well as over 80 local businesses.

**“Shared gardens”, Charleroi:** Marianne Boegaerts shared the city’s project as an example of co-responsibility which, in just ten years, has grown from 3 gardens to 17. She stressed that the project mobilizes numerous inhabitants from the very rich, to families, to the homeless, and allows people to share their ideas, techniques they have used and difficulties encountered. She noted that, on the basis of the knowledge acquired from the inhabitants, the city offers training sessions in line with their needs.

**“Social pharmacy”, Kavala:** This project is in operation for ten years now, with a consortium of NGOs and volunteers. The beneficiaries are local inhabitants who are unemployed, lack access to social security or migrants. The “supply chain” for the social pharmacy is made up of local inhabitants, who bring unused medicines from home, and public health authorities; both state and private doctors offer free consultation to the “beneficiaries”. It is important for beneficiaries to feel safe and the social pharmacy does so by making them feel included and living a life of dignity.

**Multipartite Social Contract, Mulhouse:** On the basis of criteria of well-being and ill-being, the beneficiaries are provided with collective assistance by service providers with expertise in several different areas such as welfare support, access to the labour market, financial resources and their management, relationships with the consumer world and creating a social fabric. Each partner’s complementary roles, responsibilities and commitments are clearly defined, monitored and assessed by common consent.

Samuel Thirion emphasized that these **make use of existing resources** as well as provide a means **to promote shared social responsibility**.

## **3. Reflections on multiplier effects and recommendations**

**Charleroi:**

- Provide continual support for the project, e.g. maintaining a team of people to coordinate it;
- Lobbying in order to ensure co-production is included in school curriculum;
- Work in partnership with public/private businesses to stimulate intellectual capacity.

**Timisoara:**

- Get the support of local inhabitants and members of civil society organizations;
- Change consumers’ traditional role to become “actors” in society;
- Utilise volunteers for their knowledge and time.

**Covilha:**

- Individuals participating in the project need to feel part of the project and its aims;
- Treat everyone with dignity and fraternity.

**Mulhouse:**

- People inside the group are important multipliers to “spread the word” and “get other people excited about it”.

**Kavala:**

- Multiplier effects are found within the network as the role changes from being a “service provider” to a “policy maker” influencing others;
- Externally, by writing a case-study on the project it was adopted by other cities.

## Plenary 3: New Strategies to Fight Poverty and Inequality

The aim of the plenary was to explore alternative strategies in the fight against the progressive impoverishment that European countries are nowadays facing; alternatives are to be found on two layers; first, we have to discuss the opportunity to change the vision and the general approach to policy-making and second, there is a call to substantiate a new vision with concrete policy proposals.

The plenary was moderated by **Laurent Bonelli**, University Paris-Ouest-Nanterre, France

After an introduction by:

- **Andrej Hunko**, German Parliamentarian and member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
- **Jón Sæmundur Sigurjónsson**, Ministry of Welfare, Iceland

who outlined socio-economic aspects in the aftermath of the financial crisis, the floor was given to the distinguished experts:

- **Louise Haagh**, University of York and Basic Income Earth Network
- **Ugo Mattei**, International University College of Turin, Italy
- **Talley Hoban**, Dumpster diver
- **Jacob Von Uexkull**, World Future Council

### 1. Towards a New Approach

#### i. **Broadening the scope of policy-making**

The panel all agreed upon the need for a general redefinition of the approach to economic policy in Europe; an approach which has been mostly devoted to promoting competitiveness with the chief aim of achieving economic growth, leaving aside other key objectives such as the eradication of poverty and a change in tactics to worsening inequalities. Poverty and inequality need to be put once more at the core of debates about economy and economics so that arising economic policy guidelines can lead to a socio-economic optimum. Firstly, social aspects cannot be addressed separately as second-order objectives and secondly, economic prescriptions cannot hurt the social cohesion and well-being of society. There is therefore a need for a coherent policy approach which addresses economic and social aspects at the same time.

→ Jacob Von Uexkull reinforced this vision by adding concerns about environmental issues and called for a broader strategy which encompasses economy wide social and environmental objectives and which is able to determine a win-win-win solution.

→ To foster this new approach, Louise Haagh suggested setting a target for human development spending at a domestic and European level.

→ In this regard, Jón Sæmundur Sigurjónsson reported the Icelandic experience of the Well-being Watch, which is a jointly organized think tank collaborating with public institutions, labour unions, municipalities and NGOs and which has been supporting the government since 2008, monitoring the effects of the financial collapse on households and identifying the vulnerable groups most in need of government intervention.

#### ii. **Reviewing austerity measures**

The introduction to the plenary made clear that the crisis arose in 2008 from a failed banking sector supported by states with packages aimed at securing the financial sector. It is evident that the current debt crisis is not linked to an excess of social expenditure, which was sustainable until a few years ago. To reduce public debt to 60% by cutting social expenditure, this surely means more poverty and more inequality.

→ Andrej Hunko reinforced the view that an excess of austerity can seriously put societal well-being at risk and, in this respect, the panel emphasised the recommendation of the Resolution 1884/2012 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, “Austerity measures – a danger for democracy and social rights”, point 6. Andrej Hunko also observed that a new coherent strategy - addressing austerity properly against inequalities - should be defined together with civil society and the numerous movements which have reacted to the progressive impoverishment of our societies.

→ Regarding austerity, Jón Sæmundur Sigurjónsson presented an application based on social justice principles. In fact, the Icelandic government has implemented some stringent saving measures in its welfare system as in every other area, but austerity in Iceland has been characterized by equity measures as well: raised minimum social security benefits, raised unemployment compensation, lowered taxes for low incomes but raised taxes for people in higher income brackets, increased interest deductions on loans for the housing market and raised minimum wage. The experience of Iceland makes clear that limiting state expenditure wherever possible can be considered good practice to fight this crisis but it is of paramount importance to shield the social welfare systems by all means possible.

### **iii. Costs and Investments**

Multiple voices have highlighted the fact that public institutions are not sufficiently able to evaluate the costs of this progressive impoverishment that we are facing.

→ Jón Sæmundur Sigurjónsson and Jacob Von Uexkull recalled that economic inequality leads to multiple social and health-related difficulties which, in turn, cost greater expenditure for the community as a whole. Unemployment, especially long-term unemployment, leads to serious individual and social consequences, resulting in social isolation, poverty or disability, factors which can become a serious generational problem. We should assess and consider the costs of not taking a different approach. Moreover, according to speakers, we should be able to consider expenditure in social areas as an out-and-out investment. Social spending for basic income for instance, or investments that strengthen the welfare system by reinforcing social cohesion and equality of opportunities, gives rise to healthier and more prosperous societies.

→ In this context, Jacob Von Uexkull cited the quote by J. M. Keynes “Whatever the society can do, it can also finance”. Moreover, the World Future Council publication “Money, Debt, People and Planet” stresses that the only constraints to investments are natural resources and time; budgetary limits are fictitious and a different monetary policy may well serve to enhance investments.

## **2. Concrete Strategies**

### **i. Implementing Basic Income Schemes**

The panellists pointed out that the worrisome trend of increasing inequalities is also due to deficiencies in current means-testing and other programmes. The implementation of a basic income scheme, as an unconditional lifetime right to a small and regular income, would represent a great step forward in the protection of human, social and civil rights and a great tool to enhance social justice. The main argument that has been raised relates to the capacity of a basic income to stand in a mutually reinforcing way with other rights, such as access to public services, the right to work, to participate in public life as an equal before the law, to receive schooling and health care without conditions and to have open access to offices in free competition with others. It follows that ensuring an unconditional right to a basic income is necessary in order to exercise other rights that are formally recognized but not substantially guaranteed.

→ In the context of this specific contingency with alarming unemployment rates, Louise Haagh highlighted that a basic income would ward off exploitative or poorly paid work by strengthening the position of the lower end of the labour market and would help to undercut criminal activities and suicide rates.

→ The plenary also stressed that a basic income needs to be implemented in a context of broad institutional support in order to be fully effective.

→ Both Louise Haagh and Ugo Mattei observed that the implementation of a basic income could allow for a wider approach to the protection of commons; citizens who have secured a minimum level of material well-being can start to actively participate in social activities such as the re-organization of community resources.

### **ii. Introducing legal protection to Commons**

The panellists noticed how a perverse implementation of property rights ends up impeding a complete and just usage of available resources and supports a de facto growth in exclusion and concentration of power. It is

therefore advocated to introduce and foster the concept of commons as a different way to perceive and manage property rights. The commons are based on social inclusion and diffusion of power and represent a strong challenge to the current organization of private property.

→ Ugo Mattei presented to the assembly two examples of commons: one experience started with the movement of artists and precarious workers who occupied about 7 theatres in Italy, while the second example provided described the 'Colorificio Toscano' in Pisa, a factory that was completely dismantled and abandoned, its entire workforce having been fired. In both circumstances, the occupation of a space gave birth to a re-activation of social activities; a *commonification* of theatres and culture which made it possible for workers to make a living.

A society based on the classical notion of ownership, where commons are not recognized, would frame these activities as illegal; conversely a legal protection of the concept of the commons would substantially aid the creation of institutions that are generative, that create value from communing.

A full recognition of commons requires a deep rethinking of access to material resources and agreeing to a bottom-up approach in the creation of publicly relevant activities. In the short-term however, it is recommended to safeguard commons-motivated actions and to consider them for the environment of well-being that they can generate. The intervention of police forces and evictions are to be discouraged, while it has also been suggested to establish a form of judicial control and a full hearing based on the constitutional value of the action. Police may otherwise end up protecting speculation and the exploitative use of property rather than safeguarding shared and promising activities which promote socially responsible behaviours.

### **iii. Promoting a change in fiscal policies**

In line with some of the proposals of the Guide, several experts mentioned the need to re-establish taxation on wealth which, since the 1990's, has been abolished in several European countries despite being a core means for social justice.

→ Since the fight against inequalities is not only a matter of improving redistributive policies (there is also a need for change in the determination of wages in the labour market), Louise Haagh and Jacob Von Uexkull introduced the idea of a maximum ratio in the gap between the highest and lowest earnings of the labour market, to be implemented by law.

→ Moreover, Andrej Hunko, Louise Haagh and Jacob Von Uexkull have solicited the implementation of a financial transaction tax, following the European Commission proposal.

## Plenary 4: Approaching the Future with a New Perspective

The presentations and arguments put forth in this plenary session focussed on (new) ways in which we can tackle the issues of poverty and inequalities for a more just society, as well as questioned why these issues continue to persist and intensify in Europe.

The plenary was moderated by:

- **Gilda Farrell**, Council of Europe

The keynote speakers were as follows:

- **Jean Lambert**, Member of the European Parliament;
- **Luis Jimena Quesada**, President of the European Committee of Social Rights, Council of Europe;
- **Anna Coote**, Head of Social Policy of the New Economics Foundation (NEF);
- **Isabelle Perrin**, Director General of the International Movement ATD Fourth World; and
- **Fintan Farrell**, Director of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN).

The moderator of the session was Gilda Farrell, Head of Unit of the Social Cohesion, Research and Early Warning Division of the Council of Europe.

### **1. Addressing Europe's (lack of) progress in terms of poverty reduction**

All of the speakers agreed that poverty continues to constitute a serious problem in present-day Europe, and is only being intensified by the crisis. While each provided their own conclusions, the general consensus pointed to the failure of European institutions and national governments to implement effective policies that, instead of promoting real change and well-being for all, have so far favoured cuts in social welfare, greater austerity and privatisation.

→ For Jean Lambert, poverty is exacerbated by an “enormous concentration of wealth” and a “lack of access to resources and to basic services”. She spoke about some peoples’ denial in parts of the European Commission concerning the present crisis and growing poverty in Europe.

→ Luis Jimena Quesada highlighted the scepticism and “blind sophistication” of certain legal experts and academics towards the right to protection against poverty. Using the European Social Charter (ESC) as one concrete example, he recalled that legal instruments protecting social rights are already in place but are not being utilised to their full potential.

→ Anna Coote talked about the “paradox of prevention” (why so little has changed despite people’s wish for change) and the “need to find out what the barriers are” as well as how they might be overcome. According to work carried out by NEF, the main obstacle “is the way in which modern capitalism operates and the hegemonic power of neoliberal economics”, which undermine efforts for (creative) local action and innovation.

→ Isabelle Perrin underlined the lack of consideration given to those actually experiencing poverty and how past policies have silenced and prevented them from being “part of the change”. She underlined that “aid or assistance is not a (long-term) solution to poverty”.

→ Fintan Farrell noted how “we are facing an unsustainable form of capitalism in this period” which, unless we challenge, we will not see progress happen. He said that, too often, economic policies are given priority over the social; “the complete disrespect of [social knowledge] has been one of the causes of the crisis”.

### **2. Proposals for real change in Europe, both in the present and future**

Regarding future perspectives, the panel each had their own views on how poverty and inequality could be combated and better tackled. Although the ideas transmitted were varied, all were agreed that new (social) actions need to involve actors at all levels, particularly at the grassroots level, with the provision and support of

new spaces for local projects and democratic participation – based on dignity and well-being for all – to grow and evolve, and to give all persons a voice especially those who might not be heard otherwise.

→ Jean Lambert emphasised that “you cannot create economic recovery packages without considering the social dimension and building it in...we need a Quartet, not a Troika”. She commented on increased discussion and debate surrounding the “commons” and “resources, both physical and immaterial”. She spoke about waste and the desperate need for innovation. In particular she noted the “brain waste” of educated (young) people, the waste of resources like “vacant buildings” as well as “wasting democracy”.

→ Luis Jimena Quesada affirmed that a new perspective must be founded on the respect and indivisibility of all human rights as well as on the acknowledgement that poverty is a violation of one’s rights. He stressed the need to maintain and reinforce existing laws and legal instruments (as opposed to creating new ones) that fight against poverty, particularly Article 30 of the ESC, adding that a different (legal) approach is needed; one which includes the “common efforts and shared responsibilities” of all.

→ Anna Coote underlined the need to always challenge the “ideals and vested interests of institutions and systems that defend the status quo and resist change”. She spoke about a need for new economists trained in “real life, sustainable economics” as opposed to the “dysfunctional, neoclassical” kind that continues to prevail, hindering efforts to fight poverty and inequality. She also mentioned the importance of “intergenerational equity” and the “institutional will to safeguard rights and well-being”.

→ Isabelle Perrin called for “more ambitious policies than those that seek to reduce by 20-50% the numbers living in poverty” and that “refuse to abandon those in need”. She recommended creating conditions that enable people experiencing poverty to make a real contribution “to a future of progress for all”. She said that we are wasting their knowledge and should make better use of it.

→ Fintan Farrell stressed the importance of developing social knowledge, with the contribution of “the reflections of people experiencing poverty and activists with direct experience” as well as recognising the work of social NGOs and social movements. He spoke positively about initiatives aiming to ensure access to an adequate income (but which must not be in competition with projects for basic income) and criticised the EU’s “social investment package” and social strategy to date.



# Workshop 1: How should Human Rights be implemented to protect people from poverty?

By moderator **Diane Roman** from the University François Rabelais, France

The workshop aimed to underline the potential and the main limitations of the human rights framework with respect to the fight against poverty, and to develop concrete proposals to reinforce the current framework of human rights so that it effectively protects against poverty.

Speakers from different countries and backgrounds took part in the panel:

- **Johannes Gerds**, Consultant to the Council of Europe, Germany
- **André Gachet**, FEANTSA, France
- **Renzo Segala**, Avvocato di Strada, Italy
- **Philippe de Craene**, Front Commun SDF and European Union of Homeless, Belgium
- **Michail Beis**, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
- with the kind participation of **Luis Jimena Quesada**, European Committee of Social Rights

During the workshop on Human Rights and Poverty, two main questions were addressed:

## 1. The first question was about the universality of rights. Are human rights really universal?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 states in Article 2 that rights are recognized without distinction based on race, gender, social origin or property. But at the same time, poverty can lead to violations of human rights. E.g. participants stressed that there was a strong link between poverty and discrimination: poverty exposes them to discrimination, and discrimination can lead to poverty. The result is a repeated and continuous violation of human rights. The situation of Roma or homeless people was particularly discussed as major challenges in Europe today.

Similarly, social policies themselves can lead to violations of fundamental rights: when conditions of access are too high, based on the fear of being “too generous”, when they establish categorization and they assign social benefits to beneficiaries in reduced positions, social policies become a "social police".

In this context, the law may provide some answers. As expressly acknowledged by the European Social Charter (art. 30) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Art. 34 para. 3), the protection against poverty is a right. Even if for the moment the case law of the European Court of Human Rights finds difficulties in recognizing a right to be protected against poverty - which is unfortunate - this is a European *acquis*: protection against poverty is a right and the fight against poverty a legal obligation of governments.

## 2. Under these conditions, how the law can be an instrument to fight against poverty?

This is the second issue that was discussed during the workshop. Panelists started with the example of the 2020 European program for national strategies of Roma integration. Even if social policies are not part of the European Union competences, progress can be achieved on the basis of the fight against discrimination. Similarly, the European mechanisms for referral to the European Court of Human Rights or the European Committee of Social Rights, via the collective complaints, make it possible to obtain solutions of principle which can then be used in national contexts.

The speakers also emphasized the need for personal and political mobilization of lawyers and citizens to establish a balance of power: without mobilization, there is no legal change. The conclusion was that the law is an effective tool in the fight against poverty, provided there are good craftsmen to use this tool!

## Workshop 2: How can the voices of people experiencing poverty influence democratic processes?

By moderator **Dirk Berg-Schlosser** from the Philipps University of Marburg, Germany

The aim of this workshop was to explore the relationships between universal human rights and democratic processes on the one hand, and continuing poverty and social inequality on the other. It addressed the central question how this apparent paradox can be resolved. In so doing, it took a view “from below” by bringing together representatives of groups who belong to those most affected by poverty, marginalization and discrimination in various ways, or who work on the issue, namely:

- **Ternura Rojas**, Indignados Movement activist, Spain
- **Jeto Flaviah Titti**, All African Women’s Group, United Kingdom
- **Christel Amiss**, Black Women’s Rape Action Project, United Kingdom
- **Ilona Tomova**, Institute for Population and Human Research, Bulgaria
- **Rune Herlin Kamstrup**, Council of Marginalized People, Denmark
- **Dominique Béchet**, ATD-Quart Monde, France

The central questions addressed during the session were: How can the voices of the poor and affected minorities be made more effective? How can various groups learn from each other in mobilizing their members and gaining outside support? Which forms of collective action are most effective obtaining broader social and political recognition? How can the new social media be used for this purpose? Do we need new more direct forms of political participation and democracy? How can these be reconciled with the existing representative institutions at different levels, the local, the regional, the national and the European ones?

Ternura Rojas of the Indignados Movement in Spain, emphasized the plight of the most affected by the present crisis; Jeto Flaviah Titti of the All African Women’s Group and Cristel Amiss of the Black Women’s Rape Action Project presented their two self-help organizations in the United Kingdom which are concerned with the difficult situation of migrants and the exploitation and abuse of women in particular. Rune Kamstrup from the Council of Marginalized People in Copenhagen showed that there are, even in presumably affluent welfare states like Denmark, severe problems of poverty and marginalization. Ilona Tomova from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences highlighted the discrimination of a specific minority, the Roma, both in her home country and the Czech Republic where her studies showed that even well-meaning European Union programmes may often have dubious and unintended consequences. Finally, Dominique Béchet from ATD Quart Monde in France emphasized the global aspects of the problems discussed beyond the European context.

Altogether, these were very vivid and impressive accounts showing the great diversity of experiences and efforts to organize those most affected in order to give them a voice in articulating and overcoming their plight. In this respect, there were also some signs of hope. It could be shown that some specific local initiatives like special municipal centers in Denmark, or particular persons involved like mayors in some places or individual M.P.s in London had been instrumental in alleviating the situation. Similarly, advocacy groups such as in Spain have become active in support of those most affected by poverty.

Even more important were the organizational efforts of the groups themselves and the networking that can be achieved through the cooperation of groups with similar interests and aims. In this respect, certainly the voices have become louder and in some cases more effective. Not least, this conference itself can be considered to be an important voice and amplifier in this respect. But these voices now must be better *heard* as well. It remains to be seen how they can be accommodated much more effectively in our existing democratic and judicial institutions at all levels.

## Workshop 3: Who pays and who benefits from the crisis

By moderator **Faiza Shaheen** from the New Economics Foundation, United Kingdom

The aim of this workshop was to discuss the impact of the recession and austerity on poverty and inequality; consider the potential longer-term impacts and wider repercussions; highlight the local and national responses to the crisis; and, to look at the proposals and measures that can be adopted to re-establish social justice.

A wide range of countries were represented on the panel – speakers included:

- **Cédric Rio**, Inequality Watch, France
- **Christina Samartzi**, Médecins du Monde, Greece
- **Andrij Waskowycz**, Caritas, Ukraine
- **Renato Carmo**, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Portugal
- **Adeline Otto**, Solidar, Belgium

Each country experienced the crisis in different ways. However there were three dominant features:

- An increase in poverty and inequality across European countries;
- Austerity damaging society and the economy, with the poorest being most adversely affected;
- The welfare system being dismantled with a growth of a ‘blame’ culture.

Overall it was clear that people experiencing poverty and middle-income groups were being most affected by the crisis. Within this group, the young were particularly hard hit, experiencing high levels of unemployment. The rich, however, had experienced much less hardship, and in some countries incomes had actually increased for top earners.

### Policy proposals

There was a lively discussion with the audience on what policies needed to be introduced. Three strands emerged:

1. *The need to end austerity*: While a number of policies would help to tackle poverty and inequality the immediate action that needs to be taken is to end austerity. Portuguese and Greek participants were particularly firm on the need to end public spending cuts – highlighting the destruction and pain it was causing to the poor. Others pointed out that austerity was not, in any case, helping to reduce government debt because it is fundamentally undermining growth. To compliment this policy at least some part of public debt would need to be cancelled.
2. *Progressive tax systems*: Having a more progressive tax system is fundamental to tackling inequality – there was no argument on this. However, there was a discussion on how far tax could go to address (a) inequality (b) paying back public debt. The general feeling was that while important, better and more progressive tax systems are not the panacea.
3. *Tackling systemic issues*: Several members of the audience suggested that ultimately there is a need to tackle inequality and poverty at root. This means addressing the unfair outcome delivered by unfettered markets and the capitalist system. For instance addressing the declining wage share, high wages and bonus payments to executives.
4. *Building social solidarity*: This theme of policy was the hardest to define. For some it was about challenging the rhetoric of the government/media that suggested that some were lazy and unwilling to work and so were undeserving of government assistance. For others it was about adopting a minimum income standard.

Overall there was both clearly a need and demand for action and a considerable number of potential policy solutions – this provided participants with a sense of hope.

## Workshop 4: Basic income and access to financial resources

By moderator **Yannick Vanderborght** from the University Saint-Louis, Belgium

The objective of the workshop was to review the ways in which minimum income schemes have been able to protect against the risk of poverty; to reflect upon the benefits of providing non-conditional access to resources through basic income; to consider proposals to reduce income inequalities, such as salaries, and reflect on modifications of public finance systems in order to make them more progressive.

The panel was composed by:

- **James S. Henry**, Tax Justice Network, United States
- **Bernard Bayot**, Réseau Financement Alternatif and European Financial Inclusion Network, Belgium
- **Roberto Musacchio**, Altramente and former European Parliament member, Italy
- **Jean-Paul Brasseur**, Vivant-Europe, Belgium
- **Kristin Alsos**, Fafo – Institute for Labour and Social Research, Norway
- **Hans Dubois**, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

The only point on which all panelists scored a real agreement was expressed by J.-P. Brasseur: "maintain the current model is to prepare its bankruptcy." In other words, to strengthen social cohesion in Europe it is needed to take a different path. However, there was disagreement at least partially on the sources of the bankruptcy, as well as on solutions. The alternative to the "current model" which was the most widely discussed was the proposal to introduce a **basic income**, unconditional and individual at state level or at European level. It was recalled that this proposal is being discussed all over Europe, and it is also the subject of a "Citizens' Initiative" at the EU level.

### 1. Income guarantee: minimum income, minimum wage and basic income

One point of discussion concerned the relationship between the three forms of guaranteed income: two existing ones (minimum income and minimum wage), the other in project form (basic income). It was stressed that it remains important to defend the minimum income schemes, conditional and targeted, while expressing a double request: countries that have not yet introduced minimum income should firmly commit to do so; that minimum incomes that are conditional should be hoisted up to national poverty lines.

In her speech, K. Alsos drew attention to the importance of the features that guarantee a minimum wage for employees, sometimes through the law, sometimes through collective agreements. The **minimum wage** is an important instrument for the fight against poverty at work, but it also contributes to reducing income inequality. A European standard on minimum wage would be welcomed. It may vary from one State to another, but should for example be set at 60% of the national median salary. This threshold is currently reached by the French minimum wage only. An additional option would be to link the minimum wage and the minimum level of income (by a mechanism ratio). This will enable to link wage negotiations of "insiders" with the condition of the "outsiders", and thus strengthen social cohesion.

Finally, the **basic income** was discussed as constituting the next step, as a form of universal extension of the income guarantee, allowing to break the perverse effects of targeted minimum income. However, the panel also stressed the challenge of linking it with the labour market. On the one hand, participants raised the issue of "incentives to work": how to ensure that people work if they receive such a guarantee? On the other hand, is it possible to assess the risk of downward pressure on wages, made possible by the income transfer? If the answers to these twin challenges exist, it nevertheless shows that the transition must be carefully prepared.

Moreover, the question of a probable "shopping regime" should be considered, at least if the device is not introduced all across Europe: growth of internal migration is probable, putting pressure on countries that have established the basic income.

Several people have pointed out the advantages of basic income. Among them, the idea that it would break with a tradition of exclusive focus on employment in market terms, while the non-market work, which is innovative, autonomous, and especially the "reproductive" domestic work (often done by women) deserves recognition.

## 2. A difficult context

On a theoretical level, the panel stressed that it was necessary to promote a major political reflection on the articulation between these three mechanisms of guaranteed income. However, several speakers noted that contextual challenges make the rapid implementation of a basic income relatively difficult.

Funding for this income will go through an adaptation of taxation. However, as noted by James Henry, the rich countries face the problem of rampant **tax evasion**, which is transformed into global industry and has particularly benefited transnational corporations, backed by banks that received rescue plans financed by public funding. It is important to avoid that the implementation of new policies of social cohesion is based on an increase in labour taxation, by definition less mobile than capital. It is therefore crucial to support the fight against tax havens through coordinated action at European or global level. In addition, some stressed the need to de-tax work, for example by funding basic income by an increase in VAT. Simplification of the tax and transfer system has emerged as a democratic imperative. Currently, its complexity has massively benefited those who have the means to control and take advantage of the situation.

A number of **other issues** were raised. Among them, the debt due to the increasing use of credit, and the concomitant need to encourage micro-savings (B. Bayot); chronic inability of the poorer to have access to basic services (H. Dubois) ; and the concomitant need to establish a right to the provision of services (water, electricity, heating, etc.) (R. Musacchio).

The panel was then crossed by tension between "reformists" and "revolutionaries", the first seeking to strengthen the existing reform at the margin, the latter believing that we must go further and consider a paradigm shift to reconnect with social cohesion. A proposal that may reconcile the two trends is that of, already envisaged in the academic world, establishing a modest **European family allowance**, that is to say, a European Basic Income for children.

# Workshop 5: Common pooling of resources and shared responsibilities

By moderator **Tommaso Fattori**, Movimento Acqua Bene Comune, Italy

Speakers from different countries and backgrounds took part in the panel:

- **Philippe Grainger**, Rushey Green Time Bank, United Kingdom
- **Valérie Navarre**, Les “jardins du béton”, Association Arfog-Lafayette, France
- **Marjan Borsjes**, Noppes, Netherlands
- **Ana Mendez**, Observatorio Metropolitano, Spain
- **Thomas Dawance**, Community Land Trust, Belgium

Our workshop was explicitly focused on the “bright-side” of the present time: a commons renaissance against the total commodification and privatisation of resources and services, which is also a process of exclusion and increasing polarisation of wealth. There are in Europe many initiatives and locally designed solutions emerging at grassroots level that aim to build an inclusive society and to fight against social inequalities and marginalisation. The discussion therefore, is based on concrete, existing experiences of connecting people, of building ties *by sharing* time, skills, goods and assets; for relationships and time are an essential element for well-being and happiness.

## **1. Overview of the 5 concrete projects and existing experiences presented in the workshop: pieces of “the alternative”**

The following examples represent a significant fragment of those which associations, citizens, movements are organising by themselves at the grassroots level.

1) The *Rushey Green Time Bank* is the first time bank in the UK to be based in a healthcare setting, and arose from the notion that increasing contact with other people could help patients who were depressed and isolated. Time banking is a mutual exchange system where the fundamental resource – the “currency” – is time. It involves mutual support and the practice of reciprocity, of “giving and receiving”: everyone has something special to offer others – knowledge, time, skills. It creates inclusion and community; it values individual and social knowledge and abilities which otherwise are not recognised or are underrated.

2) *Les jardins du béton* is an urban gardening experience in Paris, on the rooftops, the terraces or on the ground: common green spaces self-managed and in the midst of concrete and asphalt. The aim of the collective cultivation of land is the construction of social ties and “community”, with particular emphasis on the element of social justice. The aim is to reconstruct relations around the exchange and the sharing of knowledge, and to encourage social and professional integration. The purpose is also to produce together, in the middle of the city, food to share: biological food – “quality” food (also against the principle “poor food for poor people”).

3) *Noppes* is a Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) based in Amsterdam, where the 600 members exchange resources such as talents, services and goods for a symbolic currency, called “noppes” (which means ‘nothing’), in a logic of reciprocity and without interest. The objective is to reduce social and economic poverty and to recover well-being through interpersonal relations, social and economic support from others and going beyond money. The story of Noppes shows that reducing poverty happens in friendly, win-win situations but also that people are capable of coping on their own, of negotiating and being aware of the balance of give and take.

4) The *Observatorio Metropolitano* (OM) is an alternative think-tank from below, based in Madrid: it is an open and inclusive space whose objective is to provide ideas to the social movements, including ideas on commons and the sharing of resources. It is not without reason therefore that the OM is run by people active in various grassroots experiences of commoning and social economy, and who produce a range of materials and publications about commons and the radical democratisation of public institutions, understood as a necessary pre-condition for any authentic relationship of public-common partnership.

5) The *Community Land Trust* (CLT) of Brussels is a collective and anti-speculative or anti-profit participatory model of inclusive access to property: anti-speculative because it neutralises the mechanisms of revenue from land speculation; inclusive because it arose in order to provide access to housing for low-income families in precarious conditions. How does it work, in short? The Trust acquires the land; the low-income family acquires a home constructed on this common land, at a cost that is not the market price (up to 30-40% below). In the future – when they sell the house – they will sell it through a mechanism that prevents any property speculation. This model guarantees a “social use” of the land, according to criteria of inter-generational justice.

In all the experiences presented, we have seen several common elements: cooperative actions with democratic governance aimed at inclusion and at combating exclusion; alternatives to market logic and profit; which aim at the construction of social ties and loyal communities, based on joint responsibility; which introduce self-organised and self-managed solutions to real practical problems; which aim to give fair access to – or construct fair exchange of – material and non-material resources.

## **2. Proposals and ideas for the future**

- Generalising the existing practices of commoning and sharing, i.e. to multiply on a local scale, given that we are speaking about experiences anchored to a specific area: LETS tautologically must be local in order to work; also time-banking builds person-person relations in a determined area and the same is valid for urban gardening or CLTs.

- Engagement with public institutions but those which are “re-democratised”: to disseminate similar practices depends on the good will of public authorities (European, national and local governments) to recognise and value these experiences, to provide *ad hoc* legal instruments and adequate financial means until they can develop themselves.

- Rejection of the institutions that promote privatisation of public patrimony and services, thus destroying the commons. It is necessary therefore to “democratise democracy” and the institutions, which must support the emerging practices of sharing and common pooling of resources, defend commons: forms of public-common partnerships and *ad hoc* public funds. Concerning this matter, criticisms that arose in the workshop included lack of public support and subsidies; complexity of administrative procedures (with regard to community gardening), as well as “no agenda and commitment to fund the infrastructure required to maintain time banks”.

- Shared responsibility of all; and provision of a legal framework for commons: commons and commoning must have constitutional protection at the national and at the supranational level.

# Workshop 6: Avoiding waste and making resources available

By moderator **Maria Jeliaskova**, European Anti-Poverty Network, Bulgaria

The main objectives of this workshop were:

- **To review** the current situation in reference to waste of different resources: human, material, financial and cognitive;
- **To analyze** reasons and mechanisms that lead simultaneously to surpluses and shortages in different fields;
- **To recommend** concrete proposals on how to avoid waste and better utilize and share resources and consider political implications of reorienting policies at local, national and European level towards adequate use of resources;
- **To exchange** and share experiences and ideas for innovative actions to link the fight against poverty and inequalities with avoidance of wasted resources, enhancing common goods & shared responsibilities.

Persons active in the field, namely:

- **Jean Rousseau** from Emmaus International, France
- **James Wallbank** from Access-space and Edgeryders, United Kingdom
- **Andrea Sesta** and **Daniela Galvani** from [im]possible living, Italy
- **Mariani Papanikolau** from Kinisi, Greece
- **Anastasia Rakitz** and **Io Chatzivaryti** from the Pharmacist association and the Social Pharmacy of Kavala, Greece

addressed different examples of waste of resources, such as useless computers & material objects, abandoned houses and buildings, unused medicines and persons made redundant.

## 1. Waste of resources

The paradox of generating superfluous resources, when data on increasing poverty rates could be found everywhere in Europe, questions the common statement that poverty and social exclusion are due to the lack of resources. On the contrary, the data shows that intensive processes of the formation of unused resources are ongoing: jobless people, abandoned land and ghost towns, waste of money going into offshore zones, low level of absorption of funds designed to improve well-being, superfluous regulations, etc. The process spreads over all possible types of resources: human, material, financial, cognitive, etc. and we all witness the consequences.

## 2. Policy Proposals

Following this review, active discussion on the ways of avoiding waste took place with similar recommendations coming from different experiences, countries and localities. Summarizing, the proposals could be classified into 5 types of proposals that should be considered in their interdependence and synergies.

- a) To recognize the paradox that our societies, in a crisis situation, with growing poverty rates and intensive impoverishment of middle class, are simultaneously generating waste and redundancy in all types of resources: material, technological, human, social, cognitive, etc. This means to **identify waste and redundancy**, to locate resources and produce maps in different fields as well as in their interconnectedness. As they say, “to name the problem is half the solution”.
- b) To educate and raise public awareness that producing waste and redundancy is neither a “natural order”, nor a spontaneous process. Rather it is an indicator of misguided decisions at different levels. The **awareness raising** should address the general public, starting with us. However two groups deserve special attention:
  - children and young people – to be socialized with the idea that waste is wrong, especially in a situation where there are people starving and deprived of resources;



- decision-makers at different levels – to become aware that it is among their obligations and responsibilities to take enlightened measures to avoid waste and make resources available;  
Organizations working in the fields of anti-poverty strategies and adequate usage of resources have accumulated experience and could be very useful, including pedagogical and educational activities.

- c) To undertake follow-up activities to address the already generated unused resources by developing **strategies (platforms) to encourage recycling, re-use and sharing of discarded or abandoned resources**. Such strategies would enable simultaneously access to resources by those in need and provide working places. Support for such initiatives depends on provision of public spaces and recognition of their social value. In this regard, social economy and social enterprises, especially if an adequate normative framework is available, would be very useful.
- d) Although follow-up activities are important to respond to the situation we are in, a focus on **preventive actions** should be targeted. Such preventive actions could include:
  - a) Providing stimuli to produce materials that could be re-used and recycled, and promoting the importance of long-term goods;
  - b) Enlightened introduction of taxes on waste, following the “waster pays” principle, and encouraging enterprises to redistribute unsold items free of charge to citizens who lack purchasing power;
  - c) Questioning the current trend of exclusion of huge numbers of people from social exchange and the pressure to label them (unemployed, discouraged and poor people) as liability because they cost money. In any pro-developmental vision people are a resource and asset for development.
- e) To rebuild social rationality by **improving social bonds and social relations**. In the workshop, **de-planning** was also mentioned, in the sense of public authorities adapting to the ground and not acting as an obstacle to grassroots organization’s activities. However, the aim of not wasting resources is a kind of planning as well. Thus the problem with the planning and the demand for de-planning concerns mainly the question “Who plans?” and the opportunities for people to influence decisions that affect them. Top and distant decision-making centers would always produce waste, generate lose-lose situations for all and enhance the current widespread loss (waste) of meaning. Building of adequate bridges between moral values, knowledge (especially social sciences) and decision-making centers is necessary to counteract the growing social irrationality and address the well-being of all. This would help to recover the confidence of people that there are prospects and hopes for themselves, for their children and their significant others.