

Vladimír ŠPIDLA

Member of the European Commission responsible for Employment,
Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities

Key events for the European Year 2010

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Launch of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social
Exclusion

Madrid, 21 January 2010

President Barroso, Prime Minister Zapatero,

Minister *[Mr GARCIA-HERRERA]*,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great emotion that I speak to you here today as the Commissioner responsible for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities to launch the European Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

It was at the beginning of my mandate, in the Social Agenda 2005-2010, that the Commission proposed that 2010 should be the time for a large-scale public debate on poverty and social exclusion in Europe. And that it should also be the time for a renewed commitment on the part of the European Union in order to ensure that these scourges are fought more effectively.

I know that for many of you preparation already started months ago. I am referring to all those who, working in the public administrations, in non-governmental organisations or with the social partners, have supported the Commission's proposal.

I also know that expectations for this European Year are high. Since 2000, the European Union, which today has 27 Member States, has made significant progress:

For the last ten years, the Member States' work has been underpinned by a shared objective: ensuring that everyone has access to rights, resources and services which are necessary for full participation in social and economic life;

Thanks to the European Strategy for Social Protection and Social Inclusion, the Member States have set up strategic action plans;

Mutual learning between countries and the various types of players has become a fact of life thanks to the development of joint indicators and many initiatives and projects.

But poverty and social exclusion remain one of the harsh realities of our societies. In the current crisis, poverty and exclusion are affecting the daily lives of an increasing number of Europeans.

That is why, speaking to you today, I would like to reiterate the spirit of solidarity and responsibility which drives us on.

During this European Year 2010, we want:

- **to recognise the fundamental right of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to live in dignity and take an active part in society;**
- **to foster commitment by all public and private players.**

The responsibility of the public authorities, through social protection systems and the body of public policies, is fundamental. But we also know that it is the very way in which our economies and societies work that leaves some of our fellow citizens by the wayside. We will therefore only manage to reduce poverty and exclusion on a long-term basis if we make structural changes in both organisations and people's behaviour.

- we also want to foster a more cohesive society.

Social justice is one of the key concerns of Europeans. It is necessary to convince them that it is possible to reduce poverty and social exclusion. Nothing is preordained! The promise of a better life for all, starting with the most vulnerable, must be at the heart of the European political project.

Combating poverty is not only a question of generosity. It is not only an ethical challenge. It is in the interest of our societies. To shape the future, we need to foster innovation, dynamism and risk-taking. It will be easier for everyone to share this view if they know that, in times of hardship, they will not be abandoned and that accidents of life will not exclude them from society forever.

- lastly, we want to renew the political pledge of the European Union and its Member States to act decisively against poverty and for the social inclusion of everyone.

That is why, this year, we want to say: "Stop poverty now!".

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Occasionally, some people feel that a European Year is only organised at European level in Brussels. This is not the view upheld by the Commission.

The success of the European Year 2010 will be measured, inter alia, by our ability to bring it to the foreground throughout Europe. Every day, Europeans must hear talk of 2010 as the Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Therefore, our ability to bring the European Year to the public sphere and the media is essential. We will do this through your mobilisation, through the communication tools that we have created, through the hundreds of projects that have already been set up, and through strategic and strong partnerships, including between players who do not usually work together.

The European Year 2010 must afford policymakers, economic players, the cultural world and the media the opportunity to hold a dialogue. I would like to see ministries, local authorities and NGOs working together. I know that you have started to do this and I welcome it.

Nor will the European Year be the only direct contribution of the European Union to combating poverty and exclusion in 2010. At least 10 million people who are socially excluded receive support from the European Social Fund every year. The Plan for food aid for the poorest people has a budget of 500 million euros this year, which will be used to help at least 13 million people.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many events will take place this year, some organised by participating countries and others by the Commission. Allow me to briefly outline the main cornerstones of these.

At European level, we will have the first "European Week against Poverty and Exclusion" in May 2010, with awareness-raising activities aimed at bringing the issue of poverty to European televisions and radios.

The second "European Week against Poverty and Exclusion" will be in October. There will be the round table on poverty and the International Day against Poverty with activities focusing on Community financing and the relationship between financing and training and art.

Finally, the Year will be closed with a conference in Brussels on 17 December and a political declaration supported by the Heads of State and Government.

I am not going to run through the long list of tools available to us to publicise the European Year. You can find more information on the European Year website, which I will have the pleasure of officially launching today in twenty-three languages.

Allow me to give you a little more information:

We are lucky enough to be able to count on an advisory committee comprised of representatives from the participating countries with regard to the monitoring and execution of the activities for the European Year.

The Commission has set up a group of stakeholders with 80 participants from NGOs, social partners, foundations, international organisations, local and regional authorities and think-tanks.

The Commission is also pleased that it can rely on support from the network of European and national journalists specialised in social issues.

I trust that with your commitment and the creativity of our numerous partners we will find the means to mobilise and convince.

We must nurture hope and send a message of solidarity to all those who are experiencing hardship;

We must actively fight stereotypes that are at the heart of discrimination;

We must give a voice to people living in poverty and listen to them carefully.

Because those concerned cannot simply be the subject of our policies. They must empower themselves economically and socially.

This European Year also seeks to promote local solidarity because not everything is a question of social benefits or the responsibility of professionals. Nothing can replace helping one another, kindness, understanding and generosity. Let us not set public solidarity against private solidarity, for they are complementary. This is the main condition for ensuring that poverty is not accompanied by exclusion.

I would like to pay tribute to all the anonymous people who on a daily basis, either as part of their jobs or volunteer work, help the poorest.

I would like to remind you all that the first stereotype that exacerbates poverty is perhaps that of representing the poor as a group cut off from the rest of society.

If we manage to make headway when it comes to challenging certain prejudices, if we manage to strengthen the different types of solidarity, then our work will be useful. Let us not be afraid of being creative and of innovating. Let's dare to shake up preconceptions! Let's dare to reassess ourselves and work with new and unlikely partners!

We hope that at the end of this European Year the European Union and the participating countries will reiterate their determination to combat poverty and exclusion more effectively.

I know that the Belgian Presidency has already started to work along these lines and I can assure you that the European Commission will support the final declaration, which must be an ambitious one. The objective of pursuing poverty reduction in Europe must clearly be included in it. Many European policies, such as training, regional policy and new technologies, will have to go hand in hand with this objective.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that 2010 will let us speak openly to the hearts and minds of Europeans. I hope that at the end of it, the roles and responsibilities of each of the players is strengthened.

Poverty and exclusion are a reality, but it is possible to imagine a better Europe for all.

I'll let you watch this video now, which clearly shows that, when you are living in poverty, not only days but also nights are often spent "counting the pennies".