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Background Note Session I

Meeting of the Chairpersons of the Committees on Social Affairs

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Session I: Poverty and Social Exclusion: Working towards a more inclusive Europe

What is poverty? There have been countless definitions of the word "poverty" and attempts to divide the term between absolute poverty and relative poverty. The European Commission itself, in its Joint Report on Social Inclusion, 2004, has said that "People are said to be living in poverty if their income and resources are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living considered acceptable in the society in which they live. Because of their poverty, they may experience multiple disadvantages through unemployment, low income, poor housing, inadequate healthcare and barriers to lifelong learning, culture, sport and recreation. They are often excluded and marginalised from participating in activities (economic, social and cultural) that are the norm for other people and their access to fundamental rights may be restricted".

"With more than 120 million people in the EU at risk of poverty or social exclusion, EU leaders have pledged to bring at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020. The fight against poverty and social exclusion is at the heart of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth." *European Commission, Joint Report on Social Inclusion 2004*

Up till the year 2000, various legal documents had included provisions relating to the eradication of poverty and social exclusion, amongst which are the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union, the Treaty of Amsterdam and the Lisbon Strategy. The year 2000 also saw the establishment of the Social Protection Committee, which aims to promote cooperation between Member States and the Commission.

In spite of all the work done, the various attempts, projects and programmes, poverty and social exclusion were still a reality in Europe. A steady decrease in the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion was experienced in the period prior to the economic crisis suffered throughout Europe. This reassuring trend was reversed with the impact of the economic crisis and by 2012, the number of people at risk rose by a staggering 24.8%.

Data extracted in 2016 from the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), shows a worsening social situation with 8.1% of the European population living in severe material deprivation and 10.5% living in households with very low job intensity, which makes the 2020 target of having 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty or social exclusion, look unreachable.

In spite of the grim outlook, the European Commission is moving ahead with its work and through the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion, organises regular meetings with relevant stakeholders to make sure of their involvement in the drafting and implementation of policies that are aimed at combating poverty and social exclusion.

The work done by the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion is not exclusive. Through the Open Method of Co-Ordination, Member States regularly hold peer review meetings (attended by experts from the European Commission, other Member States and relevant stakeholders) to discuss good practices and to give expert advice on major policy reforms. In 2016 alone, there were four peer review meetings, all of which tackled subjects that are closely linked to poverty and social exclusion.

Voluntary organisations across Europe (at both national and European level) are active in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The European Anti-Poverty Network has 31 national networks and 18 European organisations that work with the Social Open Method of Co-Ordination (OMC) and the Europe 2020 strategy. This network of organisations gives a voice to persons who are facing poverty and social exclusion by ensuring they are stakeholders in decision-making processes, both at EU and national levels.

Europe 2020 has given very evident priority to issues of poverty and social exclusion and while the targets are still quite a long way from being achieved, work is ongoing and will continue to be given due importance in the hope that people will have a better life in Europe in the years to come.

Questions that may guide the discussion:

- What makes a person poor and socially excluded?
- What is the relationship between poverty and economic inequality?
- Has your Parliament/Chamber adopted any resolutions/reports on the reduction of poverty and social exclusion?
- What roles do national parliaments and the European Parliament have in promoting social inclusion at national and European level?