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Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

Minutes

Public hearing on “Eradicating extreme child poverty in Europe: an international obligation and a moral duty”, held by videoconference, on Thursday, 17 June 2021

In the framework of the report currently in preparation on “Eradicating extreme child poverty in Europe: an international obligation and a moral duty” by **Mr Pierre-Alain Fridez** (Switzerland, SOC), the Committee held a public hearing with the participation of:

- **Mr Bjørn Berge**, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe
- **Mr Gerard Quinn**, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities
- **Mr Jacques Vandenschrik**, President of the European Food Banks Federation (FEBA)
- **Mr Zachary Parolin**, Senior Fellow, Center on Poverty and Social Policy, Columbia University and Assistant Professor, Bocconi University
- **Ms Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová**, (Slovak Republic, Renew Europe), Chairperson of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs of the European Parliament

Mr John Howell, First Vice-Chairperson, introduced the Deputy Secretary General and the invited experts and opened the hearing.

Mr Fridez gave a brief outline of his preliminary draft report and urged the member States to reverse the increase of extreme child poverty in Europe.

Almost 385 million children in the world (i.e., 1 child in 5) lived in extreme poverty. This phenomenon existed in Europe as well, with 22 million children living in poverty. Although ambitious policies and objectives had been adopted in the past, their goals had never been achieved. European countries would not meet their commitment to end extreme poverty corresponding to sustainable development goal 1.2. The pandemic had worsened the situation on top of this initial failure.

Mr Fridez addressed the main reasons for child poverty. First and foremost, child poverty was a direct consequence of family poverty. Child poverty also affected children in specific situations like migrants and unaccompanied minors. These children feared for their future and were desperate.

He underlined that children in poverty were particularly vulnerable because they didn't have access to elementary hygiene in the broadest sense. They often did not live in a healthy environment, could not practice sport, did not eat a balanced diet of healthy food, did not live in decent housing where they feel safe and can do their homework carefully, did not receive quality education and enjoy quality healthcare, including dental care. The inequalities stemming from these elements also jeopardised their mental health. They were deprived of the life in security with their loved ones that every child deserves.

The Committee then **held** a public hearing.

The Deputy Secretary General, Mr Berge, expressed his support for the Committee's work on child poverty. He added that to combat this breach of human rights, political will was essential and hard choices had to be made. Plenty of room for progress existed, because one child living in poverty was one child too many.

The European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter were the main frameworks to combat child poverty. Article 30 of the revised Social Charter stipulated the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion. Even if Europe was a rich continent, the number of children living in poverty had remained stable for many years and the Covid-19 pandemic had complicated the situation. Budgetary cuts to overcome

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the consequences of the pandemic had hit the poor the hardest. Each international organisation with a mandate including the fight against poverty and the protection of human rights had an obligation to guide national governments in how to respond. The Council of Europe had an important role to play. It was incumbent on member States to enhance equality in the most different circumstances. Compliance with Article 30 of the Revised European Social Charter would help the State parties to combat poverty. Unfortunately, there was a gap between the commitments entered into by states and their exercise by individuals. The Social Charter should be more largely ratified, and its monitoring system should be made more effective.

Different bodies within the Council of Europe were working to reduce child poverty. For instance, the Steering Committee on the Rights of the Child (CDENF) features child poverty as a main area of work in the current and in the upcoming Strategies. This was an issue addressed across the whole organisation. The Committee on Social Affairs of the Parliamentary Assembly had a pivotal role to play in mobilising the Committee of Ministers and Member States. There was a moral obligation to act. The entire Council of Europe should pull in the same direction because child poverty was a disgrace. Finally, he spoke in favour of the need for collective efforts.

Mr Vandenschrik thanked the Rapporteur and the Committee for the invitation to speak during this meeting and quoted principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights of the European Union, which stipulated that every child has a right to protection against poverty and that children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities. This principle was at the core of the European Food Banks Federation, whose mission is to fight poverty and food waste.

The European Food Banks Federation collected healthy, edible food that would otherwise end up as wasted food from producers and distribution chains. The food was then sorted, stored, and redistributed by a network of affiliated charities – such as community charities, soup kitchens, shelters, or other organisations helping those in need.

The Covid-19 pandemic had caused a sudden food emergency, whose primary victims were children. There was an increase of 34,7 % of people in need of food aid in Europe. The European Food Banks Federation's members had adapted their activities and had begun collecting food from airlines, restaurant chains and canteens. The economic and social consequences of the pandemic had become more and more noticeable. There was a continuous progression of poverty in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. 60% of people who fell into poverty in 2020 were families with children, who had been relying on school meals before the closing of their schools. In addition, the pandemic had reduced access to healthy and appropriate food for children. The percentage of children living in households unable to offer at least one meal a day containing meat, chicken or fish was 21.4% in Hungary and 40% in Bulgaria.

The members of the European Food Banks Federation had turned the vicious circle of wasted food into a virtuous circle for the sake of the good use of food. They had redistributed 860,000 tonnes of foodstuffs to 12.8 million of the poorest people through 48,126 charities. They relied on the dedication of 37,016 workers (85% of whom were volunteers). In 2020, their members had redistributed 12% more food to 34.7% more beneficiaries compared to 2019. In 2020, they had helped 1,161,091 children.

Child poverty was still a serious problem in the European Union, because one fourth of children were at risk of poverty and social exclusion. In 2020, that number had increased due to the sanitary crisis. Child poverty was a Pan-European problem that affected all countries in Europe. In this context, States were invited to contribute financially to prevent children from living in destitution. The new EU Mechanism of the Child Guarantee would contribute to this objective.

The activity of the Food Banks had a structural impact with significant benefits for society in general, for the environment, for the economy, and for the resilience of the food chain. It provided a multitude of assistance programmes to individuals, not only through food assistance but with the integration of this assistance into various programs based on local needs and run by local charities. By working with these charities, the Food Bank could reach people who were often invisible, such as children.

In conclusion, he said that “no child should go to bed or school hungry”. Under no circumstances should children be blamed for a lack of food. The Covid-19 crisis had increased the number of people living in poverty. This could be turned around with awareness raising and with the implementation of poverty prevention programmes.

Mr Parolin presented his recent research on the expected results of Covid-19 Acts in the US to halt extreme poverty. He started with a presentation on child poverty rates in the United States, examining three main periods – the first, the pre-pandemic, when child poverty rates in the United States were relatively higher compared to the European Union Member States; the second, during the pandemic, when the administration had launched a massive policy response, which largely stopped the increase of poverty and finally, the near future, when the recent Biden reforms would bear fruit. This policy had the potential to cut child poverty in half.

The reforms were established on a different perception of poverty which was the income necessary to live in a specifically defined area. People who did not dispose of this amount of money were considered to be under the poverty threshold. The poverty threshold for a family of four in an average-cost city like Phoenix was around 28,000 USD per year.

During the pandemic, the United States had introduced a massive policy response, which had largely prevented an increase in poverty. The CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act) had introduced expanded unemployment benefits, which included Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (PUC) of 600 USD per week, Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) and Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC), in addition to stimulus checks. The project had shown that without these policy responses child poverty rates would have increased.

Moreover, the expanded Child Tax Credit would go into effect in July 2021. It had the potential to cut child poverty in half. The fully refundable Child Tax Credit of 3000 USD per month was part of the American Rescue Plan, which had been adopted in March 2021.

Ms Nicholsonová thanked the rapporteur and the Committee for the invitation to speak on the topic of eradicating child poverty in Europe. It constituted a major problem. The European Child Guarantee had been crucial for the European Parliament since 2015. Members of the Parliament were convinced that every child should be guaranteed access to free healthcare, education and childcare, decent housing, and adequate nutrition. Regrettably, in the European Union one in five children or 18 million children lived in poverty.

On 14 June 2021, the Council of the European Union had adopted a recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee. Its main aim was to prevent and combat the social exclusion of children by guaranteeing access to a set of key services by children in need. It was also meant to combat child poverty and foster equal opportunities. In addition, this recommendation contained a number of propositions for the member States, to address, for instance, social exclusion of children and participation in education and care; to provide at least one healthy meal each school day and educational materials, including digital educational tools, books, uniforms, etc.; to ensure equal and inclusive access to school-based activities; to implement accessible health promotion and disease prevention; to guarantee priority and timely access to social housing or housing assistance.

The pandemic had forced some parents to make huge sacrifices, because many of them had lost their jobs and fallen into precarity, with devastating consequences for their children. Moreover, the limited access to education had had severe, long-lasting effects for children in poverty. The pandemic should not diminish the life prospects of an entire generation – children should have the opportunity to grow, develop and thrive. Member States should break the existing intergenerational cycle of poverty that the pandemic had only exacerbated.

To break the cycle of poverty, Member States should take urgent action and translate their commitments into specific measures. National action plans should put child welfare at the heart of employment, social, housing and health policies. In additions, internet connection in schools and access to digital devices for all children were required to prevent school dropout.

The European Parliament had legislated on financial instruments to support policies and actions to safeguard children's well-being. An unprecedented amount of resources would be available to Member States. In addition, for the Child Guarantee to be successful, it was crucial that it be regularly monitored. The 27 Member States should nominate a national Child Guarantee co-ordinator and submit to the Commission, within nine months of the adoption of the recommendation, an action plan covering the period until 2030 to implement this recommendation.

In conclusion, everyone needed to come together and join forces to end child poverty. Children's voices had to be heard when the Child Guarantee was put into practice. The measures to end child poverty were not a cost, but an investment in the future of European society as whole.

Ms Khomenko thanked the rapporteur and referred to the situation of women and different measures to combat household poverty, like universal basic income, but also emergency needs for internally displaced persons.

Ms Hetto-Gaasch underlined that wasted food was sometimes a consequence of excessively complex regulation.

Mr Fridez thanked all the participants and expressed his support for the efforts of the European Union to find the financial means to guarantee the welfare of children.

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

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