

Poverty in Europe :
Invisible borders -
a barrier to inclusion



■ Introduction

■ Caritas Europa Poverty Papers 2010

This paper “Invisible borders - a barrier to inclusion” is part of a series of Poverty Papers Caritas Europa started to edit in the year 2010, European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. The series consist of a core paper called [“Poverty among us”](#) (also in Bulgarian, Czech, German, Spanish, French, Croatian, Italian, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese and Romanian, a printed version exists too) and of a number of related papers, like this one. These related papers are downloadable on the Internet. There is also a “How to use” paper called [“Poverty in Europe: Background Information and Methods for Youth”](#).

■ How to use this paper

This paper describes mechanisms of exclusion of migrants as found in European countries, as well as the challenges related to promoting social inclusion of migrants. Caritas colleagues can use this paper to advocate for (better) inclusion policy measures for migrants in their country. You can select and focus on one or more of the policy areas (access to labour market, education, anti-discrimination etc) and use the related recommendations in your advocacy work. The recommendations can be made more concrete by adding practical examples from your country.

This paper is also part of the Zero Poverty campaign www.zeropoverty.org.

The interactive website, the use of promotional materials in the campaign, and the organisation of public anti-poverty events are all activities that can and should be combined with the contents of this paper and its messages.

This actual paper “Invisible borders - a barrier to inclusion” was written by staff members of the secretariat of Caritas Europa as well as by staff of national member organisations across Europe: Karin Keil, Paolo Pezzana, Robert Urbé, Peter Verhaeghe and Bettina Zeugin. I am grateful for this piece of work. It reflects the point of view of Caritas in Europe at this moment.

Brussels, June 2010

Erny Gillen
President of Caritas Europa

■ Invisible borders - a barrier to inclusion

"If even being a citizen does not help against discrimination, exclusion and poverty, European immigration policies could be considered a failure."

Communities and societies have always experienced a more or less explicit xenophobic attitude, a fear for the unknown and for people from outside the community. All through history, this feeling has been manipulated by people in or aspiring to be in power positions. Manipulation of latent xenophobic feelings can lead to discrimination based on skin colour or other aspects distinguishing people from the "standard" member of society, to racism or even genocide. European history also shows that societies can overcome xenophobic feelings and attitudes by building relationships of trust with their neighbours, by enhanced understanding of and interaction with each other and by focusing on common interests. The European Union's enlargement and integration process is one example.

Europe however has never been homogenous, and it has benefited from the permeability of its borders in recent times. On the other hand, national identities and the "European identity" are constructs that are evoked time and again in order to encourage feelings of togetherness, whilst separating "foreigners" and "outsiders", those who are "different from us". Such people are either far away on other continents, or have recently arrived in Europe but are not or scarcely accepted there. Depending on the point of view they can also be Europeans but seen as "outsiders".

It might seem paradoxical, but at present a common European identity is most noticeable where there is the greatest possible agreement about mutual separation from the outside world. A "common enemy" reinforces a feeling of belonging between groups in society. During the Cold War, the dividing line between states was either this side or that side of the Iron Curtain. Nowadays, that dividing line is between "mainstream" Europe and European citizens with a "different" ethnic background, people from the South, and between religious communities. Every country experiences regular as well as irregular migration and receives asylum-seekers from crisis-torn and poverty-stricken areas in the South. Every country where a considerable number of residents hold the Muslim faith is having an intensive discourse about retaining "European values".²

At the external borders of the European Union, this partitioning is clearly visible and is based on citizenship. Most notably, the media disseminates images of refugees and migrants arriving by boat, along the coastline of Southern Europe. They risk their lives to reach Europe. Events at the South-Eastern and eastern EU borders receive less media coverage although they are not less dramatic.

1 Caritas Europa, Migration, un voyage dans la pauvreté ? Une étude de Caritas Europa sur la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale des immigrants en Europe, Bruxelles, Juin 2006, p.13.

2 Voir Mely Kiyak, Europa: Die Villa mit fünf Sternen – Essai [Europe: The Five-Star Villa – An Essay], in: Politik und Zeitgeschichte [Politics and Contemporary History] 35-36/2008. (10 Juin 2009)

Xenophobia, the fear of every person, religion and custom perceived as “foreign” does not begin nor end at either the external borders of the European Union or those of the European continent, however. Discrimination and racism as consequences of cultivated feelings of xenophobia, e.g. in certain media, is occurring in all areas of society. It leads to the fact that migrants, members of ethnic minorities or people with a migrant background in Europe are disproportionately affected by exclusion and poverty. Their unequal opportunities on the job market and in educational and healthcare institutions are essentially caused by exclusion mechanisms and disadvantages as compared to those enjoyed by the majority population.

Thus, the events on the external borders simultaneously mirror the internal barriers put up towards migrants within Europe. Highly qualified workers are much sought-after all over the world, although that does not prevent them, too, from facing discrimination. Migrants face legal, social, political and cultural, but also psychological barriers. These represent obstacles to the integration of the immigrant population and, ultimately, to its full inclusion in society. And thus social cohesion in society as such is undermined.

Exclusion and the failure to integrate individuals and entire groups of the population in society lead to conflicts and to general destabilisation. Caritas Europa is therefore seeking, on the occasion of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, to highlight these invisible internal barriers. It aims to stimulate the implementation of measures to abolish these barriers, thereby encouraging integration of immigrants and their inclusion as fully-fledged members of society.

■ Migrants are disproportionately highly affected by poverty

Whole sections of the population, purely on the basis of their “different origin”, do not have the same opportunities in the education system or on the labour market as the mainstream EU nationals. They are pushed into the shadow economy, which restricts their opportunities even more and often leads to further discrimination, exploitation and abuse. Caritas Europa points out that citizens of third countries, generally referred to as “migrants” in Europe find themselves in an even worse-off starting position than these EU nationals when it comes to employment, housing, health, education and participation in public life.

When Caritas analyses the situation of migrants according to the reference model used in the Caritas Poverty Paper “Poverty among us”, we may come to the following conclusions:

- for migrants the first source of social welfare, the labour market, is either not existing (for example for those who don’t get a work permit) or is providing only little social protection because working offers for migrants are often 3D (dirty, dangerous and demanding), unstable and badly paid;
- the second source of social welfare, all the more needy if the first one is lacking, the family, is for migrants equally either not existing (for example because the family stays in the country of origin relying on the help of the migrant rather than being in the position to support him) or bears only little means because of the precarious situation;
- the third source then, the welfare state should shoulder a maximum of support, regarding the failure

of the other two sources. But what is the case is that migrants get only minimum support, if at all. They are often excluded from minimum income schemes, especially when they are third country nationals; as asylum seekers they often get little more than in kind support and as irregular migrants or rejected asylum seekers they are normally excluded from everything.

So, even disregarding the questions of actual transformations and changes, we see already that the system is not functioning properly for migrants and that most of them are not taken into account. Societal, economic and demographic transformations and changes only add to these bad conditions. Thus migrants are at high risk of poverty, as already the 2006 Poverty Report of Caritas Europa "Migration, a journey into poverty?" has stated.

Migrants are disproportionately highly represented in poverty statistics. Cases of exclusion and poverty, which migrants from all age groups face, are complex and without easy solutions.

Obstacles that increase the risk of poverty can have their basis in legislation, the authorities or practicalities. Some examples follow:³

- The legal system of the European Union makes distinctions in relation to job opportunities, social security and the right to family life, based on nationality, qualifications and residence authorisation. This tiered legal system gives rise to numerous poverty risks. For example, in many European countries there is a distinction between the right to reside in the country and the right to work there. As a result, some migrants are not permitted to work even though they are in a country legally. In countries where residence permits are linked to work permits, migrants also lose their legal status if they lose their job.
- When it comes to education, a similar picture can be seen across Europe: pupils from migrant and minority backgrounds are clearly over-represented in the vocational education and schools outside the mainstream school system of most countries. This indicates that many pupils are being palmed off into education levels below their potential.
- In many countries migrants are confronted with discrimination when looking for work. Not having the nationality or citizenship of an EU member state is an obstacle, but also, for example, just having a "foreign" sounding name may be an exclusion criterion in application processes. There is also clear discrimination in relation to wages. EU nationals with a foreign ethnic background in particular are affected by such expressions of discrimination. The fact that they are, in public discourse, often referred to as "second generation" or "third generation migrants" is not helpful in countering the phenomenon.
- As a consequence of unequal opportunities on the labour market, the unusually high occurrence of "atypical" employment amongst migrants – including fixed-term work, part-time work and on-call work – makes this population group susceptible to discrimination, exploitation and poverty. Indeed, a disproportionately high percentage of migrant families live in working but poor households. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) comes to the same conclusion: *"In-work poverty can result from low skills or low education levels and from being under qualified for adequately remunerated*

3 From: Caritas Europa, Migration, a Journey into Poverty? A Caritas Europa study on poverty and exclusion of immigrants in Europe, Brussels, June 2006.

*jobs, or from substandard working conditions. The most vulnerable groups are often older workers, the young, women, large families, those with a disability, early school leavers and migrants.*⁴

- In many countries, barring asylum-seekers from access to the ordinary labour market is a major obstacle for their integration into society. Long-term forced dependency on welfare or even on charity often leads to impoverishment and to social exclusion.
- People in irregular employment situations and/or without a valid residence permit are, furthermore, in a weak bargaining position when it comes to negotiating employment conditions with their employers. They usually earn less than the average wage and are often denied their social rights such as holidays and sick pay. The EESC states: "Fighting undeclared employment is also a decisive factor in combating in-work poverty, partly because it affects the most vulnerable members of society (migrants, people in unstable situations) but also because it can lead to quasi-slavery, in violation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights."⁵

The residence and work permit systems for the EU and individual states are, in many cases, based on the argument of the greater or lesser "cultural proximity" or distance of potential immigrants. Similarly, discrimination in educational establishments, while it can no longer be traced back to individual attitudes of staff members is widespread in everyday life and is based on cultural distinctions that must be categorised as racist. The fact that children with a migrant background in certain countries scarcely have any chance of progressing in school is not due to any lack of intelligence on their part. Rather, the crucial factors are the social background of the family of origin and the education system in the country of residence, which is poorly tailored to the needs of migrants, as well as discriminatory measures and behaviour within schools.

■ A dynamic view of culture and identity promotes integration

If people are judged purely on the basis of their cultural origin, they are assigned a fixed culture based on their birth – and this applies as much to the indigenous population as to immigrants. Such a static understanding of culture is still fixed in the collective consciousness. People from a particular region are assigned a particular mode of behaviour.

Culture, however, is dynamic – cultures can change, they are fluid and they are not closed to outside influences. Culture is always on the move, without fixed boundaries and must be re-defined again and again. Culturally speaking, then, there is no clearly defined national Cameroonian, Ukrainian or German culture. Instead, close observation shows that there are differences based on the region, social stratum and political mindset. So, for example, the differences between the educated strata from Bangladesh, Kosovo and France are often less pronounced than those between the higher and lower strata of an individual country.

Another example is stereotyping or even stigmatisation based on religion. The fact of being a Christian, Muslim or Hindu tells you very little about a person's religious practice and faith – the same applies to all

4 EESC, opinion on Work and Poverty: towards the necessary holistic approach, SOC/336, 30 September 2009

5 EESC, SOC/336

other religions and to people with no religious faith. It is thus not only cultures that are dynamic and complex, but every individual, too has a whole range of socio-cultural characteristics. A person's cultural origin is thus only one aspect amongst many – including gender, social status, religious orientation and political views – that make up his or her identity. This reality leads us to conclude that integration goals will be better achieved if policies and implementation focus on what people have in common, not on what diversifies them from each other.

■ Migrants are individuals with resources

Especially in times of economic crisis it is tempting for decision makers to draw clear boundaries between who and what belongs to a culture and who is excluded, and to find scapegoats for crises. That makes the world seem orderly, following a fixed and demonstrable logic. People all over the world are seduced in this way. In times of crisis, in particular, migrants are the first to lose their jobs. National and regional borders, such as those of the European Union, gain in importance again in comparison with their status during good economic times. In the competitive struggle for jobs, every country gives preference to local workers and closes its borders to potential immigrants as much as possible. This has a negative effect on EU citizens too, in particular those with a migrant background. Even when the situation is not at all the same in other countries and different economic sectors, the trend still moves in this direction.

The concept of citizenship only offers an equal and full set of rights to citizens but does not guarantee equal opportunities. Equal rights are the necessary basis for inclusive societies, but additional non-legislative action is indispensable. Indeed, barriers in our heads are also partly responsible for the high poverty rates of Europe's migrant population. Only when the mindset of the majority population opens up, society as a whole can engage in diversity, which is the only way an integrative society can come into being. Diversity in the world and in Europe will increase: only a modern, outward-looking perspective emphasising what people have in common rather than what makes them "different" from each other will do justice to everyone – irrespective of their origin.

■ Recommendations

Caritas Europa believes that the reduction of poverty and exclusion is a process that goes far beyond material and financial assistance. It requires legislation and measures to empower human beings, to reduce vulnerability and discrimination and to promote social integration. Action needs to be taken at all levels of society, in particular:

At EU and national level:

- Ratify and implement international and national legal instruments giving legally residing migrants equal rights as nationals.
- Adopt and apply effective anti-discrimination legislation to punish acts of discrimination or racism against all people, independently of their residence status or citizenship.
- Include all members of society in the social inclusion process by investing more efforts in opening up the defensive mindset of the majority population towards migrants through emphasising mobility as a reality, an open migration policy and an individual-based transcultural perspective.
- Guarantee that Human Rights of all are respected, including migrants without regular residence status.

At national, regional and local level:

- Give migrants, people with migrant background and ethnic minorities access to mainstream services as much as possible and offer specific services only when specific needs occur. Services have to be adapted to the reality of a diversifying public and of changing needs.
- Guarantee that Human Rights of all are respected, including migrants without regular residence status.
- Reinforce education policy, including the transition between school and labour market, as an effective tool to reduce the risk of poverty.
- Improve know-how in dealing with cultural and religious diversities for example through trans-cultural trainings for civil servants and public and private service providers.



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