

Excellencies,

Reverends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

(Current situation)

I would like to thank the organisers for having invited me here today to take part in this important seminar on combating poverty and social exclusion within the framework of the Europe 2020 strategy.

Many Europeans are currently living in very uncertain and precarious times – the economic crisis has wiped out over a decade's worth of progress.

We all know the statistics by heart, related to unemployment, public deficits and low growth levels. And we all see the crisis' real impact on people's life every day. Sadly, its effects are likely to be felt by for many years to come.

Nonetheless, the crisis has also highlighted the real value of the European approach to welfare. Social welfare schemes have provided many people in need with essential protection.

Personally, I firmly believe that Europe can and should be proud of the way that our social model has protected a large number of Europeans from the worst effects of the economic downturn.

It is also unquestionable that for many people charities and faith have played invaluable roles in helping them through very difficult times – both in terms of material assistance, but also by providing spiritual and emotional support. *(Reference to the meeting with the leaders of Portuguese Church)*

(Europe 2020: social dimension)

Against this backdrop, the Commission has already taken action to reinvigorate and strengthen the social dimension of Europe of the future. As the Commissioner responsible for social affairs and inclusion, one of my key personal and political priorities is the promotion of policies which support the most vulnerable members of our society and tackle the root causes of poverty.

Poverty is not just scarcity of material income. It is also about lack of future, lack of opportunities. Access to the labour market is a key factor in fighting poverty and breaking the vicious cycle of exclusion.

The European Commission is fully convinced of the need to strengthen all our available instruments for combating poverty. That is why the new Europe 2020 strategy, which has been endorsed by the European Council, places strong emphasis on the social dimension. There is a powerful message about Europe's genuine commitment to achieve tangible results for a more just and more inclusive Europe.

Europe 2020 is built around three priorities – namely, that future growth in the EU must be smart, sustainable and inclusive. It makes also clear that people are at the heart of achieving a smarter, greener and more sustainable social market economy.

Sustainable and inclusive growth simply cannot be achieved if we neglect the needs of the 84 million Europeans who live at risk of poverty – even worse, 10 million of whom are children. Combating poverty and exclusion must be in the centre of our strategy. That is why the urgent need is to reduce in-work poverty, to facilitate the integration of young people into the genuine labour market, to increase the employment rate of people over 50, and to ensure that workers who lose their job find a new one quickly.

(Poverty headline target & integrated guideline)

It is a fundamental change that the European Council recently agreed on headline targets for Europe 2020 in five key policy areas that will drive the strategy forward. One of these areas deals specifically with social inclusion and poverty – namely, that we are committed to reducing the number of people at risk of poverty by 20 million people by 2020. And we should not forget – that 20 million people is the entire population of a medium sized country in Europe.

This agreement is a major breakthrough. It is the first time that an EU level poverty target has been endorsed by all Member States. Moreover, this target reflects the multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion, as well as the diversity of situations and priorities across the Union.

Progress will be measured by three major indicators, namely relative poverty; material deprivation and jobless households. Through these indicators we can target to help people who either have income less than 60 of the average (median) income, or face poverty related difficulties like poor nutrition, or live in a household where most adults do not have a job. These EU indicators and the regular monitoring of progress will provide accountability.

It is also clear that we also need a strong political ownership. We need to ensure that the implementation of our Europe 2020 strategy brings about real benefits to all Europeans, including those most in need.

As part of this strategy, Member States will now – and will have to - develop concrete national targets, adapted to the nature of their different situations. These targets will further foster commitment and transparency among the national governments.

(Platform against Poverty)

To support this ambitious poverty headline target, the Commission has also proposed a so-called flagship initiative for a “Platform against poverty and social exclusion”.

The Platform will combine those elements which already work with new innovative approaches, such as micro-financing. It will represent a horizontal approach in a sense of combining different well proven EU and national policies, like education, youth, health, decent housing and others to combat poverty.

Besides broader integration across policy domains, the Platform will mobilize available financial instruments in pursuit of the social objectives and in reaching out to the largest possible group of stakeholders. As you heard today, the Commission will present concrete proposals for shaping and launching the Platform this autumn.

(European Year 2010)

This Platform will build on the progress and the political momentum we have already achieved this year through the European Year 2010 against poverty and social exclusion.

The slogan of the European Year: "Stop Poverty Now, and Together Build a Society for All". In this context, the ambition of the Year is to create a wide ranging debate in the participating countries on the cause of poverty and social exclusion so as to identify how best to combat the problem and how to engage

successfully the whole society. This should lead new approaches, actions and wide partnership.

The European Year is a call for all partners, undoubtedly for the Church, NGOs and public authorities on different levels; for social partners, business, media, and decision-makers to put poverty on their agenda, now in 2010 and in the future.

The echo to the European Year from different actors has been very encouraging, in many cases beyond all our initial expectations. Now it is our responsibility to continue without losing momentum and provide due follow-up in the longer term.

The European Year has helped to build a political momentum and create positive dynamics. I wish to see this preserved and built on in our future actions.

(Conclusion)

Excellencies, Reverends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our objective is clear. We must fight against poverty and social exclusion – together.

This is at the heart of our endeavours for the next ten years. We have a wealth of experience to build on. And we are developing the tools to ensure the concrete progress that we all are aiming at.

Now is the time for action. We cannot, and will not, sit idly by while there are millions of Europeans out there in need of our help. We have a concept – now is time to make it a reality.... together.

THANK YOU