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## Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

### Minutes

of the hearing on “Income inequalities are a threat to social cohesion”  
held in Paris on Thursday, 2 June 2016, from 11.30 am to 1 pm

*For the minutes relating to other items on the Committee agenda please refer to PV04.*

**Thursday, 2 June 2016, from 11.30 am to 1 pm**

**Increased income inequalities are a threat to social cohesion**

*Rapporteur: Mr Tuur Elzinga, Netherlands, UEL*

[AS/Soc (2016) 15]

**Ms Deborah Hardoon, Deputy Head of Research Oxfam GB, Oxford (United Kingdom)**

**Ms Hardoon** first introduced the activities of Oxfam, a confederation of NGOs working in more than 90 countries around the world to fight poverty and injustice. During the last few years, Oxfam had been actively campaigning against rising economic inequality. In many countries, people at the bottom of the income ladder faced unjust inequality of opportunities, hindered access to basic rights and impaired social mobility, whilst suffering from various social, economic, political and environmental consequences. Not only Oxfam, but also the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the OECD and other organisations had sounded the alarm regarding current trends and the worrying consequences of income inequalities, stating that the latter represented the number one issue of our time.

**Ms Hardoon** presented a recent report by OXFAM on “An economy for the 1%”, which analysed the main drivers of inequality. The study revealed a positive story of growth at the aggregate level, meaning that the world was becoming richer. However, according to World Bank estimates, around 10% of the global population still lived in extreme poverty; this group had seen a negligible increase in income over the last 30 years, whereas, the biggest share of the increase in income had been attributed to the richest 10%.

The picture was even more extreme in the case of wealth distribution: the richest 1% possessed more wealth than the other 99% combined; 62 billionaires had the same wealth as the bottom half of the planet. Whilst the richest 1% had seen their wealth growth exceed 50% of the total wealth stock, the wealth of the bottom 50% had been declining in real terms since 2010.

Additionally, the study showed a decline in the share of income attributed to labour all over the world, whereas the return on capital was growing. This trend corresponded to Thomas Piketty’s main findings about the rate of return on capital, which was greater than the growth rate of the economy and confirmed that owners of capital, landlords and investors were getting an increasing “share of the pie” compared to ordinary workers. Indeed, certain asset owners could make up to 5 million dollars a day just on interest payments.

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<sup>1</sup> Minutes approved and declassified by the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development at its meeting on 21 September 2016 in Paris.

By the same token, CEOs and other top earners were prospering at the expense of employees: they were often seeing their income grow whilst lower wages stagnated.

Amongst the most flagrant examples of unjust economic dynamics leading to the unfair allocation of rewards (disconnected from social contributions or value adding activities), **Ms Hardoon** mentioned the active lobbying of pharmaceutical companies against access to medicines, the increasing financing of heavy lobbying by the financial sector, and tax dodging by individuals and companies (example of the “Panama papers”).

In order to make a transition from exclusive economies to inclusion and fairness, **Ms Hardoon** suggested putting in place the following policies:

- Share the tax burden fairly to level the playing field and invest in inequality-reducing public services, as well as agree on a global approach to end the era of tax havens;
- Pay workers a living wage, close the gap with executive rewards and share rewards more fairly through the supply chain;
- Promote women’s economic equality and women’s rights and end all forms of discrimination against marginalised groups;
- Keep the influence of powerful elites in check;
- Change the global system for Research and Development and the pricing of medicines so that everyone has access to appropriate and affordable medicines.

**Ms Céline Thévenot, Policy Analyst in social affairs (Income Distribution and Poverty Section), Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)**

**Ms Thévenot** started her presentation referring to a number of OECD publications, namely “Growing Unequal?” (2008), “Divided we Stand” (2011) and “In it together: Why less inequality benefits all” (2015), in which experts describe the economic consequences of rising inequalities. She explained that the level of inequalities was measured by the Gini coefficient: from 0 for perfectly equal societies, to 1 for absolutely unequal ones. Within this range, 0,25 was generally considered acceptable, while 0,35-0,40 represented critical levels. The lowest level of inequalities was registered in Nordic countries and some Eastern European countries (around 0,25), whereas the USA, Turkey and Mexico demonstrated extremely high levels of inequality. France and Germany were in the middle of the statistical chart.

The expert pointed to several important trends related to inequalities. Firstly, on average inequalities had increased in the OECD countries since the mid-80s. For instance, 30 years ago Germany was more equal than France, and now the countries had the same Gini coefficient. A similar rise could be witnessed in Sweden, Finland and Denmark – countries which used to be considered equal. Secondly, inequalities did not increase at the same pace; there were certain episodes, which suggested that the rise could be linked to policy reforms or to economic changes. Thirdly, inequality had already been on the rise before the crisis, which proved that it was a long-term trend.

**Ms Thévenot** summarised the main messages of the OECD report “In it together: Why less inequality benefits all”:

- *Inequality has reached record highs in most OECD countries.*
- *It is not only about poverty, it is about the bottom 40%.* Inequality was not an issue for the very bottom of income distribution only, it concerned a significant part of the population.
- *The rise in non-standard work contributed to higher inequality.* Non-standard work was defined as any type of work that was not fixed-term, full-time work, and encompassed temporary work, part-time work and self-employment. The presence of these forms of employment had significantly increased in the OECD countries during the past 30 years. People involved in non-standard employment generally had lower wages, poorer access to education and training, and weaker social protection. In many countries, this resulted in an unemployment trap for non-standard

workers with reduced social mobility, which contributed to increased polarisation of the labour market.

- *High wealth concentration limits investment opportunities.* Wealth concentration was significant and more important than income concentration: in OECD countries, 10% of the population owned 50% of the wealth, whilst the bottom 40% owned only 3%.
- *More women in the workforce contribute to the decrease of household income inequality.* The increased participation of women in the labour market had contributed to mitigating the increase in inequalities over the past 2-3 decades. It was estimated that if women had kept the same participation level as 30 years ago, the inequalities would have been 2 points higher.
- *Rising inequality drags down economic growth in the long-term.* The rise of income inequality by 1 Gini point lowers the GDP per capita growth rate by -0.12 percentage points per year. In unequal societies there was less access for those at the bottom to higher education or to social mobility, which resulted in increasing the inequality for future generations: children with lower parental education background tended to perform less well in terms of education, years of schooling, literacy, numeracy and future performance on the labour market.

As far as the redistribution policies were concerned, the study showed that redistribution through taxes and transfers did not necessarily lead to bad growth outcomes. There was no clear impact of redistribution on economic growth.

In conclusion, the expert recommended 4 policy measures to tackle high inequality and promote social cohesion:

- Promote employment and good-quality jobs;
- Foster women's participation in economic life;
- Strengthen quality education and skills development;
- Improve the design of tax and benefit systems for a more efficient redistribution.

Forthcoming projects of the OECD would focus on intergenerational social mobility and income mobility. More information could be found on the OECD website [www.oecd.org/social/inequality-and-poverty.htm](http://www.oecd.org/social/inequality-and-poverty.htm).

### **Debate**

**Mr Jónasson** thanked the experts for launching this important discussion and asked for more detailed information on the term of non-standard work.

**Ms De Sutter** enquired about the Gini coefficient which seemed to be more correlated with the feeling of the well-being of people rather than with a country's wealth. She asked about the relation between inequality and more or less stable and democratic political systems. Was there less inequality in countries where human rights were most respected? Was it a result or a cause?

**Mr Grin** underlined the importance of vocational training in tackling income inequalities. He drew attention to the need to take into account the volatility of the financial markets when analysing capital gains.

**Ms Magradze** had always believed that having a great number of rich people was positive for society, however now it seemed that the high concentration of wealth was jeopardising social stability. She then wondered whether the existence of wealthy people was good for a country.

**Mr Schennach** said that during the economic downturn in Europe, rich people were multiplying their wealth, whereas simple workers had to 'pay' for the financial crisis. He enquired about the data available on the young generation, specifying that many 20-30 year-old people with high education were in a precarious situation, only accessing unstable jobs.

**Ms Günay** drew the attention of the rapporteur to the fact that the report was focusing mostly on the economic side of the subject, whilst addressing cultural, social, ethical, environmental, human capital and social protection dimensions was paramount to ensuring inclusive growth.

**Mr EBI** did not agree that part-time work could represent a serious problem, since many people were keen on having such work, willingly accepting the part-time schedule. In his view, it was important to distinguish between flexible and atypical work.

**Mr Kiral** noted that redistribution policies would discourage and demotivate people from becoming successful, and it was therefore important to focus, instead, on empowering municipalities and local authorities where 80% of the global population resided. Following his meeting with the Mayor of Athens, **Mr Kiral** underlined the importance of improving links between local authorities, national governments and supranational levels. He fully supported the idea of vocational training, however, the social benefit system should be reviewed at the same time, with special attention to the proper verification procedures in use. He stressed the importance of improving legislation in order to make wealthy people socially responsible, referring to examples of French companies investing in infrastructure and schools, in different countries where they operated.

**Mme Cimbro** pointed to the link between gender equality and economic growth. Women's income contribution was important for many households, but adequate childcare needed to be provided to reconcile family life and work.

**Lord Foulkes** underlined the importance of establishing control over those financial managers who were awarding themselves generously, regardless of the economic performance of their companies and their added value. He referred to the "Panama Papers" case which had revealed the ultimate lack of transparency and showed how many rich people secretly "stashed" their wealth in tax havens. Countries like India, China or Russia, which in the past had not witnessed the existence of very wealthy people, were now obviously facing considerable inequality problems and subsequent tensions. Rich people needed to justify the acquisition of their wealth.

Concerning the question of inequalities and people's sense of well-being, **Ms Hardoon** explained that there was a lot of evidence of existing links. For instance, in the richest areas of Glasgow, people were expected to live 15 years longer than those in the poorest. At the same time, although in the poorest areas of Glasgow, people had a decent income which was significantly higher than in India, they were still expected to live shorter lives than the poor in India. The relative gap between rich and poor mattered a lot, even more than the absolute income, as relative inequality drove people into despair, drug and alcohol abuse.

The expert asserted that inequality and political rights were very interrelated. Those at the top of the income ladder had impunity in many cases, getting away with avoiding judicial sanctions. Those at the bottom quite often did not know their rights, and did not have access to representation in court.

Regarding the social, cultural and ethical aspects of inequalities, **Ms Hardoon** referred to data showing that the richest 10% of people were producing more than 50% of global carbon emissions, thus contributing to a number of disastrous environmental consequences. It was also important to have a genuine meritocracy and equal opportunities for all, to ensure that the best jobs were not captured by those with power and influence.

It was indeed, not the flexible work, but the work in precarious conditions which represented the main issue. With temporary and "zero hours" contracts, workers were not certain about their future and about their financial stability. There was no evidence that redistribution discouraged entrepreneurs from doing business.

Replying to the questions put to her, **Ms Thévenot** said that the OECD study defined non-standard work as any form of employment which was not a full time or permanent contract: temporary, part-time work and self-employment, specifying that this definition had no relation to trade unions. These categories were not necessarily negative forms of employment. Policy makers should find the most appropriate policy tools to also support non-standard forms of employment, to ensure that workers were treated on an equal

footing with other workers in more stable forms of employment. Some ideas could be found in the OECD study on “Digitalization and the new forms of employment”. The links between well-being and inequality depended on each country and the way in which inequalities were accepted. The link between human rights and inequalities was evident: children living in more unequal countries clearly lacked equal opportunities whilst children with a high parental education background generally did better in life. Life-long learning and professional training were among the key policies aiming at reducing inequalities.

As for the “Panama Papers”, **Ms Thévenot** described the OECD project “Base erosion and profit shifting” aimed at promoting more transparency, and addressed the tax avoidance strategies that exploit gaps and mismatches in tax rules. As far as the role of women in mitigating inequalities was concerned, the expert explained that it was not a simple correlation. Sometimes an increased participation of women in the labour market tended to reinforce inequalities, increasing the gap between poor and wealthy families. Very often, one-earner households were extremely fragile, whereas the presence of two earners in a family would help to smooth economic shocks. It was important to provide policy tools to empower women to participate in the labour market, in particular, good quality and easily accessible child-care services or tax incentives.

**List of decisions**

**The Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development**, meeting in Paris on 2 June 2016, with first Ms Sílvia Eloïsa Bonet (Andorra, SOC), First Vice-Chairperson, and then Mr Serhii Kiral (Ukraine, EC), Chairperson of the Sub-Committee on Environment and Energy, in the Chair, as regards:

- ***Increased income inequalities are a threat to social cohesion*** (*Rapporteur: Mr Tuur Elzinga, Netherlands, UEL*): held an exchange of views with:
  - Ms Deborah Hardoon, Deputy Head of Research Oxfam GB, Oxford (United Kingdom), and
  - Ms Céline Thévenot, Policy Analyst in social affairs (Income distribution and Poverty Section), Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

**Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development**  
**Commission des questions sociales, de la santé et du développement durable**

**List of presence / Liste de présence**

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|                      |  |                 |
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| Ms Stella KYRIAKIDES |  | Cyprus / Chypre |
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| Ms Vasiliki KATRIVANOU        |  | Greece / Grèce     |
| Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE         |  | Romania / Roumanie |

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| 81. Lord George <b>FOULKES</b> | United Kingdom / <i>Royaume-Uni</i> | Baroness Doreen MASSEY       |

### **SPECIAL GUESTS / INVITES SPECIAUX**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Ms / <i>Mme</i> Deborah HARDOON.....    | Deputy Head of Research Oxfam GB, Oxford (United Kingdom)<br>..... <i>Directrice adjointe de la recherche, Oxfam GB, Oxford (Royaume-Uni)</i>   |
| Ms / <i>Mme</i> Katherine HILL.....     | Policy Manager, Equality and Human Rights (Age UK)<br>..... <i>Directrice politique, Egalité des sexes et Droits humains, Age UK</i>  |
| Mr / <i>M.</i> Leocadio RODRIGUEZ ..... | Coordinator of the European Joint Action on the prevention of frailty in the elderly<br>.....and Head of Department of Geriatric Medicine of Madrid's Getafe University Hospital<br>..... <i>Coordonnateur de l'Action commune européenne sur la prévention</i><br>..... <i>de la perte d'autonomie des personnes âgées,</i><br>..... <i>Directeur du Département de Médecine gériatrique, Hôpital Universitaire de Getafe Madrid</i>   |
| Ms / <i>Mme</i> Céline THÉVENOT .....   | Policy Analyst in Social Affairs (Income distribution and Poverty Section),<br>..... Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs,<br>..... the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)<br>..... <i>Analyste des politiques des politiques sociales (Section Distribution des revenus et pauvreté),</i><br>..... <i>Direction de l'Emploi, du Travail et des Affaires sociales,</i><br>..... <i>Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Économiques (OCDE)</i> |

### **PARTNERS FOR DEMOCRACY / PARTENAIRES POUR LA DEMOCRATIE**

|                                  |                             |
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| Mr / <i>M.</i> Arif HASSAN ..... | Morocco / <i>Maroc</i>      |
| Mr / <i>M.</i> Qais KHADER ..... | Palestine/ <i>Palestine</i> |

### **SECRETARIAT OF DELEGATION OR OF POLITICAL GROUP / SECRETARIAT DE DELEGATION OU DE GROUPE POLITIQUE**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Ms / <i>Mme</i> Francesca ARBOGAST ..... | Secretary of the Socialist Group / <i>Secrétaire du Groupe Socialiste</i> |
| Ms / <i>Mme</i> Sonja LANGENHAECK .....  | Belgium / <i>Belgique</i>   |
| Mr / <i>M.</i> Razvan TANASE .....       | Romania / <i>Roumanie</i>   |
| Ms / <i>Mme</i> Sevda VALJEVIC .....     | Bosnia and Herzegovina / <i>Bosnie Herzégovine</i>                        |

### **ALSO PRESENT / EGALEMENT PRESENTS**

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Mr / <i>M.</i> Thierry MATHIEU.....  | Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Democracy,<br>..... Social Cohesion and Global Challenges /<br>..... <i>Vice-Président de la Commission Démocratie Cohésion sociale et Enjeux Mondiaux</i> |
| Mr / <i>M.</i> Nicola SPERANZA ..... | Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE) /<br>..... <i>Fédération des Associations Familiales Catholiques en Europe (FAFCE)</i>   |

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**PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY / ASSEMBLÉE PARLEMENTAIRE**

**NAME / NOM**

Mr / M. Mario MARTINS ..... Director General / *Directeur Général*

Ms / M<sup>me</sup> Micaela CATALANO ..... Head of the Communication Division /  
..... *Chef de la division de communication*

**Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development / *Commission des questions sociales, de la santé et du développement durable***

**NAME / NOM**

Ms / M<sup>me</sup> Tanja KLEINSORGE ..... Head of the Secretariat / *Chef du Secrétariat*

Ms / M<sup>me</sup> Maren LAMBRECHT-FEIGL..... Secretary to the Committee / *Secrétaire de la commission*

Mr / M. Raul MALLAINA GARCIA ..... Co-Secretary to the Committee / *Co-Secrétaire de la commission*

Ms / M<sup>me</sup> Alina BELIAEVA ..... Co-Secretary to the Committee / *Co-Secrétaire de la commission*

Ms / M<sup>me</sup> Fatima NOUICER ..... Assistant / *Assistante*