

Brussels, 19 July 2010

## **Presidents of Commission, Parliament and European Council discuss the fight against poverty and social exclusion with European faith leaders**

*Today around twenty senior representatives from the Christian, Jewish, Muslim religions as well as from the Sikh and Hindu communities met in Brussels on the invitation of President José Manuel Barroso and co-chaired by Jerzy Buzek, President of the European Parliament and Herman van Rompuy, President of the European Council. They discussed effective ways of combating poverty and social exclusion as an imperative for European governance.*

This was the sixth in a series of annual meetings launched by President Barroso in 2005. For the first time the meeting takes place in the new context of the Lisbon Treaty which foresees in its Art 17 that the Union maintains an "open, transparent and regular dialogue" with religion, churches and communities of conviction. Today's meeting testifies of the importance that European institutions give to this dialogue.

José Manuel Barroso, the Commission President said: "In Europe, several million citizens live at the edge of social exclusion. A poor testimony for one of the richest regions of the world! As Europe recovers from this crisis, I want to see a generation of growth which integrates the most vulnerable into main stream society." He added: "Churches and religious communities are important providers of social services in EU member states. If we want to combat poverty effectively, it is essential to draw from their long standing and wide ranging experience."

Jerzy Buzek, the President of the European Parliament added: "The promise of a better life for all without exceptions must always be at the heart of the European project. Combating poverty and social exclusion is a task for the partnership of all; local, national and European levels as well as laymen and churches. Our first and foremost priority is to restore social and economic security. Churches have a crucial role to play in this regard. They contribute with a long standing experience in social work with individuals and communities. This experience has never been as valuable as it is today in a time of crisis."

Herman Van Rompuy, the President of the European Council said: "We all know that this issue is mainly linked with homelessness, with a better access to the labour market, with the possibility to apply for health services, with, indeed, what can be called "the material conditions of life". But combating poverty and social exclusion is also, in essence, willing to restore human dignity, the dignity of both men and women. And that is why societal, cultural and ethical questions should also be taken into account."

In the European Year against poverty and social exclusion 2010 and through the European Poverty Platform, European institutions engage in a dialogue with civil society, NGOs, public authorities and other providers of social services to find new approaches, actions and partners in a Europe-wide effort to eradicate poverty.

Promoting employment, inclusive growth and social cohesion is at the heart of the Europe 2020 strategy. One of the EU-wide agreed objectives is to reduce by at least 20 million the number of Europeans exposed to poverty and social exclusion by 2020. Progress will be measured by three major indicators, namely at-risk-of-poverty; material deprivation, and jobless households. These EU indicators and the regular monitoring of progress will provide accountability of the Member States.

Two other headline targets of the Europe 2020 strategy reflect the need to improve equity and quality in education: reducing school-drop-out rates to less than 10% and increasing the share of 30-34 years old having completed tertiary or equivalent education to at least 40% by 2020.

The discussions took place in a frank and open spirit. The faith leaders from fourteen Member States (France, United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and Denmark) expressed their support for the Europe2020 strategy and its social and education targets. They encouraged the European institutions to further increase the momentum, especially with a view to improving access to the labour market, better targeting of social services in member states and ensuring equal opportunities with view to access to education and training.

They underlined their continued commitment to foster social cohesion and increase a sense of solidarity and civic engagement among Europeans. They emphasised that overcoming the current crisis will only be possible when people and social justice are at the heart of European policies.

The following members of the European Commission also participated in the meeting: Vice-President Viviane Reding, Vice-President Antonio Tajani, Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič, Commissioner Maria Damanaki and Commissioner László Andor.

List of participants: see [MEMO/10/342](#)

Link to [Europe 2020](#)

Link to [European Year for combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010](#)

Link to [key figures on social inclusion](#)

More about the [EU dialogue with religion, churches and communities of conviction](#)