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Exposé du Secrétaire d'Etat Philippe COURARD pendant
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FIGHTING CHILD POVERTY: A MORAL DUTY AND AN ECONOMIC NECESSITY

In the year 2000 during the Lisbon Council the Heads of State committed to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty by 2010.

At the dawn of the magical year 2010 we must humbly and full of shame admit that we didn't meet the objective at all.

We can't even blame the economic crisis for that ,as even before the crisis of 2008-2009 struck, little to no progress has been made.

This is surely the case for child poverty .

Knowing that poverty levels among children are higher than among the whole population, action is absolutely needed .

I cannot accept a poverty rate of 19% of the children all over Europe. Even if in Belgium we have 17% of child poverty, it remains unacceptable for me that 1 child on 5 runs the risk of poverty.

If we look closer to the Belgian monoparental households 1 on 3 runs the risk and in households where nobody works, the children there have a risk of poverty of more than 70%.

How can we live with that?

Promises have been made for several years but nothing happened.

Every year during the Spring Councils of 2005, of 2006 and 2007 the heads of state solemnly agreed to take measures to reduce child poverty but the number of poor children in Europe didn't diminish.

Even this year during the EPSCO Council, the Member States repeated they wanted to establish strategies to combat and prevent child poverty. They even added that therefore accessible and affordable quality child care was needed.

A lot of study work has been done . There was the Report of the Independent Experts of 2007 , the SPC report on Child Poverty in 2008, the new study demanded by the DG Employment on indicators and the effectiveness on child and family care policies that will be presented in Brussels at the end of this month.

The promises are there, the studies are made , the strategies are clear. Why don't we deliver?

First of all we must leave the rhetoric and the general ideas. It's high time we identify the main challenges in each Member State and dare to work with quantified targets.

How come that in Europe we have no problem to set a quantified target on the level of employment that should be reached by each Member State but apparently we fear to say that we want to reduce the number of poor children in Europe with 50% by 2015?

It's my ambition to set child poverty on the first place in my priorities for the Belgian Presidency.

I want to reach the objectives that already in 2007 were put forward by the Independent Experts:

1. to ensure that children grow up in families with sufficient resources to meet their essential needs (that's why I want to make the discussion on a decent minimum income in Europe the main theme of the Round Table against Poverty and Social Exclusion planned for October 2010)

2. To make sure that children have access to services and opportunities so they can reach their full potential

3. To promote the participation of children in society (that's why we in Belgium are right now involving the poor children themselves in the development of our strategies: they have a voice too and a voice that need to be heard)

If we really want to break the recurring cycle of poverty we really need an early intervention to support children at risk and their families, best delivered at the local level and all this in an integrated matter.

To make it very clear:

- employment, tax and social protection policies must ensure an adequate income
- access to services must be improved (especially childcare, education, health and housing)

The absolute priority to tackle child poverty is to increase access to employment of parents and to prevent educational disadvantage.

Indeed, it is in the early childhood that we find the seed for future exclusion and poverty .

It is poverty that hinders early-on development .Why?

Very young children who are poor are exposed to a lot of risks: they often experience many and intense stressful situations, financial and family instability, limited support, poor housing and nutrition, poor cognitive stimulation etc.. All that childhood stress can lead in later life to more physical and mental illness.

If we really want to help, we need to help early and we need to help on many levels.

If we really want to give every European child the possibility to develop his or her potentialities and gifts, we need to invest in early child development.

This means: an affordable and accessible childcare of great quality, together with parental support. We must no longer see childcare as a help for parents going to work but as an instrument for developing human capital.

Yes indeed, fighting child poverty is not only a moral duty but also an economic necessity: we need every young child to help us support our ageing society.

If we help poor children from the very beginning, we don't need to invest in extra formation later on, we will have less cost in health and we will have more tax revenues and more contributions to our social security system.

My position about the very interesting discussions we have had yesterday concerning the indicators is clear.

As political leaders we don't have to be afraid of indicators. We have to support their development, and more particularly, use them as an instrument to help making a decision.

Indeed, "to know" is "to be able to".

In Belgium, in my department “Social Integration and Fight against Poverty” in the Federal Government, we have created a measuring instrument to reflect the reality of poverty. “The barometer of poverty”.

Composed of some key indicators, in limited numbers (ten), convincing and holistic, this barometer is particularly based on the main indicators of the UE-Silc. We are trying, thanks to this instrument, to give a vision of the size and the diversity of the reality of poverty in our country (income/ spending power, access to housing, access to health services, access to work,...). In other words, access to fundamental rights.

This instrument, that is now updated each year, and therefore allows the “dynamic ”of poverty, gives the Government an instrument of evaluation and a help to make decisions. I, for my part, think that’s a rather original approach.

The next step forward now to take on the European level, is to go for a Recommendation on Child Poverty to prove that this time we really mean it and we are willing to commit.

I know that the staff of the European Commission is going to produce yet another working document on child poverty in 2010, followed by a communication and the launch of a public consultation on EU action to be taken.

As I said before, the time of studies and reflections is over, it's time for action now and I would like to ask you all to support the Belgian presidency to obtain a Recommendation on Child Poverty in 2010.

That's what Europe expects from us

That's what the children expect from us.

That's what the future generations expect from us.

All together we can end child poverty in Europe.

Let's make this appointment with history.

Philippe COURARD

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