

OPENING CONFERENCE REPORT

EUROPEAN YEAR FOR COMBATING POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Held in Madrid on 21 January 2010



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SUMMARY: KEY MESSAGES

The Opening Conference of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion successfully launched the campaign, thanks to the active participation of a high-level audience, a well-focused agenda, and the prospect of action throughout the year.

President of the Spanish Government José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Jose Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, and other speakers were clear about the need to put poverty and exclusion at the top of the European Union's agenda for the coming decade. There is widespread concern that one out of six European citizens lives below the poverty threshold: clear calls were made on both EU and national authorities to take effective measures to combat this as soon as possible.

Five key messages emerged from Conference speeches and debates:

- 1. Placing the fight against poverty at the top of the European agenda:** Participants called for the fight against poverty to be put at the heart of the 2020 Strategy, which should make social cohesion one of its cornerstones.
- 2. Combating inequalities, investing in social protection and promoting solidarity, priorities for the Spanish Presidency:** Widening inequality is not only unfair, it is incompatible with the European vision of society. Social cohesion must be a priority mainstreamed into all EU measures. All key players must be involved and show their solidarity in the fight against exclusion. This commitment can be formalised through a European social pact.
- 3. Creating stronger European instruments and setting quantitative objectives for those currently in use:** Three out of four European citizens¹ believe the EU has an important role to play in the fight against poverty.

¹ Eurobarometer Survey on poverty and Social Exclusion 2009

Participants stressed the need to use new instruments from the Lisbon Treaty (the Charter of Fundamental Rights, Horizontal Social Clause), to reinforce current ones (Open Method of Coordination) and to demand that legal instruments are fully implemented (e.g. anti-discrimination directives). The Open Method of Coordination must serve to reinforce mutual commitments between Member States, which is essential if progress is to be made on quantitative objectives.

- 4. Active inclusion based on three pillars, adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services, must be central to policies aimed at fighting exclusion:** Mechanisms and instruments must be set up so that the principles and objectives of the Commission Recommendation on Active Inclusion are effective, valuable, and are fully implemented.

- 5. Political commitments must result in specific priorities and actions targeted at those most vulnerable:** Child poverty, low wages, in-work poverty, the exclusion of immigrants, the elderly, minority groups and, in particular, of Roma people, are pressing problems that require urgent measures. Those affected need to be actively involved in developing such measures.

1. CONTEXT

The Opening Conference of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion was held in Madrid on 21 January 2010. Entitled *Building together a society for all*, it was a high-level event widely reported in the media.

The Spanish contingent was led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, President of the Spanish Government, Trinidad Jiménez, Spanish Minister for Health and Social Policy, and Miguel Ángel Moratinos, Spanish Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation. The European Commission was represented by its President José Manuel Durão Barroso, and Vladimir Špidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. Members of the European Parliament Iñigo Méndez de Vigo and Jean Lambert also attended, and there were 12 Ministers and Secretaries of State from EU and candidate countries.

Felipe González, former President of the Spanish Government, gave the keynote address, in his capacity as Chair of the Reflection Group on the Future of the European Union. Following a presentation of the European Year's objectives, there were three round tables. The first directly involved people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. The second focused on analysis of experiences and points of view on the Lisbon Strategy, and objectives to reduce poverty. The third discussed challenges for the future.

The conference brought together some 400 participants. It provided an opportunity for more than 30 speakers from a variety of fields (political figures, NGOs, social partners, experts, people experiencing poverty and social exclusion) to take part in panels. Active participation in the debates was also encouraged. A large group of national and international journalists covered the event, attended press conferences and took part in two project visits. The event culminated in a visit to the Prado Museum, where Madretierra, a social enterprise, served drinks and appetisers.

2. OPENING SESSION: OFFICIAL ADDRESSES

Trinidad Jiménez, Minister for Health and Social Policy of the Spanish Government, welcomed participants and spoke of the important challenges that Europe faces at present: economic growth, creation of more and better jobs, and overcoming inequalities in different areas. She focused on the importance of the European social model and insisted on the need to guarantee social welfare for particularly vulnerable groups, such as the disabled, the elderly, and Roma people. She highlighted the precarious and vulnerable situations in which many people now find themselves, exacerbated by recession, and spoke of inequalities, particularly as regards access to health care.

'Europe has an acknowledged social model that makes us strong,' she said, adding that there is political will to find solutions to the social and economic crisis. This involves gaining a better understanding of social exclusion in a changing context, strengthening social measures, the Open Method of Coordination, and involving the whole of society.

She said the Lisbon Treaty provides a unique opportunity to construct an EU that is more relevant for its citizens, more united, more prosperous and free. So the challenge for 2010 is to continue making progress on the European social model to build a European Union for all, and to find solutions together.

Jose Manuel Durão Barroso, President of the European Commission, said the fight against poverty is a political imperative, and although it mainly concerns national governments, *'three out of every four European citizens want to see the EU play a more active role in this field'*. He said the EU is committed to this combat, and has set up a major framework to this end: a legislative body, social cohesion policies, strong social dialogue and a strategy for growth and employment.

He said the Lisbon Treaty has opened a new chapter in the political life of the European Union, providing tools to reinforce the progress that has been achieved. These include the horizontal social clause that makes social cohesion a common objective in all policies, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights that brings together civil, political, economic and social rights, and citizens' rights.

This is the framework in which EU objectives will have to be constructed for 2020. The objectives have a clear goal: to promote a social market economy that is greener, more competitive and more inclusive. One of the objectives of this strategy will be job creation, the cornerstone of every strategy that seeks to counter poverty. In addition, active inclusion policies must ensure that everyone knows their rights, providing a complementary minimum income, together with access to quality social services.

He said that a key objective in the EU's ambitious project is to ensure both internal and external solidarity. Europe is the biggest provider of development aid and will endeavour to keep up momentum despite the recession.

Within the EU, he called for the European Year to be a year of general mobilisation on the part of all social stakeholders, to reduce unacceptable levels of poverty. He underlined that together we can make a change for millions of European citizens, *'making society a fairer place for everyone, to everyone's benefit.'*

President of the Spanish Government José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero began by saying that Europe set an example by providing solidarity abroad, and is a leader in development aid. This is because *'social cohesion and solidarity are components of the fundamental project of the European Union and the most deeply-rooted identity of the Union'*.

The social welfare model, social and cohesion policies, universal health systems, and free education for all citizens are the foundation of the European Union, he said. He said it is necessary and should be obligatory for developed, democratic countries to provide healthcare and education (basic services for human dignity) for everyone who lives there, regardless of their legal status.

Combating poverty and social exclusion should not stay in the realm of theory, but be applied practically, he said. Here, he gave the example of Spain, which, despite serious economic crisis, has maintained and reinforced all benefits and support.

He emphasised the Spanish Presidency's commitment to work with the European Commission to develop the European social agenda, setting goals, driving active inclusion through protection, reinforcing job policies and improving exchange programmes.

He said the Spanish Presidency wants to pay special attention to groups that are at a higher risk of exclusion, such as the elderly, people with disabilities, the unemployed. Their needs will be taken into account along with mainstreamed equality policies, which will be debated at various conferences, meetings and Councils. There will also be a 2nd European Roma Summit, which will put forward integration measures for Roma people in the European Union.

President Rodríguez Zapatero said he hoped to see the EU 2020 Strategy approved in the first half of 2010. He said it should be based on key measures such as reinforcing cooperation in energy, innovation and research, tackling the challenges of ageing, maintaining and further improving the social model, and progressing towards socially and environmentally sustainable competitive growth.

He finished by voicing his intention to work for a European Social Pact, a Pact between European institutions, business organisations and workers' representatives, stressing that *'the strength and the raison d'être of Europe is its solidarity among people, countries and communities, and this should hold in good and bad times'*.

3. KEYNOTE ADDRESS: THE SOCIAL EUROPE WE WANT

Felipe González Márquez, Chair of the Reflection Group and former President of the Spanish Government, started by saying that the consequences of the economic crisis (increased unemployment, poverty and exclusion) and its long-lasting effects may become a burden for future generations.

The EU achieved that I would say "the perfect virtuous circle": high levels of growth, employment and social cohesion, amid social dialogue that not only included enterprises and trade unions, but also other players in civil society such as NGOs. This enabled it to expand democracy and solidarity.

The recession has put the spotlight on Europe's structural problems: unemployment, an ageing population and the unsustainability of protection systems. By the year 2030, Europe will have 30 million fewer people of working age, and by 2050, 70 million fewer. *'Immigration is a medium and long-term necessity, but creates irrational emotions in the short term,'* he said.

He said that although the EU was emerging from recession, structural problems have not been addressed. Young people today are not concerned about losing their freedom, but about not having a job and about the quality of life they might expect. *'For the first time ever, parents do not expect their children to have a better life than they themselves have enjoyed.'*

He said there will have to be a combination of solutions to tackle all-important issues such as greening the economy, new forms of social redistribution and income distribution, growth that creates jobs, improved productivity, and more adaptability. This all comes in a context in which the EU's decision-making process has become more complex, since the number of member states has grown from 12 to 27.

Mr González said that the EU's distinguishing feature — growth that creates jobs and increases productivity to improve social expenditure — was in jeopardy, and that this was the very tool needed to combat some of the structural problems. He emphasised that we can only hope to build a policy to reduce poverty if we have an economy that adds value.

4. PRESENTATION OF THE EUROPEAN YEAR

Vladimír Špidla, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities presented the objectives of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, and its key events. He said that combating poverty is also a responsibility of the European Union, and that social justice is a fundamental concern among Europeans. Structural changes are needed, he added.

He highlighted significant progress made by the European Union in combating poverty over the past decade. Member States' action has been underpinned by

some common objectives: ensuring that everyone has access to rights, resources and services needed to play a full part in social and economic life. Thanks to the European Strategy for Social Protection and Social Inclusion, they have also set up strategic action plans. Mutual learning between both countries and key stakeholders has become a reality thanks to the development of common indicators and many initiatives developed across Europe.

Commissioner Špidla said the campaign in 2010 provides a opportunity to renew commitments to combat poverty and social exclusion, to set ambitious objectives for the coming decade, and assign the resources needed to attain them.

He listed the four priorities for the year: **recognition of rights**, starting with the fundamental right of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to live in dignity and to play a full part in society; **shared responsibility and participation**, increasing public ownership of social inclusion policies and actions; **cohesion**, promoting a more cohesive society by raising public awareness of the benefits for all of a society where poverty is eradicated, fair distribution is enabled and no one is marginalised; and **commitment and concrete action**, emphasising the strong political commitment of the European Union and the Member States to make a decisive impact on poverty and social exclusion.

He recalled the Year's success will also be measured by the ability to make it a reality, visible at all levels, and in particular to reach the public and the media. He stressed the need for inclusive partnerships, and for the Year to involve policymakers, economic stakeholders, the cultural world and the media in a dialogue.

He recalled that many events will be staged during the Year, and some will be directly organised by the European Commission, including a European Focus Week in October. He invited participants to find more information on the European Year's website, available in various languages.

Commissioner Špidla insisted on the need to actively fight stereotypes that are at the heart of discrimination, and to give a voice to people living in poverty. They must be involved in the process, empowering themselves both economically and

socially.

He said that although he was speaking at his last official engagement as Commissioner, he was confident that all those involved in the Year would do so actively.

An awareness-raising **video** entitled ‘Endless Counting’ — was then given its premiere. Intended for wide distribution, particularly on the internet, it recalls that one in six people in Europe lives under the poverty line, and illustrates how this situation affects their daily lives.

5. TESTIMONIES OF PEOPLE IN A SITUATION OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The **first round table** was an opportunity to listen to the testimonies, experiences and opinions of four people who are or were exposed to poverty and social exclusion.

Moderator **Roshan di Puppo, Director of the Social Platform**, said that people should not just be the object of social policies, but also active subjects. She stressed how important it is for citizens and civil society organisations to contribute to policy-making, in line with article 11 of the EU Treaty. She said the Social Pact that the Spanish Presidency had called for should include dialogue with civil society, and called for more recognition of the work carried out by not-for-profit organisations.

People with direct experience of poverty then spoke of what it meant to lack sufficient resources in their everyday lives. ‘*You can’t think beyond today,*’ as one of them put it. They spoke of the way in which poverty damages them, and of the loss of their very rights. ‘*People who don’t know how to defend themselves have fewer rights than others,*’ said **Zoltanne Szvoboda**. Poverty means living with humiliation and scarcity.

People in poverty are asked to get actively involved in society while they are

struggling to secure their daily basic needs, she said. *'You can only think about getting involved in society if you know your daily needs are being met.'* Stereotyping jobless people as lazy was unfair, she added, when many found it impossible to sit still for a moment just to think.

Others called for fundamental rights to be guaranteed, for respect for those living in poverty, who sometimes have to meet bureaucratic requirements that violate their privacy. *'What matters is having such basic things as dignity. And what is dignity? Well, having time, for example,'* said **Geneviève Baert**.

There was a call for a basic income to be guaranteed for all, and for those affected to be considered as active, interested parties as regards their personal and social well-being. *'Our development as people needs to start by us being aware that we are the ones able to change our situation. We have the means to change within us,'* she added.

The panellists spoke of the contradiction they see between what is debated at conferences and meetings and their daily lives. **Mirko Grga** put it this way: *'The Commission says that no-one should be excluded because of their race, but as gypsies we are excluded every day because our children cannot go to school, we are rejected when we look for work, we are relegated to living in ghettos.'*

Participants said they are not seeking special privileges, just the normality that would help them to have dignity in their lives, so that their children have the means to go to school, so that they and their families are not relegated to living on the outskirts of cities, have access to a job, and so on.

Other panellists drew attention to contradictions in some social protection measures. The way in which they are structured can lead to dependence on protection, as the price of accepting a bad, low-paid job can be loss of benefits. *'You're told that you have to look for work, but if you find a job, the terms are terrible, it lasts just a few days and pays very badly. If you take it, you will lose your social benefit and you don't know whether you'll get it back again. What sort of support is that?'* said **Geneviève Baert**.

The debate at the round table also acknowledged the persistence of inequalities which were widening in our societies, and the ways in which they were humiliating for excluded people. Participants said that living in poverty made them feel insecure and robbed them of expectations. This led to intergenerational poverty, because the children of those excluded have fewer opportunities to integrate successfully. *'We don't want our children to suffer what we have suffered,'* as one participant put it.

Others said that they heard about integration from social services and society at large, but what this meant in reality was not clear. *'We are asked to integrate, but what is integration? For some people, it means forgetting who you are and absorbing everything offered here — assimilation. For others it means getting charity clothes and eating at the social services canteen — paternalism. What I would ask for is real integration: I want to be accepted for what I am,'* said **Idriss Sadi**. They suggested that integration should be the result of a process that promotes the individual and their participation in society, and should be achieved with the on-going support of many actors. *'The participation process makes me visible,'* as one put it.

Participants highlighted the need to make European funds more accessible and for a wide public debate on inequality. Stressing the importance of enabling those excluded to retrieve their dignity, they insisted that change is possible, with the right action to bring it about.

The moderator closed the session by referring to three issues that require progress on the European agenda: first, the approval of a directive on minimum income, second, the definitive adoption of the proposed directive for combating discrimination outside the labour market, and third, to better assess the possible impact of liberalisation of services on those excluded.

6. WHAT THE LISBON STRATEGY MEANS FOR POVERTY REDUCTION

The round table moderator, **Aurelio Fernández, Chair of the Social Protection Committee**, asked participants to evaluate the progress and limits of the European Strategy for Social Inclusion with regard to five key issues: elderly people, child poverty, ethnic minorities, promotion of inclusion through work and health, and

the development of active inclusion. High-level representatives from the governments of Spain, Belgium, France, Hungary and the Netherlands took part in the debate.

The moderator and several panellists discussed the need to place the objectives of social cohesion and quality employment at the centre of the EU 2020 Strategy. They said this is a key moment at which to redefine our model, and work towards economic growth that will improve the quality of life of those most vulnerable. They called for action beyond the Open Method of Coordination, setting clear and quantified objectives in the fight against poverty.

'Age is a fundamental factor in social exclusion,' said **Francisco Moza Zapatero (Spain)**, focusing on the challenge of demographic changes. People over the age of 65 has lower income and greater dependence on health services and by the middle of the century, one in three EU citizens will be over 65. He called for social policies that guarantee sufficient income, adequate social and health services, and active ageing measures, emphasizing that investment in these objectives will also generate jobs.

Statistics show that children are those most adversely affected by poverty. **Philippe Courard (Belgium)** stressed the need for a minimum income. *'To solve child poverty, we must debate the guaranteed minimum income. Without this, there can be no progress,'* he said, adding that there had to be the right balance between guarantees for people, and sanctions for public administrations that do not meet their obligations.

'The social inclusion strategy is very important in combating poverty among the Roma minority,' said **László Herczog (Hungary)**. He proposed action in three areas: promoting employment through active methods (including maintaining public employment during crises), reducing social disadvantages, and mainstreaming the inclusion of Roma people in all policies. He recalled that structural Funds are a fundamental instrument and a fair approach is needed to ensure that they are applied according to disaggregation policies. He stressed the need for the 2020 strategy to ensure the mainstreaming of exclusion issues, and called on the European Union to step up its efforts by introducing new measures

and ensuring full implementation of existing policies.

'Poverty is much more than a shortage of material things. Above all, it is the lack of opportunities to participate in society and a lack of expectations for the future,' said **Jetta Klijnsma (Netherlands)**. She said it was very important for people to have the opportunity to integrate through work, but that there was also a need to guarantee a minimum income and social protection. The EU 2020 strategy should set sustainable growth as an objective, along with social fairness and the alleviation of poverty.

Martin Hirsch (France) drew attention to the complexities of poverty. The jobless are poor, but there are also poor workers, he said. *'We need to take action against poverty, setting a balance between a common minimum income, access to employment, and maintenance of universally accessible public services,'*. France has driven a pilot experience on active inclusion, which has shown that social investment has its reward. It is, he said, very important to promote social innovation and to put forward clear objectives to reduce poverty as a way of strengthening the EU strategy in the future.

Panellists debated the complexity of the phenomenon, and the need to adopt common criteria and principles, while adapting measures to different situations (rural / urban poverty) and to different population segments. It is, they said, important to mobilise all resources, to guarantee services and to act at local level.

The moderator finished by drawing three conclusions, from the Social Protection Committee's perspective: the need for strategies that reinforce active inclusion, the need for cultural change, with stronger leadership in social policies to reinforce citizens' confidence, and the need to continue monitoring and improving the way poverty and social exclusion are measured.

7. CHALLENGES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND FUTURE COMMITMENTS POST-2010

The moderator **Maria João Rodrigues** began by saying that although 10 million jobs had been created in Europe in recent years, rates of poverty had not been

reduced. She said there is a need for progress in four directions: to give a leading role to people, to insist on reducing inequalities and not just poverty, to provide new mechanisms and stronger instruments (including the Structural Funds) and to set quantitative objectives. She then opened the debate on future challenges to the panellists.

‘The objective of empowering people in inclusive societies means that we need to put people first,’ said **Antonia Carparelli, Head of Social Inclusion Unit (DG EMPL) at the European Commission**. This had two dimensions: equity, meaning that growth alone will not be enough to achieve inclusion and will have to be accompanied by other policies, and efficiency, meaning that a society that neglects so many people was unacceptable. *‘We cannot allow non-inclusive societies to exist,’* she said. She added that current instruments need to be revised and strengthened, and that all countries should have progressive objectives based on their specific situation.

Jean Lambert, Member of the European Parliament, said the Lisbon Treaty demands structured dialogue, and that the concept of empowerment means the right to be listened to and to be able to respond. It encompasses the right to access and understand information, enjoy rights, the freedom to choose, and to have control of one’s own life. This is not possible without eradicating poverty. She said poverty entails costs such as loss of talent, health problems, education issues, and increased social tensions. She stressed the need for countries to implement EU directives, especially those on anti-discrimination, and emphasized that social spending cannot be reduced during a recession. Employment, cohesion and social inclusion should go hand in hand in the 2020 Strategy.

People in a situation of poverty are still wondering when they are going to see a solution, said **Ludo Horemans, President of European Anti Poverty Network**. Extreme poverty is unacceptable, and the difference between extreme poverty and extreme wealth is immoral. He called for discussion not only about combating poverty, but also about combating extreme wealth. *‘We should aim to end the European Year with precise objectives and instruments,’* he said, adding that the challenge is to eradicate poverty, not to reduce it.

Globalisation has not solved the problem of unemployment, said **John Monks, Secretary General of the European Trade Union Confederation**, and yet it has substantially increased return on capital, which is now double what it was in 1999. Social inclusion basically means social cohesion, he said. To promote that, European institutions and Member States need to put much more emphasis on key problems such as competition between tax regimes.

Among the issues that arose during the debate were the need to improve social protection and its importance in the reduction of child poverty. The quality of services was also highlighted as key pillar of social cohesion. Participants said it was urgent to react and contribute to the EU 2020 Strategy, and a call was made for the European Parliament to be fully involved.

The moderator closed the session with a question. *‘Why should we have to accept extreme levels of poverty and extreme levels of wealth?’* She urged all concerned to make 2010 a year in which tackling poverty was put at the heart of the 2020 Strategy.

8. CLOSING SESSION

Many political figures from national governments and from the European Parliament took part in the closing session, spelling out their key messages in view of the European Year.

Trinidad Jiménez, Minister for Health and Social Policy of the Spanish Government thanked speakers and attendees for their involvement, and welcomed the quality of their contributions.

Iñigo Méndez de Vigo, Member of the European Parliament, stressed the need to increase public administrations’ awareness of the advances implied in incorporating the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the Treaty, as well as European institutions’ duty to combat poverty.

Philippe Courard, Secretary of State for Social Integration and Combating Poverty of Belgium, said he expected to see progress and commitments this year, especially in the field of child poverty.

Xhelal Bajrami, Minister of Labour and Social Policy of Macedonia, stressed the importance of reinforcing policies on social housing, employment and education to combat exclusion.

Mary Hanafin, Minister for Social and Family Affairs of Ireland, said there was a need to mobilise and give a leading role to people who suffer poverty, by organising ways in which they could take part in formulating solutions.

Ivan Svetlik, Minister of Labour, Family and Social Affairs of Slovenia, stressed the need to reinforce active inclusion plans at a local level, improving instruments and participation.

Helena André, Minister of Labour and Social Solidarity of Portugal, said the European Year must serve to create more effective instruments and to involve all players.

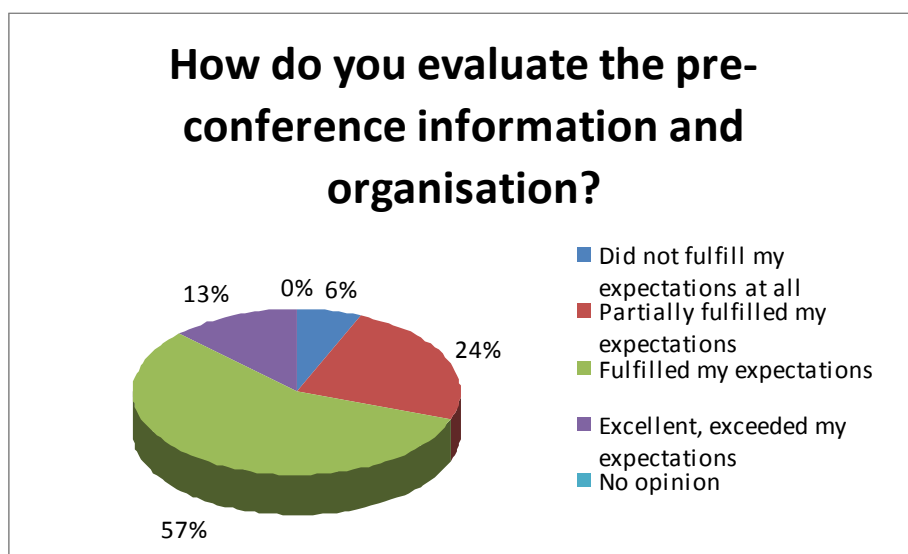
László Herczog, Minister of Social Affairs and Labour of Hungary, said the Year was an opportunity to develop better understanding of the problems, and better methods for combating poverty.

Donatas Jankauskas, Minister of Social Security and Labour of Lithuania, stressed the importance of reaching agreements on social pacts.

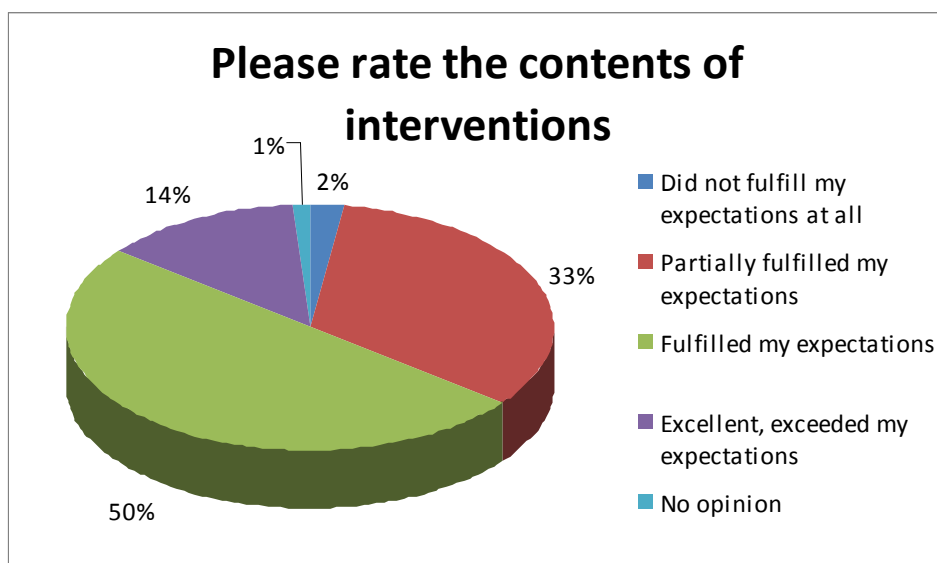
Miguel Ángel Moratinos, Spanish Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation closed the conference, saying the European Year should improve employment and inclusion rates in the European Union. He also reminded participants of the EU's duty to help combat poverty in the developing world through new instruments in development cooperation.

9. EVALUATION OF ATTENDEES

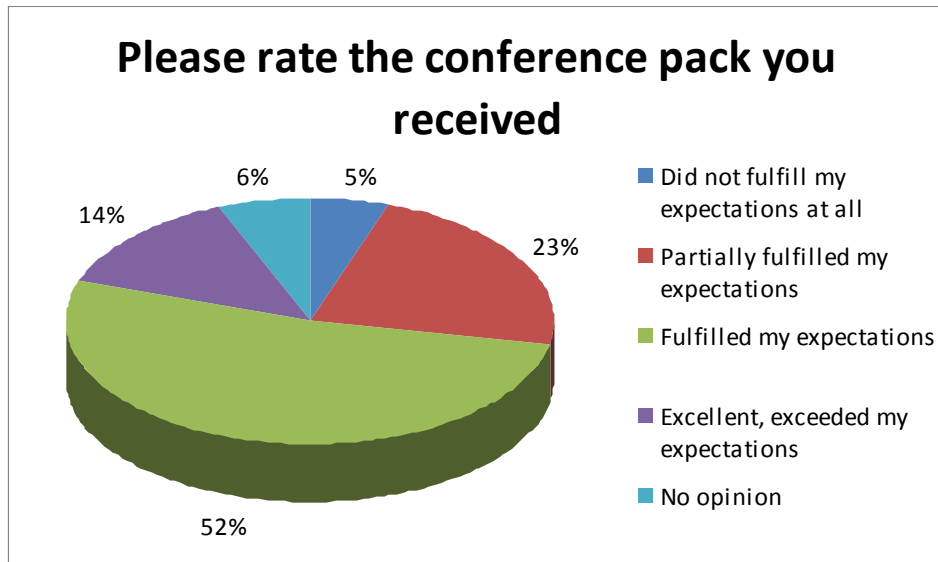
1. Please evaluate information received before the Conference and its organisation



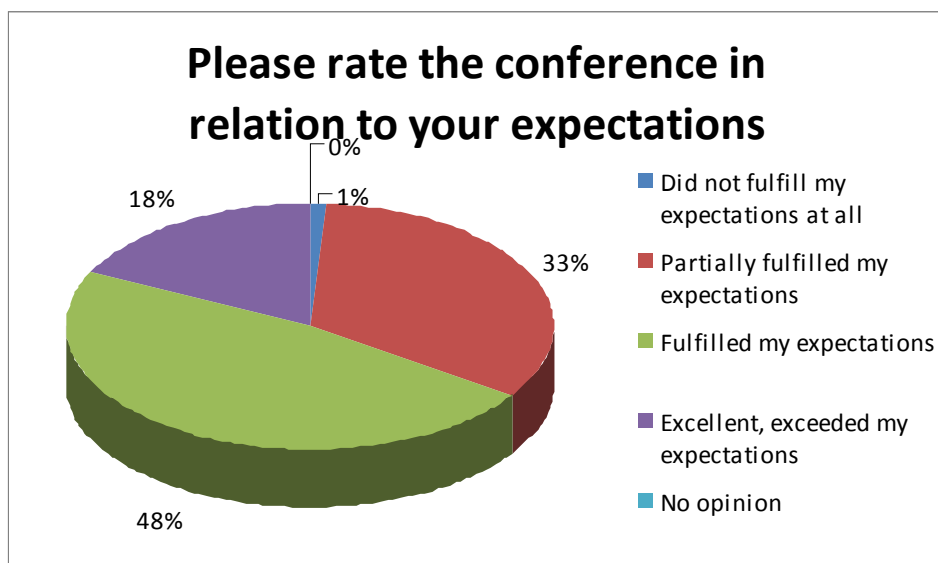
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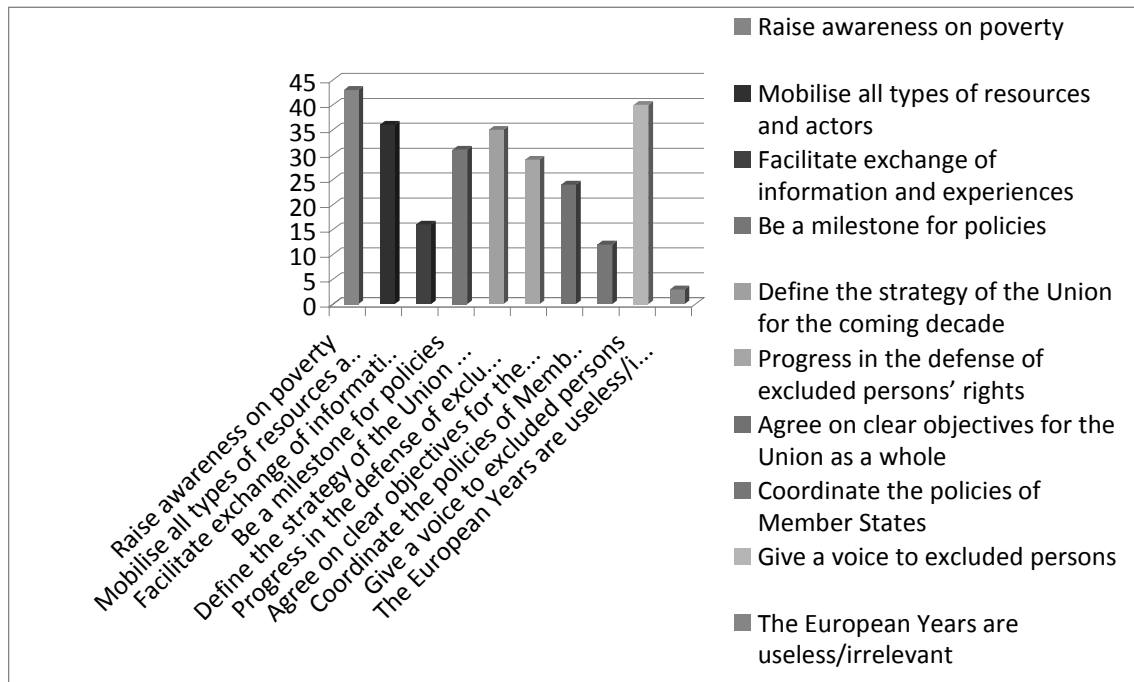
3. What was your opinion of the conference materials that were handed out?



4. To what extent did the Conference meet your expectations?



5. In your opinion the European Year should serve to ... (select a maximum of three responses)



6. How would you improve the Conference? (select a maximum of three responses)

