

POVERTY IS A SCANDAL LAUNCH OF CARITAS EUROPA'S ZERO POVERTY CAMPAIGN

Press briefing - European Year 2010: A year of action against poverty

Every human being has the right to sufficient means for a decent life. This is a statement that very few people would disagree with. And yet, there are millions of people in Europe alone who lack shelter, heating, healthcare, clothing, food.

This is a disturbing state of affairs. Moreover, it is a reality that few people wish to confront. Most are happy to shut their eyes to the suffering that surrounds them.

More than anything, it is this selective blindness that Caritas wishes to change in 2010. Through a range of actions, Caritas intends to open people's eyes, unblock their ears, stimulate their minds and touch their hearts. We are all humans created in the image of God. It is a scandal that so many are denied the means for basic sustenance.

It is with this in mind that Caritas is using the opportunity presented by the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion to launch both its new Poverty Paper, in which the organisation's core values and objectives can be found, and the Zero Poverty campaign website and petition – key tools in achieving Caritas's objectives in 2010.

1. Poverty Among Us: Structure, content and aims

The Poverty Paper, *Poverty Among Us*, which has been specially published for the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, is where Caritas lays out most explicitly its vision of Zero Poverty and where it challenges society to act.

The paper is divided into two main sections. **Section A takes an analytical approach to poverty**, investigating the underlying causes of poverty in Europe and offering solutions at a political and administrative level, while **Section B** on the other hand, **provides readers with real-life examples of individual distress** and offers **practical, achievable recommendations** for anyone that wishes to combat poverty in their community.

1.i. Poverty Among Us: Section A – The analytical approach

1. i.a. A lack of well-being

Section A describes poverty as not merely a lack of material means, but offers a wider interpretation of the problem. **It defines poverty as a lack of well-being**, which can include illness, disability, unemployment, widowhood and any other involuntary situation of deprivation.

The principal structural reason underlying a lack of well-being is identified in the paper as a **lack of social welfare**.

The sources of our social welfare principally stem from three areas: **the welfare state, the labour market and the family**. All of these areas have been threatened in recent years, even prior to the financial crisis.

1.i.b. Strengthening social welfare

How do we, as a community of humans born with equal rights, strengthen social welfare? Since social welfare derives from the welfare state, the labour market and the family, it follows that the key to greater well-being lies in strengthening and connecting these three areas.

With respect to the **welfare state**, *Poverty among Us* highlights that in many countries social assistance is sometimes so small that it fails to cover the basic costs needed to live with dignity. Moreover, the paper points out that social insurance is inadequate to deal with unemployment, invalidity or bereavement. As a result, people who experience sudden shocks are often drawn into a cycle of poverty that they cannot escape from. Regional imbalances or bureaucratic complexity can also prevent people from accessing the help they need.

As regards the **labour market**, the paper addresses the fact that social partnership arrangements are often weak, thus leaving workers with little or no organised representation of their interests. The grey or black market also leaves workers open to abuse as does in many cases, labour migration.

The **family** has come under threat due to the increased strain that many modern families find themselves in. The stress of poverty and the tensions that it can generate can lead to family breakdown, which further weakens people's ability to cope with difficult situations.

Poverty Among Us therefore recommends that action is taken to strengthen the social bonds that bind our communities. It is the only way to avoid spirals of poverty that rob individuals of their dignity.

1.ii. The Poverty Paper: Section B – The empirical approach

1.ii.a. The truth about poverty

Section B provides a contrast to the theoretical approach taken by Section A and **uses hard hitting examples to relate the truth about poverty in Europe today**. We learn about the young Italian who works 11 hours a day in the black economy for 90 euros a week. We learn about the mentally ill, who without the support they need find themselves on the street. We learn about the children being trafficked to service the sex trade. We learn about internally displaced people in European war zones. We find out about a vast patchwork of human suffering. We find out the reasons why we must act now.

1.ii.b. What we can do

After introducing us to a variety of vulnerable people, Section B **exhorts the public to do something to prevent these terrible situations from happening**. The paper describes various initiatives that Caritas organisations have put into place in order to alleviate poverty and restore people's fundamental dignity.

In France, for example, *Secours Catholique* helps poor people to find a roof over their heads and guarantees to pay the rent for a number of months, helping these people to regain some familial stability and also to look for a job. In Estonia, Caritas organises therapy sessions. In Moldova, Caritas cares for children who have been trafficked or abused. In Turkey, Caritas assists autistic children; in the Czech Republic, Caritas is helping socially excluded Roma. *Poverty Among Us* gives us examples of good deeds that are done all across Europe.

The paper therefore **lays down a challenge to all of us to get involved**. Having learnt about the reality of poverty in Europe and learnt about projects to assist those most in need, the paper asks us all what we can do. And surely, in the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, it is not unreasonable to ask the public to make a small contribution of time or money to strengthen the bonds that bind us as a human community.

2. www.zeropoverty.org: A key campaign tool

While *Poverty Among Us* forms the blueprint for action in 2010, it is the Zero Poverty website - www.zeropoverty.org - which will serve as the main channel through which Caritas will diffuse its key campaign messages, allow individuals to discuss the realities of poverty in Europe today and sign the *Petition Against Poverty*.

2.i. The Petition Against Poverty

The Petition Against Poverty is central to Caritas's campaign for a future in which no-one is forced to live on the streets, dies prematurely because they cannot afford healthcare or has to drop out of school because their family needs them to work. **It offers four achievable policy goals for European governments to aim towards**. These are:

- a) End child poverty by guaranteeing allowances for every child in Europe, regardless of the status of their parents;
- b) Secure a minimum standard of social security for all;
- c) Guarantee universal healthcare and strengthen the welfare state;
- d) Take active steps to ensure decent jobs with decent wages.

Caritas's aim is to inspire 1,000,000 people to sign our petition. If this target is achieved, then **Caritas intends to present the petition to the European Commission invoking the 'European Citizens' Initiative'** – a major new innovation brought into European law by the Lisbon Treaty. With a million voices behind it, Caritas aims to ask policy makers to turn the petition's recommendations into concrete legislative action as the European Citizens' Initiative demands.

2.ii. A Discussion and Awareness-Raising Hub

Caritas intends that www.zeropoverty.org becomes an important meeting place for activists that wish to combat poverty in 2010.

Taking its inspiration from the popularity of social networking sites, **Caritas's Zero Poverty website will serve as a sort of 'poverty Facebook'**, where users can register blogs, Twitter feeds, YouTube channels, and thus share information on the fight against poverty.

For example, someone who keeps a blog about poverty can register their blog on the site. Every time they update their blog, the Zero Poverty website will automatically display a link to their article. Similarly, someone who uses Twitter can register so that their tweets appear on the Zero Poverty website every time they tag their Twitter update with the phrase 'zeropoverty'.

Users of the website can thus keep informed about actions to combat poverty across Europe and also interact with other users who share the same interest in creating a better future.

2.iii. Campaign Missions

The Zero Poverty website will also contain a list of 'missions', or recommendations, that users can fulfil over the course of the year. Each time a user completes a mission, they can enter which mission they have completed. The users which complete the most missions will see their achievements prominently displayed on the site.

The final list of missions will be released shortly after the campaign launch in the European Parliament. They will include such recommendations as volunteering in one's community or buying fair-trade products.

Through the missions, the Zero Poverty website will complete the virtuous circle of awareness raising, discussion and action. Hopefully enough people will in this way be inspired to make 2010 a memorable year in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

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