
9 SOCIAL EQUITY AND JUSTICE

We are committed to securing inclusive and supportive communities.

The commitment to greater social equity and justice is integral to sustainable development. It is increasingly apparent that the issue of environmental quality is inextricably linked with human equality. Globally, countries with a more equal income distribution, greater civil liberties and political rights, and higher literacy levels tend to have higher environmental quality. Sustainable development implies a better quality of life for all, now and in the future, in a just and equitable manner, while living within the limits of supporting ecosystems.

We will therefore work to:

1. Develop and implement programmes to prevent and alleviate poverty.

At the Lisbon Summit in March 2000, building on a long-standing commitment to economic and social cohesion in the EU, the European Council declared that the number of people living below the poverty line in the Union was unacceptable. The Council called for decisive steps to eradicate poverty. There is today wide agreement that a reasonable starting point is to measure poverty in terms of people living in households whose disposable income, adjusted for household size, is less than 60% of the median in the Member State. This definition is that which was recommended by the Task Force on Statistics on Social Exclusion and Poverty (Eurostat, 1998).

There are big regional and national differences. For example, a household with the same living standard may be regarded as poor in a Nordic country, but relatively wealthy in Greece, Portugal or in some new Member States. Technically, the measure used is strictly national. A household that disposes of less than 60 percent of the country's median income may be regarded as poor. According to these criteria, around 72 million Europeans (16%) live under conditions of poverty, which is only 3% less than in 1994. For further information on local action on poverty, see EU Urban Audit indicators: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/urban2/urban/audit/src/publics.html Also refer to ICLEI's Projekt 21 initiative (german language only): <http://www.iclei-europe.org/index.php?id=1263> .

Population ageing will lead to a slight increase in income inequality and poverty in most European countries. Older persons generally have a lower income than working people, so that more people will fall below the poverty line. In addition, income inequality will increase somewhat because of the generally lower income of retired people compared with those in work.

Policies designed to combat poverty will come mainly from national governments, with support from the European Union. However, at the local level, municipalities can ensure that national policies are delivered, and that particular local circumstances do not conspire to exacerbate the economic conditions that may engender poverty. For example, the lack of access to fresh foods in deprived neighbourhoods may create 'food deserts', forcing citizens to buy more expensive and nutritionally poor foods. Similarly, poorly built and insulated housing may create 'fuel poverty', where people may be forced to pay significantly higher proportions of income in order to heat their homes. Planning and housing policies at the local level can significantly impact upon these factors that contribute to poverty.

2. Ensure equitable access to public services, education, employment opportunities, training, information, and cultural activities.

Local governments have considerable influence upon the way in which local public services are provided and accessed. In general, these services tend to be used most effectively by the better-educated and more affluent citizens. The challenge is to create the conditions that will enable those citizens who traditionally have not made full use of these public services to do so. This may require greater publicity of already existing services, with a particular focus upon the traditionally excluded groups – for example, elderly people, black and ethnic minorities, women – and those living in identified deprived areas.

Equally, it will be important to ensure that such services are accessible. In the case of geographically based services such as libraries or certain cultural activities this may mean ensuring accessibility by public transport or, in some cases, working towards either taking the services to people's home (for example mobile libraries) or in the case of new provision, considering how such services might be accessed by previous low user groups. Access to training and education is of particular importance here, in that these services have a major impact upon life chances and opportunities. Local governments can access relevant data from national ministries or organizations such as WHO: www.euro.who.int or www.unesco.org on issues such as literacy rates, in order to set targets on this in their locality.

3. Foster social inclusion and gender equality.

Social inclusion and exclusion are not synonymous with poverty, although the concepts are clearly linked. Whereas poverty refers principally to questions of lack of income, spending power, and consumption processes, social inclusion conveys a wider sense of marginalization and exclusion from the mainstream of society through factors such as race, religion, social class, age, disability and gender, often although not always, linked to income.

The Lisbon European Council of March 2000 asked Member States and the European Commission to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty by 2010. Building a more inclusive European Union is an essential element in achieving the Union's ten-year strategic goal of sustained economic growth, more and better jobs and greater social cohesion (see www.ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/pdf/lisbon_eu.pdf)

Member States co-ordinate their policies for combating poverty and social exclusion on the basis of a process of policy exchanges and mutual learning known as the 'Open Method of Coordination' (OMC) which has five main elements:

1. Agreeing common objectives for the Union
2. Establishing common indicators as a means of comparing best practice and measuring progress
3. Translating the EU objectives into national/regional policies on the basis of National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion
4. Publishing reports analysing and assessing the National Reports
5. Establishing a Community Action Programme to promote policy cooperation and transnational exchange of learning and good practice.

Although the continuous rise in transport demand suggests that European citizens are becoming increasingly mobile, a significant minority of people continue to be excluded from the best that society has to offer, with poor access to mobility often a key factor.

Local governments have a key role to play in this process. For example, European cities have been structured around the car, so that accessing essential services, such as schools and hospitals, shopping, work and entertainment has become difficult for those without their own vehicle.

In 2006, the Commission adopted a Communication highlighting the leading role that Europe's towns and cities should play in creating growth and jobs in Europe, including increased accessibility and mobility.

The Communication Cohesion Policy and cities: the urban contribution to growth and jobs in the regions states that, in European towns "transport planning should take account of those without cars or those unable to drive (eg older people, young people and those with mobility impairments). The goal is to ensure access to jobs and services (healthcare, shopping) and to facilitate personal autonomy without reliance on the private car." With an increasingly ageing society (already 22% of the population is older than 60 and this share is expected to rise to 36% by 2050), the issue of improving accessibility can no longer be neglected.

The riots in French cities in 2005 highlighted the need to come up with new solutions to face the problems of marginalisation in urban areas.

The Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities, which EU ministers adopted in May 2007, devotes considerable attention to the problems of high unemployment and social exclusion stressing the need for an integrated urban development policy, focusing on labour-market improvements, education and training for young people, the development of 'high-quality public spaces' and affordable and efficient urban transport.

4. Improve community safety and security.

Securing the safety and security of citizens is a key element of sustainable development. Local governments may work closely with their police colleagues to develop strategies to combat personal and property crime, particularly street crime. For information on local indicators relating to safety and security of citizens see for example UK local performance indicators: <http://www.local-pi-library.gov.uk//SYSTEM/MODULE/PI/ITEM.ASP?ID=182>

Certain communities may feel vulnerable or at risk as a result of racial or religious victimization. Again, local governments can work with communities to combat racism or religious intolerance.

Environmental improvements to street lighting, pedestrian routes, cycle paths and other similar physical changes may offer significant improvements to personal safety and security, particularly for vulnerable groups such as the elderly or young children.

5. Secure good quality and socially integrated housing and living conditions.

The post-war tradition of subsidized housing in many European countries has guaranteed decent living conditions for many families that might have lived in destitution in countries with less generous benefits. But there is a growing shortage of such housing, and in the face of increased migration to Europe and increasing house prices in the owner-occupied sector - European housing prices have risen by an average annual rate of 7 percent over the past five years – the demand for housing has increased dramatically. Added to this, the housing stock in some of the ex-communist Member States, and the older social housing in other states are now in urgent need of renewal.

Local governments have historically had a major role in housing policy, both as providers of housing and regulators of the private housing market. Although the powers and resources available to local governments in this field varies widely between Member States, local governments will all have some influence over housing provision and quality in their municipalities.

Housing quality is a major factor impacting upon health and quality of life. Moreover, the immediate environment within which housing is located is of equal importance in determining quality of life.