



Recommendation 1196 (1992)¹

Sever poverty and social exclusion : towards guaranteed minimum levels of resources

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Assembly notes with grave concern that severe, persistent and widespread poverty excludes growing numbers of persons and families from the normal processes, relations and amenities of civilised society :

1.1. this situation presents a challenge to governments and parliaments to reconsider the principles on which systems of social protection are functioning, and the values from which these principles are derived -as set forth in a number of basic texts of the Council of Europe, most notably its Social Charter ;

1.2. marginalisation and exclusion of the most economically vulnerable are symptoms of an erosion of the moral and cultural bases of our societies : they are contrary to -and may put at risk -the principles of a healthy democracy.

2. Manifestations of severe poverty, and the social dynamics of marginalisation and exclusion as a result of its persistence, vary considerably :

2.1. from one country to another -and in the case of some adjacent countries very substantially -with consequent pressures for cross-border migration ;

2.2. from one region to another within countries ;

2.3. according to an urban or rural environment ;

2.4. according to the age of those concerned ;

2.5. according to whether causes are primarily unemployment and long-term unemployment, or changes in family structures and increasingly individualised life styles to which provisions of social protection systems have not been adequately adjusted ;

2.6. on account of essential differences in the functioning of their economies between the countries of western Europe and those of central and eastern Europe, arising from major upheavals in the latter's transition to free market systems.

3. The Assembly recognises that the general problem of poverty is best addressed by policies for economic growth, with broad and varied training and retraining opportunities for those without work -on the principle that unemployment is also an opportunity for investment in the skills and capabilities of individuals.

4. Today, however, in most European countries, irrespective of the implementation of such policies and their effects, it is clear that strong and distinct policies are required to address severe and persistent poverty.

5. Severe poverty -the focus of this recommendation -relates to the possibility of living and bringing up children in minimally decent conditions.

1. Assembly debate on 7 October 1992 (20th Sitting) (see [Doc. 6592](#), report of the Social Health and Family Affairs Committee, Rapporteur : Mrs Håvik ; and [Doc. 6623](#), opinion of the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development, Rapporteur : Mr Svensson). Text adopted by the Assembly on 7 October 1992 (20th Sitting).



6. Relief of severe poverty, therefore, must often precede the possibility for those affected to be integrated into the community and to benefit from regular access to education, health care, social security and other services.
7. Severe poverty is recognisable within particular communities, according to the standards of those communities, by those in direct contact with the individuals and families affected. It thus stands in no need of definition, nor of specification of "thresholds" and "minima" across Europe, in order for a significant impulse to be given at European level for the implementation of stronger national policies -as is and was, respectively, the purpose of this recommendation ; of the Council of Europe's colloquy on marginalisation and poverty (Strasbourg, 3-5 December 1991), including the welcome presentation of projects and programmes of the European Community ; and of the Charleroi Declaration of the Council of Europe's Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (7 February 1992).
8. The questions at governmental level are accordingly :
 - 8.1. how to improve and channel support to those working most effectively towards the relief of severe poverty, most often through associations and charities ;
 - 8.2. whether social protection systems need to be adjusted or reformed in order to give priority to this objective.
9. Most social protection systems reflect the view that those who do not have paid work or only work part time have only the right to correspondingly limited and diminishing resources. They function on the principle of providing an incentive to work, and incorporate an implicit negative value judgment on the situations of those who neither find paid work nor take up opportunities for training.
10. Social protection systems based exclusively on such views and principles, even if properly adjusted in response to changing family structures and life styles, no longer meet essential needs in societies with massive unemployment. Moreover, at a more general level, current definitions of "work" operate to the disadvantage of those who contribute most effectively -outside the economic system -to the life of local communities.
11. The Assembly is aware that probably no social protection system can be designed which is exempt from abuse or questionable exploitation ; and that marginalisation and exclusion are not always related to material circumstances.
12. The Assembly considers that such matters are best dealt with at local level within the context and structure of national systems ; and that in so far as the notion of an incentive may be retained in social protection systems in regard to certain benefits and varying levels of support, it should no longer apply in regard to the provision of a basic minimum level of support when the circumstances of an individual and his or her family fall below what are regarded in that society as minimally decent standards.
13. The Social Charter of the Council of Europe already provides that any person without adequate resources should be granted adequate assistance (Article 13) :
 - 13.1. nineteen of the twenty Contracting Parties to the Social Charter, including the twelve member states of the European Community, have accepted the provisions of this article ;
 - 13.2. this article -applied in a social context of severe, persistent and widespread poverty, of massive and rising unemployment, and of changing family structures and individualised life styles -already gives expression, for those states which have accepted it, to their acceptance of a commitment, as an aim and principle of policy, to guarantee a decent minimum level of resources for those in need ;
 - 13.3. social protection systems in Europe must be adjusted so as to honour this guarantee, and to make provision in the event of disputes on its application for a right of appeal to an independent body by or on behalf of those concerned.
14. The Assembly calls on the governments of those member states of the Council of Europe which are members of the European Community, in the interest of progress towards a "European social area" :
 - 14.1. to ensure that, in the application of the recommendation of the Council of Ministers of the European Community for common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social assistance in social protection systems (92/441/EEC), account is taken of obligations arising in international law from adherence to the Council of Europe's Social Charter ;

14.2. to ensure that, in the application of the recommendation of the Council of Ministers of the European Community on the convergence of social protection objectives and policies (92/442/CEE), account is taken of standards established by the Council of Europe's European Code of Social Security (revised) and of provisions for the Community's accession thereto ;

15. The Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers, in the spirit of its most welcome recent Recommendation No. R (92) 4 on co-ordination of employment, social and educational services for the integration and reintegration into employment of persons with difficulties :

15.1. instruct its ad hoc committee of experts for improving the Social Charter to review and update the terms of Article 13, with a view to better protection for those without minimally decent standards of living, and to consider the utility of a specific article on housing ;

15.2. instruct its Steering Committee for Social Security, further to the recommendations of the 5th Conference of European Ministers responsible for Social Security (Limerick, Ireland, 20-21 May 1992), to report on the value of the European Code of Social Security as a standard-setting instrument for the countries of central and eastern Europe, and on action by the Council of Europe to facilitate progress in these countries towards these standards ;

15.3. instruct its Steering Committees for Social Policy and for Labour and Employment to pursue and as appropriate to combine their efforts :

- a. in helping the countries of central and eastern Europe -in the context of great economic and financial difficulty and disturbingly high and hitherto unexperienced levels of unemployment -to design and introduce systems of social protection, and to gain access to effective levels of funding for this purpose within the framework of international programmes of support, most notably those of the European Community, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the G 24 Group of industrialised countries.
- b. in helping countries to work out national strategies for reducing severe poverty, both in general and for key groups most at risk, on the basis of concerted measures of support at local level not only through social protection systems and unemployment cash benefits but equally in access to housing (and protection against loss of accommodation), health care, education and training and opportunities for cultural and leisure activities ;
- c. to encourage the establishment of personalised contracts providing an incentive for the poor and the socially excluded to have access, according to their needs, to literacy programmes and programmes for the acquisition or updating of knowledge or to get recurrent professional training, giving them thus the opportunity of improving their way of life.