Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
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Social exclusion: a danger for Europe's democracies

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Social exclusion is a growing and serious danger for Europe's democratic societies. Social exclusion is often linked to poverty, even though not all people who are socially excluded are poor and not all people who are poor are socially excluded. Often, members of certain societal groups, such as minorities, migrants or people with disabilities, are excluded from full participation in society for non-material reasons linked to discrimination, xenophobia, intolerance or legal status. However, many poor people manage to overcome material obstacles to participation in society – often through education.

2. Whatever the root causes, the exclusion and marginalisation of certain categories of the population has always been an issue, even in the most prosperous societies. In recent years, social rights and democracy have been increasingly under threat, notably from the impact of the financial and economic crisis, as highlighted by the Parliamentary Assembly in its Resolution 1884 (2012) on "Austerity measures – a danger for democracy and social rights".

3. In times of crisis, many find it difficult to break cycles of disadvantage and improve their income and quality of life, and social exclusion in all its forms is often perpetuated and passed on from one generation to the next. Early intervention measures therefore need to be reinforced in order to provide equal life and development opportunities to all from a very early age.

4. Moreover, policies aimed at fighting exclusion and marginalisation often neglect one crucial aspect: democratic participation as a civil and political right. If those who are disadvantaged have less influence in political decision-making processes because they tend to be less involved or under-represented, future public policies may not be in their favour either. This leads to a vicious circle where situations of social exclusion go hand in hand with political under-representation.

5. Many of the measures that can be adopted to overcome situations of poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation have already been highlighted by the Assembly and other Council of Europe bodies. When considering current threats to social rights and democracy, member States are therefore invited to consult these texts.

6. Against the background of current challenges and the need for targeted action, the Assembly suggests that member States take the following measures to uphold the highest standards of democracy and good governance:

6.1. develop and implement comprehensive national action plans aimed at fighting social exclusion, including:

6.1.1. targeted measures for different age groups: children, young people, working-age adults and the elderly, thus following "life-cycle approaches";

6.1.2. gender-sensitive approaches considering the specific situation of women, notably working women and single mothers;

1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee*, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 18 November 2014 (see Doc. 13636, report of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, rapporteur: Mr Mike Hancock).
See also Recommendation 2058 (2014).

6.1.3. early intervention strategies aimed at preventing poverty and social exclusion and breaking “cycles of disadvantage”;

6.2. give priority to policy areas regularly identified as decisive in fighting poverty and social exclusion, including education and training, the creation of quality jobs guaranteeing social rights and inclusion in social security systems, the guarantee of minimum family incomes and the reform of social security systems to face current challenges (for example demographic developments);

6.3. develop targeted measures for groups in need of special protection and support, who are often particularly threatened by social exclusion in a given national context and disproportionally hit by the crisis (or austerity measures), in particular migrants, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities, preventing phenomena of “ghettoisation” wherever possible;

6.4. develop specific measures fostering democratic participation across society and reaching out to those who are marginalised or at risk of social exclusion, including by:

6.4.1. developing and implementing national agendas for inclusive democracy, aimed at ensuring democratic participation for marginalised groups;

6.4.2. promoting principles of good governance, such as openness, transparency and citizen participation, as minimum standards of any democracy;

6.4.3. fostering and developing participatory mechanisms and bodies, in particular at local level, allowing all inhabitants to get actively involved in developments concerning them, to express their needs and to stimulate new developments themselves;

6.4.4. providing education for democratic citizenship to all children from an early age and via official school curricula;

6.4.5. promoting “easy to understand” communication about any political decisions, structures and processes, including through close co-operation with the media sector;

6.4.6. making use of new communication technologies to make community involvement more accessible and attractive for all, especially young people;

6.4.7. supporting and fostering civil society organisations and the voluntary sector in order to reach out to those excluded in a proactive and effective manner.