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Let's Make Education a Way Out of Poverty!

17th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty

7-8 November 2018

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FOREWORD

We were thrilled to co-facilitate the 17th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty, on the theme of Poverty and Education. We were particularly excited that this shared facilitation represented a meaningful and visible step on EAPN's journey to transformative and empowering participation of people experiencing poverty in our network.

This meeting took place as we are moving to the end of this political cycle in Europe, with Parliamentary Elections coming up in May, and new leadership expected in the European Commission and Council in late 2019. While we have seen strong political steps and commitments in this cycle (committing to the Sustainable Development Goals, the European Pillar of Social Rights and its associated legislation), we have seen fewer concrete steps in the fight against poverty, with 113 million people still living at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Europe. It is clear to us that our moral, political, economic, social, and educational systems need to be radically reprogrammed in order to make poverty unthinkable and impossible on our continent. This reprogramming should focus on the wellbeing of people, including those facing poverty and social exclusion. That is not only fair, it is smart and beneficial for all.

This year's meeting linked well with European political agenda. The Europe 2020 Strategy includes a dual headline target on education and training, aimed at curbing early school-leaving to under 10%, and improving the completion rate of tertiary education to at least 40%. The first principle of the Pillar of Social Rights states that "Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market." Finally, SDG4 aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities"



We welcome these political commitments – and insist that they must be implemented on the ground, and soon. This implementation requires major public investment that needs to be driven by a radical change of political paradigm - beyond GDP (Gross Domestic Product), towards a rights-based model of social and sustainable development prioritizing fairer income distribution, shared prosperity and human rights and well-being – with the aim being to make Europe poverty free. People experiencing poverty and their civil society organisations are key partners in the design, monitoring, and implementation of these policies.

Our focus this year on the links between education and poverty have raised crucial questions around access to quality and inclusive education (particularly for vulnerable groups facing multiple obstacles), access to technology and the growing technological divide, the hidden costs of poverty in the education system, and how to prevent and support early-school leavers, among many other topics. The 15 discussion tables raised many issues and the

subsequent workshops came up with concrete proposals on how to make education a true way out of poverty and social exclusion.

We strongly encourage European decision makers, in this political cycle and the next, to pay careful attention to the issues being raised in the European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty. For Europe to truly succeed, our decision makers must recognise that we are Europe and that our voices must be heard. Our experiences are important and insightful, and can help shape the future of our continent – a future we can build together and of which we can all be proud.



Vera Hinterdorfer
EAPN Vice President



Leo Williams
EAPN Director



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The theme for the 17th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty (PEP Meeting) was **Poverty and Access to Education**. The event was organised in Brussels, on 7-8 November, by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) with support from the European Commission, the Austrian Presidency of the European Council, and the EAPN Fund.

Among the 120 participants were national delegations of EAPN members, representatives from civil society and trade unions, and volunteer groups from 28 countries. As in previous years, the PEP Meeting was a unique opportunity to share their stories of hardship and hope with one another, and with EU decision-makers.

They were joined by decision-makers from the European Commission, including a virtual appearance by Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), and Katarina Ivanković Knežević, Director for Social Affairs in DG EMPL. Member States were represented by Florian Pecenka from Austria's Department for Education, Science and Research at Austria's Permanent Representation to the EU, on behalf of the Council Presidency, as well as Guy Vanhengel from the Brussels Region Ministry of Finance and Budget.

Hosted at the MCE Conference Centre, in Brussels, delegates entered through a 'market place' of stands and exhibits with clusters of national delegations mingling and sharing stories. Upstairs in the main auditorium the plenaries and closing statements took place. Open discussion was promoted throughout the one-and-a-half day event.

The opening plenary set the scene, with moving testimony from British and Spanish national delegates, set in the context of key EU strategic and political directions (MFF, European Pillar of Social Rights, Europe 2020 and the European Semester, the Skills Agenda, European Social Fund, FEAD), and global initiatives, such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

With the new EU Budget for the Future, the political push for education is gaining momentum, and a big emphasis has been put on social inclusion, according to Florian Pecenka. Commissioner Thyssen confirmed the European Commission's ongoing commitment to the European Meeting of People experiencing Poverty and education in particular, saying that early childhood education and care is a high priority, especially for those growing up in poverty, to break the cycle; something addressed in the Social Pillar and Skills Agenda.

The world café formula, combined with interactive, high-level panel discussions involving leading national and EU policy-makers, provided a rich canvas from which tangible decisions can be made to reconfigure how wealth generation is framed in modern 'social' economies, with education as a powerful lever to pull more people out of the poverty cycle.

The 'freeze flashmob' action at Brussels' Central Station on day two was an eye-catching way to draw attention to major issues and open questions concerning access to education as a way out of poverty. Commuters took photos, asked questions and were handed leaflets as they made their way through the 'frozen' maze of PEP Meeting delegates draped in national and EU flags.



Day one was all about open discussion to further define, refine and outline concrete, actionable recommendations emanating from 15 'table talks', burning questions and themes prepared in advance by national delegations. Eight themes were agreed on for further elaboration in the afternoon workshops, and after a short summary session, four topics were chosen to be presented to decision-makers on day two.

The four concrete recommendations presented to decision-makers (in no set order) were: **early school-leaving; digital divide; disability; and migration** (see later for details). The remaining topics were discussed via the question and answer session with decision-makers. The table talks and workshops were summarised by hosts and note-takers and edited into this report.

Powerful testimonies and strong messages about the right to education for all and the importance of investing in education were heard during the event, reminding everyone that the struggles for good-quality, inclusive education are diverse (impacting on mental and physical health, household budgets, inclusion, etc.).

"We shouldn't have to fight for education, it should be a right!" said Sian Jones, EAPN policy coordinator; a clear take away and signal that the current system is failing to deliver on the ground.

Too many people remain in poverty, real-life skills are not given the credit they deserve in job-search, children still leave school too early, feel excluded or that their talents are not nurtured in crowded schools. Joined-up solutions involving families, communities, students, teachers, social actors, NGOs and the non-formal education sector are needed to deliver innovative ways of working with children (and their families) and adults involved in education processes and connecting formal and non-formal education to create a holistic life-long learning approach which leaves no one behind.

SETTING THE SCENE

Let's make education a way out of poverty!

Despite signs of improvement in most European economies, a staggering 113 million people, or around 25% of the total EU population, are still living at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The widening wealth gap is a strong signal that economic and political systems need an overhaul based on the view that eradicating poverty is a public good, and thus a moral and political obligation.

For the European Anti-Poverty Network, good-quality, inclusive, life-long education is a proven and important part of the path out of poverty, making the choice of **Poverty and Access to Education** as this year's general event theme both timely and insightful. But education alone is not enough. Tackling poverty requires a mix of policies to succeed, among which access to other services, strong social protection systems, pathways to quality and sustainable jobs etc., are important.

Education is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It should be accessible to all and not merely a tool to access the labour market. Education is one of the most important investments a country or region can make in its people and their future.

Thanks to its participatory style, involving people with direct experience of what poverty means in cities, towns and rural communities all over Europe, the 2018 PEP Meeting was well equipped to foster discussion and address the major issues in this theme. These included, among others:

- **How to develop a broad and inclusive education policy**
- **Early-learning, early school-leaving and child poverty**
- **Lifelong learning beyond labour market needs**
- **How to ensure broad participation of students and parents experiencing poverty in education schemes**

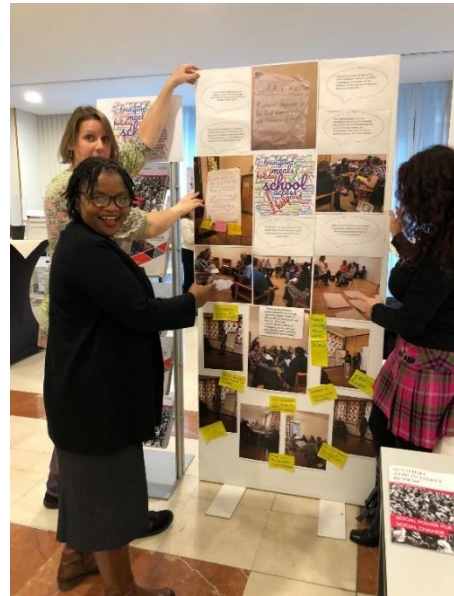


MARKET PLACE

'PEP talk' ... voices from the market place

"Erasmus+ is an opportunity for people who aren't used to studying abroad, to see that it's not elitist. It is also great for experiencing different options, youth exchanges, training ... It's not that hard. It's more than an education programme. They gain interpersonal and -cultural skills and it helps social inclusion."

(Erasmus+'s Alexia Samuel, European Commission and Julien Rubaudo, Dynamo International)



"For us, the PEP Meeting is important to share information. We came early to get ready on time and not miss anything. It's useful to develop ourselves and help others through our experience on the ground, which means not top down. Experience that is not always known."

(Luxembourg's Frank Zeimer, Michael Achu Mutabiri and Markus Berchem)

"We wanted to get some new experiences and contacts, and to learn how other countries are answering tough questions about education, and to hear their different points of view – what the situation is in other Member States like Croatia or other new Member States."

(Finland's Hani Forsell and Jaana Saikkonen)





“Access to education was a good choice of topics. We would add ‘equal’ and ‘quality’ access to that. There’s a gap right now. The figures say one thing, but don’t take into account everyone. Some learn differently, need different formulas. Role models, for example, are important for kids to rely on someone, the ‘one good adult’ can mean a lot to struggling kids with ADHD, for example, who are set up to fail in the current system. All kids need emotional and mental skills too.”

(Ireland’s Paul Uzell)



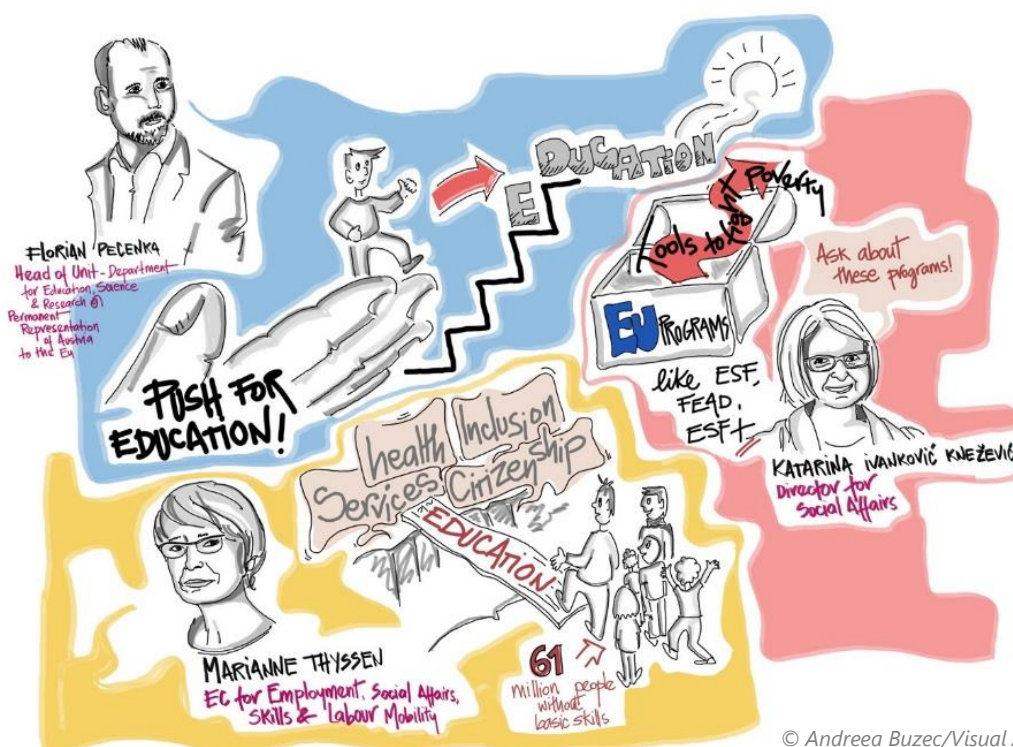
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OPENING PLENARY

For the European Anti-Poverty Network, it is not enough to work **for** people experiencing poverty; what counts is finding sustainable solutions to work **with** them, according to EAPN Vice-President Vera Hinterdorfer. This is the working rationale of the network and is captured perfectly by the annual European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty, which Leo Williams, EAPN Director, described as the “high point” of the year. The audience was reminded of this year’s theme, which was beamed overhead, “Let’s make education a way out of poverty!” and introduced the panel of policy-makers from the European Commission and Austrian Ministry of Education, together with three heart-felt testimonies from people experiencing poverty in Spain and the UK.

Florian Pecenka, Head of Unit Education, Science and Research at the Permanent Representation of Austria to the EU, said education was a well-chosen theme for this edition of the PEP Meeting. Europe’s economic troubles highlighted the need for better, more inclusive education as a way out of the crisis. “But we missed the opportunity in 2011 to really get education at the top of agenda.” With the new EU Budget for the Future (MFF), the political push for education is on, and a big emphasis has been put on social inclusion with double the proposed budget (€30 billion) which he said needs to be shored up. “We need your support for that, too.”

Education is now part of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and is a fundamental right, regardless of age, status and situation, added Hinterdorfer. “It is necessary to get out of poverty not just to get better jobs. Things change fast so it is important to educate and keep up.” And the 2018 PEP is the chance for all of the “life experts” in the room to raise their voices, she said, so that policy-makers can hear real stories and understand the values driving positive change.



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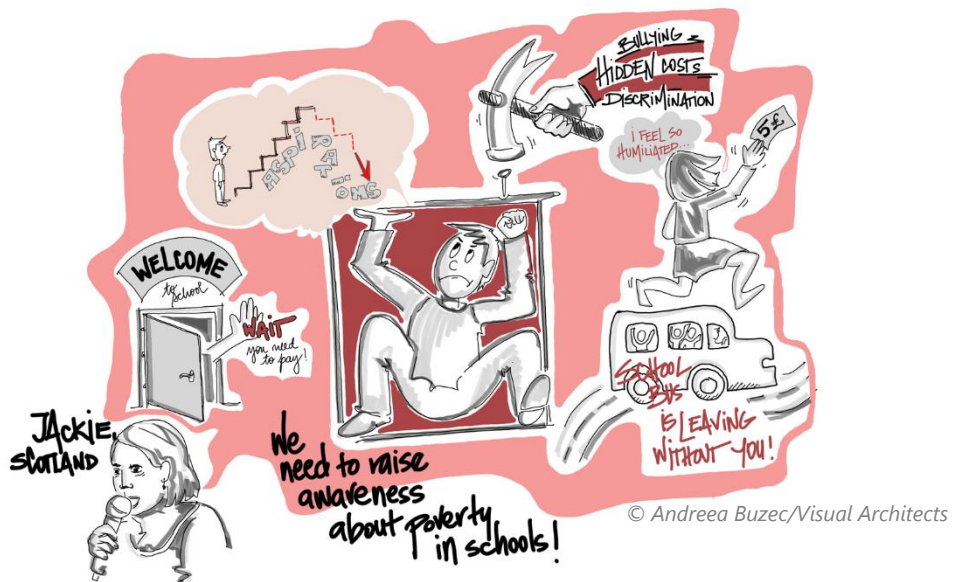
Marianne Thyssen, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion, urged delegates to raise their voices and come up with innovative ideas for good-quality education, training and lifelong learning. The Commissioner gave her address from Vienna, where she was attending a Vocation Education and Training (VET) meeting, as part of the Austrian Presidency. She said it was no coincidence that education, which is close to her heart, was a vital chapter in the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), “investing in everyone’s future”. But with some 61 million adults still struggling with basic skills (numeracy, literacy, digital, etc.), there is work ahead. The [New Skills Agenda](#) for Europe is there, she said, to make sure everyone has the skills needed for better lifelong opportunities. And early childhood education and care is a high priority, especially for those growing up in poverty, to break the cycle.

Powerful testimony

Jackie Stockdale, a mother of three primary school-aged children in the UK, gave powerful testimony of the struggle many Europeans are facing to improve their lives through education, having to work multiple part-time jobs and attending classes on an empty stomach. Despite her best efforts, she still feels trapped in poverty. “How can we escape poverty when the sole focus is day-to-day living?” she lamented, with additional costs of education, such as uniforms, school trips, books and other learning materials. “These hidden costs must be eliminated for children to progress!” The government helps with uniform grants, but it is not enough. She said it is hard for teachers to create an inclusive environment in classes with so much inequality, made worse by a consumer society, and she called for innovative parent-school cooperation to promote inclusiveness and better understanding of poverty. “We need to work together ... and invest in the whole system ... to offer a decent future regardless of a family’s income,” she concluded. For this, voices of people with direct experience of poverty, such as those in the room, have tangible contributions to make. Communication is key, from bottom to top, she said and “more joined-up thinking” is really needed.

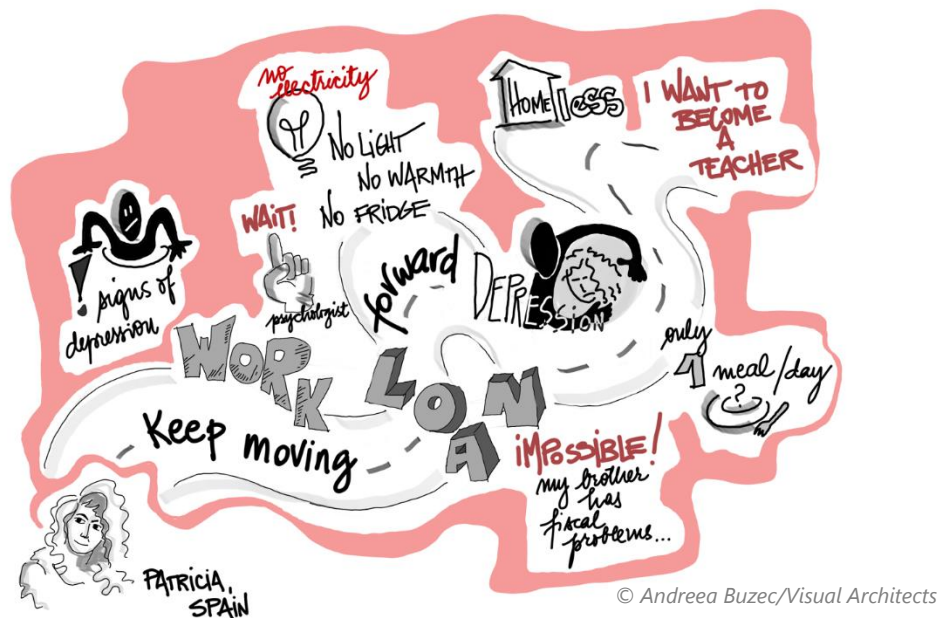


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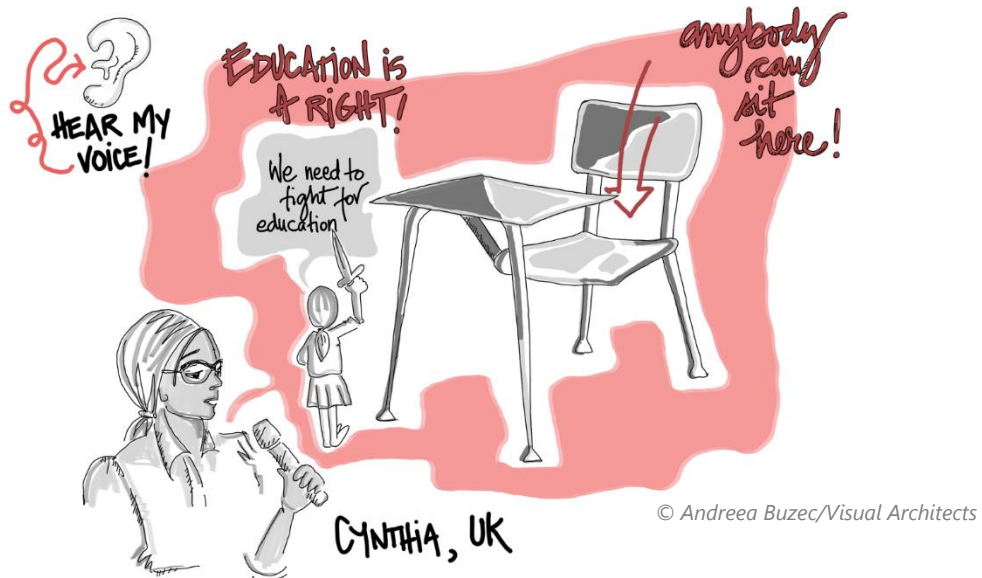
Patricia Pantión Gámez from Spain told a heart-rendering personal account of her mental and physical battle to complete her studies after being forced to leave high school early to support her family. Time and again she was denied study loans, and the strain of working and studying with no family support led to several bouts of depression. At one low point, she had no money to pay the utilities and the power was shut off. That meant no heat, no computer to study, no fridge... "I only had enough money to eat one meal a day," she said. "I broke down and almost didn't finish the course." But she persevered and eventually finished with some help from friends. "That's my story of struggling to finish my education."



Next to take the floor was Cynthia Eniola Oyeneyin, representing the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) who described her "years of overcoming adversity" after being denied a study grant due to her migrant status. "I'd been in the UK ten years, so I felt really let down," she said, "but I picked myself up and decided to raise awareness in colleges and secondary schools about this injustice." On that journey, she met others in a similar limbo situation. Together, they became activists. The law changed after a supreme court decision, but



Cynthia was still not covered, so she had to keep fighting and find other sources of funds, which is when she discovered a special clause in the regulations to help young migrants. Today, she attends Kent University. "I learned that you need to actively fight for what you want," she said. "And I'm pleased to be here with people who share that fight, to make the world a better place and help people access education and better their lives."



Invited to offer some political context and to reflect on these three harrowing stories, Katarina Ivanković Knežević, Director for Social Affairs in DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, said that we need to see the broader picture, because it is more than just education at stake. Social inclusion is a major part of this. "We are blessed to have people like you (Cynthia) who fight and make change possible, to overcome prejudice," she said. There are tools at the EU level, such as the European Social Fund ([ESF](#)), which currently has 20% of its budget earmarked for social inclusion, and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived ([FEAD](#)) which provides food, school materials, and other support to those most in need. She called on all PEP Meeting delegates to bring strong messages to policy-makers to raise awareness of the real struggles, but also the potential out there. "Sometimes fear blocks us from seeing the possibilities," she said. "The window might be open, but we need to feel... safe to [look through] and see the opportunities."

TABLE TALK

The World Café (or 'Knowledge Café, as it is sometimes known) is a simple yet effective format for hosting multi-themed group dialogues and accommodating the complexities and nuances of different contributors and their unique contexts and cultural viewpoints. Advanced preparation in the form of thought-provoking questions is the key to optimising time-limited 'table talks' to be sure that take-homes are on point and actionable.

After the plenary on 7 November, delegates broke out into a series of table talks taking place throughout the venue. The sessions topics sought to answer a series of probing questions proposed and refined during the course of preparations together with EAPN national delegations.



**A summary of each 'table talk' can be found in the following pages.
A more detailed account of the discussions can be found on the EAPN website
or on request.**

World Café is a structured conversation enabling groups of people to share experiences and knowledge on established themes. Topics are assigned to different tables around the venue and participants are encouraged to answer questions and generally discuss prevailing ideas. Several rounds of discussion offer individuals the chance to contribute to different tables/topics with facilitators or 'table hosts' actively stimulating exchanges in order to identify key issues, deepen understanding, and harvest 'collective intelligence' from the national picture already established during preparatory phases.

For more information on this method: www.theworldcafe.com

Table 1: Why do children and young people leave the education system early?

Table host: Laura Marin, EAPN RO

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

What is your own experience, direct or indirect, with early school-leaving (ESL)? Is education perceived as a way out of poverty, something worth investing in? What obstacles, financial or other, prevent children in poor families from completing their education on time? Do parents remove their children from school early so that they can engage in income generating activities (for example seasonal or agricultural work)?

Round one

With participants from Romania, Portugal, Bulgaria, Luxembourg and Ireland, the session focused on volunteering for some time. General accounts for why early school leaving (ESL) takes place include: because children need to work to support families; children with learning difficulties struggle and face discrimination; teachers are demotivated, and lessons become less interesting and too academic; school takes up the whole day; and pressure from coursework. "Income does not depend on education," said a Bulgarian delegate on the perception that education is not seen as a way to increase social mobility. What is the alternative? A Portuguese delegate said, "Yes, education could be a way out of poverty, but people don't believe in it!" Other issues raised included the idea that results-based funding means schools can't offer a good education, leading to more drop-outs, and funding stays low (a vicious cycle). Some participants felt that 'life chances' are often predetermined, and that goes for education and elective subjects as well. It is not relevant enough for the labour market. In some cases, a high education is no guarantee either. In Bulgaria, a top student now works minimum wage for 12-hour shifts to make ends meet. Corruption is another problem. One participant believed exams are deliberately difficult to increase uptake of private lessons/tutoring. Lack of skilled and trained teachers is an issue.

"Education could be a way out of poverty, but people don't believe in it!"

Round two

The second session included participants from Serbia, Italy, Lithuania, Slovenia, Estonia, Luxembourg, and Ireland. An Estonian delegate wondered if everyone was just "living and learning for the labour market" and offered some national statistics (drop-out rates: 3% at primary, 8% secondary, 20% vocational, and over 20% university... 70% of IT students drop out in year one!). It was felt that teachers were key to childhood development, their qualifications/skills and contacts with pupils is important, especially for children affected by poverty who don't recognise their own potential. A Lithuanian labourer (assistant carpenter) said he can earn more than full carpenters, which in his opinion incentivises leaving school early (i.e. for some people higher education can mean lesser-paid jobs). A Luxembourg participant was worried about declining apprenticeship opportunities. Is education a way out of poverty? Consensus was that poverty remains even with a good education, a problem

that erodes self-esteem, and education fails to take into account different ways of learning. One delegate said there was a lack of information about possibilities such as scholarships. In Estonia, it was felt schools didn't teach social skills enough, undermining civic and community spirit. Quality education is definitely a way out of poverty, but poor education is not. In Finland, teachers are valued; you need to be top 10% of class to enter teaching school. This led to the topic of [PISA rankings](#), in which Finland usually scores well, but they are not the whole picture. Estonian also scores high without as much focus on teaching quality (low pay and low incentive) because education is targeted to achieve high scores. Luxembourg is similar to Finland; teachers are well paid but seem to be in it for the money. An Irish participant felt that the system stifled creativity, talents, skills (both in pupils and teachers). Many children leave school lacking basic life-skills which should be addressed by community teachers. "Showing a light, giving hope through a personal relationship" can make a huge difference for a child at a key moment in their education.

Round three

Participants from Poland, Belgium (Romania/Portugal), Scotland, Estonia, Italy and Germany heard what previous sessions had covered. They added that specialists, mentors, and trainers are needed as well to show positive examples and a common spirit among pupils, with stronger pupils helping weaker ones.

The question of whether education systems are well prepared for diversity also came up. In Poland, a participant said it is not the case; no education on diversity takes place because there is still largely a mono-culture in classrooms.

Take-homes from the rounds...

- Contributing factors to early school leaving: cost of education, lack of qualified teachers, corruption; lack of additional resources (psychologists), pressure on pupils, teachers, schools; discrimination and segregation; irrelevance of curriculum to the labour market; irrelevance of education for social mobility; and no guarantees education leads to better income
- ESL is a complex issue needing integrated measures targeting the child, family, school, community and society
- Teachers (their skills/qualifications and contact with the children) are key to education, motivating pupils; 'quality' education is a way out of poverty, but 'poor' education is not



Table 2: Do adults experiencing poverty have access to learning opportunities later in life?

Table host: Dina Vardaramatou, EAPN GR

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

What obstacles, financial or other, do adults face when attempting to complete their education at a later stage in life? How can second and third chance education mechanisms address this situation, and how can they be improved? Are literacy and numerical skills programmes for adults available, effective and accessible? Do older people, who are no longer part of the workforce, still have access to educational opportunities? Is the offer adapted to each person's strengths and needs?

Round one

First it was noted that education for adults included training, and in-work training, which it was felt is limited due to older employees being less valued. This can lead to discrimination and difficulties on the job and during job-search. Workers wanting to up-skill struggle to find time or become demotivated to pursue other avenues of education. Other issues included: mismatches between workforce skills and the labour market; over-focus on quantitative data rather than people themselves, leading to a lack of investment in people, and gaps between training and reality; the quality of the training can be poor and offers no guarantee of a job afterwards in areas where high unemployment is common. Hiring discrimination against older people was a recurring theme, but also against women, people with disabilities. Employers should be held accountable when they do not comply with regulations, it was felt. One delegate pointed out that not all adults wanted to participate in



the workforce or pursue opportunities for better education. A barrier to education for adults is often financial insecurity, it was concluded.

“Workers wanting to up-skill struggle to find time or become demotivated to pursue other avenues of education.”

Round two

Poor education systems and work environments offer little motivation to continue education, leading to a vicious cycle of working to survive and finding no time to improve the situation with diplomas or new skills. Participants felt that education should be given much higher priority (and funding) as an incentive for older adults both in and out of work. Some academic and life skills are not recognised or sufficiently valued in many countries. Over 65s can still learn new skills but often have few opportunities because they need to work and continue contributing to their pension.

Round three

Education is not necessarily seen as positive by all because it can lead to 'overqualified' job-seekers of all ages. Yet over-emphasis on academic education can have the opposite effect because life skills are undervalued. Changes were called for to ensure employers acknowledge life skills and are prepared to pay for qualified staff (i.e. "There is no such thing as being overqualified, employers just don't want to pay for them!"), and for workers/job-seekers to find an educational balance. Governments need to make concrete proposals to tackle these issues, the participants said.

Take-homes from the rounds...

- Financial insecurity (having to work leaves little time to improve skills and take part in training) and a mismatch between training/skills and labour market needs are barriers to education for the older workforce
- Discrimination against older workers/job-seekers is a problem, but also against women, people with disabilities, and different social groups
- Heavy focus on numbers not people dehumanises and demotivates older workers/job-seekers who see their life skills as undervalued in the digital age

Table 3: How can vocational education and adult learning opportunities be tailored to support people who are unemployed to access the job market?

Table host: Fintan Farrell, EAPN Europe

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

What is your direct experience with vocational education in the perspective of accessing employment? Are they relevant for what people need? Do they help people to get quality, sustainable jobs? What role for Public Employment Services (PES) in supporting the unemployed towards education and identifying opportunities to upgrade their skills? Is the approach of PES supporting people to find a job or rather sanctioning people who cannot find jobs? What obstacles, financial and non-financial, do the unemployed face when trying to access training?

Round one

Participants discussed the difficulties of finding relevant adult training to get back on track. Lack of job opportunities is the main issue. "The problem is you do all these studies and when you finish there's no job," said a Portuguese delegate, echoed by one from Finland ("There's no match between the training and the needs."). Wrong assumptions about unemployed people (that they are unskilled, monolingual and can't use digital tools) are a barrier. Not all people who engage in training are unskilled and older people are willing to change and adapt, the Finnish delegate added. Some workers feel pressure to do vocational

training, but they have to pay for it themselves. Free adult training provided by governments typically takes place during the day, which makes it hard for workers and active job-seekers.

“The problem is you do all these studies and when you finish there’s no job.”

Round two

In some countries like Portugal, the government training/courses are not valued by private companies. University degrees and diplomas are better recognised. “Vocational education has lost its value in many countries,” a participant from Finland stressed. Unpaid (re)training in companies is one solution offered to job-seekers, but participants said these internships rarely or never lead to permanent job offers; and job-seekers often can’t refuse to do them because their unemployment benefits will be cut off. “If you have been unemployed for a long time, you are sent to workplace training, but these companies only see it as a free workforce,” said a Danish delegate. For many participants, free education would help to solve many of the problems linked to adult training and unemployment. “People need to be empowered to have direct access to education,” a participant from France concluded.

Round three

Participants offered stories and examples in their own countries. For instance, in Romania, many people prefer working on the black market rather than having a poorly paid work or “the jobs no one wants to take up”. Many people feel obliged to accept training spots and badly paid jobs because of how it is perceived to be out of work. Sometimes, solutions look good on paper but not in reality. Some programmes are tailored to people who have no or very low education. But participants said these “second chance” programmes were only available in very few communities and most of the schools are not interested in organising them.



Take-homes from the rounds...

- There is a gap between training and available jobs; it needs to be tailored to individual profiles
- Wrong assumptions about unemployment mean vocational education and adult learning are not well tailored to job-seekers’ needs
- Compulsion and ‘threats’ of sanctions versus respecting people’s choices, and offering free vocational education to empower people

Table 4: How can we support low-income families and children to access education and training?

Table host: Twimukye Mushaka, EAPN UK

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

What are the financial obstacles to access education and training for families and children living in poverty? Is 'free education' (when we do not pay fees) actually free? What are the other costs related to education – housing, clothing, transport, books, school trips, etc.? What role for family benefits and child allowances in supporting children living in poverty go to school? What kind of material support (books, clothes, meals) could be provided by the schools themselves? What other type of support could be helpful?

Round one

On the subject of financial obstacles, participants said education support for low-income families, like vouchers and school materials in Malta, only go so far when you still have transportation, uniforms, meals and activities to cover (often in one advance payment). Add to that the cost of rent close to good schools. Relatives sometimes have to pitch in and help. Governments need to be lobbied to make up the shortfall for struggling families. A diploma is not enough to get a job: "Today, you need a Master's, a PhD... How can you do all of these things while living in poverty?" A Macedonian participant gave a similar account of so-called 'free education' under the country's new social protection programme, which only really covers half of the real costs. Education is mandatory, but not fair for everyone. Adequate minimum income would be a better way of bridging the gap. Others agreed that mobility is a real hurdle. Other topics covered included: migration and diversity; different languages in school; the importance of extra-curricular activities; and adult education programmes and support groups for low-skilled workers. The Youth Guarantee was mentioned along with calls for more EU support for apprenticeships and to fill the gaps in national and NGO funding for investments in long-term education, not just short-term fixes. A Maltese delegate spoke of the hardship in many households, including hers, where domestic violence, poverty and many dependants put a huge strain on the family. The stigma of poverty, bullying and other pressures is hard on families. More action is needed to address domestic issues.



"Today, you need a Masters, a PhD to get a job..."

Round two

The issue of nutrition, health, learning and feeding families on low incomes, especially during the holidays when the 'one hot meal a day' is taken away, was raised by Spanish participants. In some countries, that meal is not provided free of charge and packed lunches are forbidden. Families who can't afford that meal often go without. In Andalucía, a summer/holiday meal programme has started. Italian delegates spoke of food inequality and how training and guidelines for families on good nutrition would help. The effects of domestic violence on children's ability to learn, which was raised in session one, was further discussed with examples from Hungary and elsewhere. Teachers need training and support to identify and deal with behavioural problems. As too the importance of free, inclusive, life-long (re)education paid for by progressive taxes, as in the Spanish case. Education is one of the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, a delegate pointed out. The challenges of integrating minorities and marginalised communities was discussed: "We have to educate families because sometimes children are integrated but parents are not," said a Spanish participant.

Round three

"You need to understand what is important for the people, ask questions and engage them in the conversation," an Italian participant captured the spirit of the last session, which dealt with issues such as access to technology, community building initiatives for low-income families, homelessness education problems (no fixed address), and ideas to empower poor people and ways to pay for it. Crowd-funding was suggested by a Dutch delegate as a way to provide computers and education materials for low-income families. Creating a 'community' for people to help themselves and improve their skills was regarded as a sustainable solution, not only to financing better education but also to reinforcing values and bringing families into the system. Access to technology is important, but in the end empowering people is the most sustainable solution, it was concluded. It doesn't matter if you have an iPhone or the latest technology, "...you have to make people stronger so they don't care about that".

Take-homes from the rounds...

- Limited financial support from national governments (social security) puts families at risk; calls for adequate minimum income, educational benefits and investment in long-term solutions
- The effects of nutrition (especially 'holiday hunger'), domestic violence and integration on education were discussed, as well as free and inclusive education (i.e. progressive taxes)
- Access to technology, community building initiatives for low-income families, homelessness education problems, and other ways to empower poor people

Table 5: What are the non-financial obstacles preventing people in poverty from accessing education and training?

Table host: Judith Tobac, EAPN BE

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

Aside from money/income, what are the main obstacles to accessing quality education when living in poverty? Are there enough educational facilities in your area, and is it easy to reach them? Are there convenient public transport links, is it affordable? Are the schools and educational institutions in your areas adequately staffed and equipped to cater for the needs of a very diverse student body, with complex individual learning and development needs? What other factors (aside financial support) would make it easier for people in poverty and their children to access education and training opportunities?

Round one

Participants noted the impact of ill-health in general, and mental ill-health in particular, as one of the barriers to accessing formal and or informal education opportunities. Digital exclusion is a big barrier as well, with children sometimes expected to do homework using new technology that they don't have



at home. This hinders learning and stigmatises the children and their parents, making them feel embarrassed about being poor. Or they don't "fit in" because they don't have "trendy" clothes, phones and pocket money. The cost of childcare and lack of a support network is another barrier to accessing education. And there is not enough information on what support is available to enable children and adults better access to education. Making educational information easily accessible should be part of the fabric of access to education for all.

"Digital exclusion is a big barrier ... with children sometimes expected to do homework using new technology that they don't have at home."

Round two

People have busy lives, juggling the responsibility of raising a family and working, which makes it practically impossible to find time for additional education. Poor access to good-quality education close to home was also noted. To improve their chances, children sometimes attend schools outside their catchment areas, but this means more time commuting/travelling and less time for extra curricular activities. Active parental involvement in the "education journey" was also considered critical to children's development. Most countries still lag behind in supporting the educational needs of children and adults with disabilities, the group felt. Investment in digital services for better inclusion is a priority area, according to the table. Overcoming prejudice about poverty and education

is also important: the assumption that people from deprived areas are not expected to do well in school is very damaging. It was noted that Europe's education system is too rigid and often boring to most children and young people. Innovation is needed to develop better ways of making education more interesting and inclusive for everyone, as a public good.

Round three

Poor transport and high costs of mobility were emphasised as barriers to education for people in poverty. Access to school meals for everyone was also considered important, as a hungry child has more difficulty engaging and learning. It is important that children are fed well in order to reach their potential. In some countries, it was reported that there are divisions between children from poor and affluent backgrounds.

Take-homes from the rounds...

- Issues like ill-health (mental and physical), childcare support networks, digital exclusion and poorer children not fitting in were all raised
- Busy lives, long distances between schools and extra-curricular activities, and overcoming prejudices about people in poverty's ability or motivation to learn need addressing
- Poor and expensive transport, socio-economic divisions in school, and the importance of making sure children are well fed in order to learn and engage were all discussed

Table 6: What prevents migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees to successfully integrate the education system of the receiving country?

Table host: Ban Hussein, Coram Children's Legal Centre, UK

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

What are the main barriers for these groups to entering and succeeding in the education system? How can they be best overcome? What is the main reason for lower educational achievement in their case? How to combat the discrimination based on race, skin colour, ethnic origin, religion or nationality? What kind of support do these groups need in order to make sure that they can fully participate in and make the best of the education system?

Round one

Lack of legal status in Europe affects the entitlements migrants and asylum-seekers have in the receiving country. Insufficient psychological support, ineffective immigration systems, discrimination and red tape are all barriers faced. Poor training on the needs of newly arrived migrants, barriers between the government and local people/migrants are also issues. A Belgian participant highlighted the struggles (personal and administrative) of marrying and raising a family with a migrant. Institutional racism based on colour, religion and language

ability is common. Long periods of waiting for papers confirming the migrant can stay are wasted. In Sweden, for example, it can mean years of no school, training or work (time spent outside society). An Albanian delegate echoed the problem of feeling excluded from the Greek labour market despite having good qualifications, and a lack of structure, support and experienced social workers which forces migrants to move on. An Irish delegate said education systems were failing children and parents, and migrants are often excluded altogether. They need help to adapt to reality on the ground, an empathising learning environment prioritising basic kindness and socialisation skills (a lot of this starts in the home). A Scottish delegate working with children in care, including asylum-seekers, said refugees were widely misunderstood. Problems faced by younger people were also highlighted: extended studying with little experience or being turned away because they are 'overqualified' (academically). Work placement can help if better coordinated between universities and employers. The perception of the cost of hiring people with high qualifications is an issue for older people too. Compromise is needed between market expectations and personal goals/ambitions. Universities struggle to find that middle way. On a positive note, a Serbian participant whose partner is from Sudan had a daughter who felt 'different' but in a good way. At 18, she moved to England to study, and is now a university professor.

“Education systems are failing children and parents, and migrants are often excluded altogether. Politicians don’t seem to empathise.”

Round two

On the question of how to combat the discrimination based on race, skin colour, ethnicity, religion and nationality, participants called for fundamental reforms in society to tackle the prejudiced systems in place. Positive discrimination leads to confusion: “Black students get into Oxford every year based on skills and this is not recognised by the other white students.” Better awareness is needed of how ethnic minorities can make a difference and contribute positively to society. In Greece, a highly institutional education system is a barrier to integration on the grounds of religion. There is no structural discrimination in Norway, but it still exists in practice: accessing education is not a problem, getting a job at the end of school remains difficult for ethnic minorities. The group proposed a fast-track system for validating the equivalence of diplomas, and free language courses for everybody. A UK delegate called for government officials to listen to the people and be held accountable. In Sweden, the government rushes people through language courses, but not enough attention is paid to the cultural aspects.

Round three

On the subject of support measures, several proposals were put forward. A starting point is better and faster language-learning upon arrival in the host country. A Finnish participant said sports and hobbies were good ways to meet people and learn the language (fostering what another delegate called “native friendships”). Professional match-making and mentoring was another proposal (put people together to share experience). A Serbian example is the work of cultural mediators to tackle the “we want them out of the country”

mentality. Broadly, it was felt countries needed to help refugees learn the steps to follow when they arrive.

Take-homes from the rounds...

- Political failures, lack of empathy, training and social assistance, institutional racism, language barriers, uncertain legal status and poor awareness of migrants' entitlements in the receiving country
- Solutions to discrimination include a fast-track for qualification recognition, more accessible and better language studies, cultural awareness campaigns for host countries (education on the positives of diversity), removal of institutional and religious barriers to integration
- Additional support for language acquisition is a priority, and cultural connections through hobbies, mediators, mentors and professional match-ups were all ideas to foster 'native friendships'

Table 7: How to ensure equal access to education for children and students with a physical or mental disability?

Table host: Caroline Van Der Hoeven, EAPN BE

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

Is there enough trained personnel (counsellors, teaching assistants, social and support workers, doctors) in the schools in your country to support these students? Are educational facilities accessible to those with reduced mobility and are they adapted to take into account their needs? How to combat discrimination in the school environment towards those with a physical or learning disability? What other measures (additional support, catch-up classes, etc.) are needed?

Round one

Broadly, participants felt there was a lack of quality support for those with mental or physical disabilities, leading to negative perceptions and segregation within schools and in society. This affects transitions within mainstream schools and the labour market after schooling. Reasons for this disconnect include: poor communication between school psychologists and teachers, resulting in children being stigmatised and feeling excluded which can cause stress and anxiety. Poor diagnosis and evaluation mean different levels and types of intellectual disabilities are not identified. Inclusive schools also struggle to cope with different abilities, it was suggested, with high drop-out rates due to a sense of not belonging (separation within the system) and lack of progress. Non-formal education was identified as important to fill the gap and help children transition into independent working lives. But more needs to be done to promote this approach, to include everyone and educate people about the positive contributions of people with mental or physical disabilities. But today, education

systems and labour markets fail to help these young people develop their unique talents and skills.

“Non-formal education is important to fill the gap and help children transition into independent working lives.”

Round two

People with a mental/physical disability are not seen as productive and capable by the education and labour systems. This results in far less opportunities and lower quality of work



and education. As they are disregarded, the tools and money that should be directed to supporting them is instead allocated to unrelated sectors. This isolation and lack of encouragement and belief has negative effects on mental health. “It’s like there’s no interest in including these people,” said a participant from Iceland. More support in classrooms is needed to help students

individually, and for this to be implemented successfully they must be well trained and paid. Money was a recurring theme in the session; instead of being seen as positive in this setting or an investment in young people’s productive and inclusive future, it is viewed as a burden or cost to the school or society. Teachers therefore don’t have enough tools or help to keep an eye on classrooms and their students (bullying goes unnoticed). The alternative, special needs classes or ‘segregation’, just further stigmatises disabilities and the students who have them, lowering their self-esteem.

Round three

Based on the challenges identified in previous sessions, participants agreed that schools needed to be granted more flexibility to tailor courses and adapt procedures which would help to bring down barriers for all students, starting with greater awareness of inclusion/equality, disabilities, and accessibility issues, and the role that everyone can play in productive societies if their unique strengths are identified and invested in. “It’s important to fight for it, to fight for it everyday,” said one delegate from Serbia. And that means involving people with learning and physical disabilities in the dialogue and encouraging them to speak up and take advantage of what is out there (the Erasmus programme was offered as an example). Primary and some secondary schools are improving and working towards inclusiveness, it was felt, but tertiary schools and their staff are less progressive. One participant said ‘accessibility’ was not only about ramps or building codes, but also the wider environment ... “integrated into society as whole”. Calls were made for a code of good conduct/practices to be better promoted and explained, to show commitment to inclusive and accessible schools.

Take-homes from the rounds...

- Children with physical or mental disabilities need positive and inclusive transitions into the work force and mainstream society, with unique talents identified, developed and recognised
- Mental/physical disabled people are not seen as productive and capable by the education and labour systems (not a good investment), so their opportunities are fewer
- Schools need more flexibility to bring down barriers for all students, starting with greater awareness of inclusion, disabilities, and accessibility issues, and the role that everyone can play in productive societies

Table 8: What forms of segregation, discrimination and bullying do children and young people living in poverty experience in schools and other educational institutions?

Table host: Anna Vermunt, ATD Fourth World

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

What forms of segregation and discrimination are you aware of? Is school segregation a reality in your country? Are Roma children, or poor children, placed in so-called 'special needs' schools? How widespread is the phenomenon? Do schools have effective anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies and classes supporting inclusive education for all? Is staff trained to deal with these situations? Are there measures ensuring that every child is empowered to grow, learn, and develop to the best of their abilities?

Round one

Discrimination, labelling, bullying and stigmatisation on many grounds starts in early school and, left unchecked, can carry on throughout school years. Parents and teachers are sometimes part of the problem. Differences appear in small ways and in outside activities too (e.g. not being able to afford gifts or birthday parties). In Iceland, church aid tops up government services. In



Romania, segregation is a problem (poor kids often sit at the back of the class and Roma children are still sent to separate schools); NGOs and community services fill the gap left by government, providing things like a hot meal at school. Schools are integrated in Luxembourg, and the government provides meals and school materials for low-income families, but the cost of housing is the big problem, and you need be domiciled in Luxembourg to access help. "School is normative, and differences (clothing, accent, etc.) are

grounds to be bullied,” said one delegate. Courses about diversity, being open to different things and not judging by appearance, are needed to keep children in school and prepare them to become well-rounded members of society with the tools to get out of the cycle of poverty. Support from/for parents and from/for teachers is also needed, but schools lack funding for this.

“Courses about diversity, being open to different things and not judging by appearance, are needed.”

Round two

A recap of session one and some personal testimonies of bullying, feeling different, not having ‘cool’ clothes and the difficulties faced when changing schools and trying to fit in. One delegate felt a single ‘platform’ to bring people together specifically for issues of child poverty would tackle the main problems, whether it be language difficulties, inexperienced teachers in Portugal, discouraging children from poor families with higher academic ambitions in the Netherlands, or a shared problem of segregation in school canteens which only reinforces the differences between “well-to-do and poor(er) children”. The issue of teenage migrants being ‘encouraged’ towards trades and technical subjects to improve their chances in a prejudiced labour market was discussed, as too the role of social workers, parents, teachers, career counsellors in these decisions. Teaching quality and lack of motivation was also raised as an issue going forward.

Round three

Technology such as smart phones and tablets, or the mandatory use of it in coursework, is creating a ‘digital gap’ in education. Those who can’t afford it like foster children and poorer migrant families fall behind from the start. The International Bill on Human Rights should be better known/communicated and applied at all levels, including in schools, as a de facto right to education! This session rewound a little to explore the origins of prejudice and revealed it comes in diverse forms, on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background as well as socio-economic discrimination. Attempts to tackle some of these through the Czech Republic’s ‘inclusive education and special school’ programme (for people with disabilities, Roma, poor children, etc.) were a “disaster”; children in this school accomplished nothing, the delegate said. Things are better now with totally mixed schooling, more assistants in some classes, and a degree of choice (e.g. schools closer to parent’s work), but the problems are not resolved. An EU-supported FEAD project for school lunches was also mentioned. Croatia relies on volunteers to fill the gaps (only part-time support is provided) helping children with special needs; otherwise they have to stay home. Students from different religious backgrounds are also left no choice but to stay out of school in some countries because they are discriminated against. The problem of prejudice (“just assuming” things about migrant children, for example) extends to teachers too, who need training to learn how to address the needs of these children.

Take-homes from the rounds...

- Children from poor families stop school too early – it is vital to keep them in school, so they have the tools to get out of the cycle of poverty
- Better teacher training on bullying and discrimination is needed to create a better environment for educating children and stop alienation in schools
- Diverse forms of discrimination (digital, social, economic, racial, etc.) are evident, and political leaders not fully aware/supportive

Table 9: What role for teachers in ensuring quality and inclusive education for all?

Table host: Magda Tancau, EAPN Europe

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

What is the quality of teacher training in your country? Is teaching staff adequately remunerated and enjoying good working conditions? Are there enough teachers? Is additional training available for teachers to deal with complex realities of a very diverse student body – including fighting discrimination and bullying, integrating special needs, supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds? How can we better support the teaching staff to deliver quality and inclusive education for all?

Round one

Participants from Croatia, Estonia, Serbia, Romania, France and a representative of the European Commission tackled this question from different angles. In Serbia, for example, it was learned that teacher strikes were the culmination of poor conditions and growing issues with low pay, crowding, literacy, diverse backgrounds/abilities, no additional social support or counselling, and more. Poor pay and crowded classes were common in Estonian and Croatian schools too, leading to early school-leaving and poor job prospects. A participant from the European Commission noted the stature of teachers was not high enough to attract good candidates in most countries. Teachers in Romania struggle inside and outside class, with many children from poor backgrounds needing extra help. Issues like poor hygiene, nutrition and family distress affect many countries present around the table. Programmes in Estonia to provide breakfast to children in need and an EU 'milk and fruit' scheme were mentioned. A French delegate said teachers struggle to control the class because they lack decision-making freedom. The group reflected for some time on the role of teachers in modern classrooms today.

"Teachers should be asking: How can we make it work for you, do you need a mentor or extra help?"

Round two

Delegates from Serbia, Scotland, Austria and the European Commission explored the many pressures on teachers and schools today. "There are so many demands on teachers! They have to be everything for everybody," noted the UK participant, calling for better resources and teacher-student ratios. The group agreed, adding that training for special needs students was lacking, especially in how to communicate with diverse students and encourage them to learn. The problem of the teaching profession being recognised and appreciated (financially, in society or on social media) came up. Budget cuts, lack of freedom for teachers to spice up classes, or the feeling that they have to be entertainers but also social workers to deal with problem children or those that don't respect others in the class are all issues teachers are facing. The level of training and qualification, including additional modules now for special needs and other pedagogic and didactic topics, should be reflected in teacher salaries. It was concluded that students, parents and society should understand the role of teachers better to better manage expectations; and that a balance between class and home support was needed. These measures and others are key to attracting highly qualified candidates to the teaching profession, it was felt. And that these teachers are properly trained for 'inclusive' classroom needs (differently abled students with cognitive, physical or behavioural issues) with the right skills to motivate and nurture the children with compassion and professionalism.

Round three

The discussion was propelled by a group of young people from the UK with a migrant background and very recent experience of the education system. The impression was that the government puts pressure on teachers to direct students towards sciences in order to boost the statistics rather than treat them as individuals with specific needs and interests. Smart children and those really struggling get most of the teacher's attention. What about the ones in the middle who also need help; who takes care of them? Teachers should be asking: How can we make it work for you, do you need a mentor or extra help? Teachers really need a wider set of skills today, but many lack the tools, especially to help students facing certain problems. An Italian delegate suggested the creation of institutional guidelines for teachers on how to approach students like this, more training on how to really listen. They should also acknowledge and apply the assumption that 'learning how to learn' is a key competence. It is important to teach students values and not only to pump in layers of information, the EC delegate added.

Take-homes from the rounds...

- The role of good teachers is to help students discover who they are and what they want to become, not to push them towards a 'desirable' career path; more reflection is needed on the role and stature of teaching in society, and greater effort (information, remuneration) is needed to encourage young people to take up the profession (good teachers are critical to good education; it is a cycle).
- Students, parents and society should understand the role of teachers better, to manage expectation. Better training and appreciation (financial and societal) of the role of

teachers in the education of future generations would help to attract highly qualified candidates to the profession who are properly trained for 'inclusive' classroom needs.

- Teachers need a wider set of skills, but often lack the tools to help students facing certain problems or those struggling in the middle. Learning to listen should be part of the training process.

Table 10: What obstacles do parents experiencing poverty face when actively engaging with their children's school and supporting their children in accessing educational opportunities?

Table host: Bert Luyts, ATD Fourth World

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

What are the main challenges a parent in poverty faces when it comes to supporting their children in education? What kind of financial and material support measures exist in your country, and how can they be implemented to be more effective? What other measures – classes, support groups, parent-teacher conferences, etc. – would be helpful in this context, to foster a better link between schools and families and to ensure that parents are key actors in delivering quality and inclusive education?

Round one



One of the main barriers to active engagement by parents is the fear of being unfairly judged and rejected or excluded by teachers or the school community. Embarrassment and the desire to conceal their circumstances from others – social, health, nutrition, housing, etc. – is as important as lack of resources and time, according to the participants in the session who came from

Norway, Belgium, Italy and International Federation of Social Workers. Measures put forward to overcome this included more effort by schools/teachers to make parents feel welcome through "open and inclusive communication" and learning opportunities to all (accessible school events that don't single out disadvantaged parents). Teaching outside the classroom, such as community facilities close to pupils' homes, were advocated by Italian participants. More promotion of teaching as a vocation, not just a job, and efforts to recruit teachers who care about the wellbeing of pupils and their families was proposed. Education about civic responsibility should be promoted as well.

“More effort by schools/teachers to make parents feel welcome through open and inclusive communication is needed.”

Round two

A different profile of participants attended the second session, including a social worker turned activist who stressed the need for families (grandparents as well) to exercise and defend their right to be included. Other participants pointed out that the stress experienced by parents living in poverty can be overwhelming and prevent engagement. Greater understanding of the impact of poverty on parents by teachers and the need for teamwork is required. Neighbourhood organisations are more supportive than state services, it was felt, and peer support was powerful. Failing education systems are characterised by uniformity and testing rather than individual achievement and diversity. Participants called for the retraining of teachers to focus on the child, the family and the community, and to engage children more in decision-making. Concern was expressed about the digital divide and it was suggested that access to technology should be recognised as a basic right from birth to death. This group, which included delegates from Belgium, Norway, Scotland, IFSW, Caritas, and the Netherlands, felt that adequate minimum income schemes would improve the situation.

Round three

Participants from Romania, Malta, Belgium, IFSW and the UK and Netherlands confirmed their support for the conclusions of the preceding rounds and added several more points. Poverty stops learning, they stressed, because it raises practical problems for children and their parents, such as the financing of extra curricula activities, purchasing of uniforms, and external problems like housing and heating. The children most damaged by poverty need certainty from teachers and schools. Poverty is passed from one generation to the next. Radical action and new systems and service models are required to prevent it being perpetuated. Families need sustained support to change, it was concluded.

Take-homes from the rounds...

- Fear, embarrassment, time constraints and an unwelcome environment are major barriers to more and better teach-parent communication, focused on the genuine needs of the child
- Participants called for the retraining of teachers to focus on the child, the family and the community, and to engage children more in decision-making
- New systems and service models are needed to prevent poverty being perpetuated through a failing education system; families/parents need sustained support to be part of this change

Table 11: What role and responsibility for employers to invest in on-the-job training and to support the continuous up-skilling of their staff?

Table host: Chiara Fratalia, EAPN Europe

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

What is the situation in your country – do employers provide opportunities for continued training once on the job? Is the training relevant and qualitative? What considerations particularly related to workers in poverty are relevant when it comes to providing skills upgrading while in employment? What incentives – financial or other – should be put in place to motivate employers to provide more and better access to education and training opportunities for workers?

Round one

There is a disconnect in companies between the benefits of substantial training and its perceived 'cost'. Governments may need to provide incentives, in partnership with businesses, to provide quality training, especially for those most in need. The group analysed the challenges involved and concluded that academic qualifications are only one measure of a person's ability. Life skills for older job-seekers and demonstrated motivation in younger, less experienced candidates are as important. Employers need to recognise this fact and



invest in their staff. Starter jobs for young people pay poorly but can be topped up with training and the chance to gain experience. Employers need to take training seriously and offer contracts with training options built in. In addition to a potential partnership role, governments need to cut bureaucracy to make all this possible.

“Life skills for older job-seekers and demonstrated motivation in younger, less experienced workers are as important as academic qualifications.”

Round two

After a brief recap of the previous session, this group explored the wide implications of training, how it helps to develop creativity and networking skills among staff. While it was agreed on the value of training in broad terms, the group felt that there needs to be groups or institutes put in place to ensure that the training provided is done properly and effectively. Trade unions were put forward as a possible reviewer to ensure this. Other proposals by the group included the need for extra support for low-skilled employees, which could involve state-run training facilities and partnerships with NGOs to provide trainings for vulnerable groups.

Round three

Following up on the previous ideas, this group felt the responsibility of training must therefore be shared between the employees, employers, and the government. Each of these actors should be obliged to work towards training that is mutually beneficial. Governments should provide incentives, especially for vulnerable people, and partnerships with NGOs should be made to tailor training for these groups. Employers should at the very least be obliged to support and inform employees of opportunities, according to the participants. In exchange, employees should commit to staying longer instead of leaving immediately after training.

Take-homes from the rounds...

- Employers need to recognise that providing in-work training is an investment in their staff and business not a cost
- Training is more than task or job-specific; it is also an opportunity to promote creativity and networking; very low-skilled workers or candidates may need additional state- and NGO-backed support
- Commitments to training need to be mutually beneficial for employees, employers and governments, with NGOs involved to tailor support for those most in need

Table 12: How to best validate informal and non-formal education and recognise the skills acquired outside of the formal education system?

Table host: Sian Jones, EAPN Europe

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

In your country, do you feel that education, learning and training which takes place outside accredited educational institutions is recognised and valued? Can you give examples of such learning – sports, caring, scouting, languages, etc.? What role for skills acquired in informal or non-formal ways, such as social and community learning throughout one's life, in mitigating poverty and social exclusion? How do these skills help people to lift themselves out of poverty? What measures are needed to better validate skills acquired in such a way – guidelines for certification? How to ensure comparability and recognition across borders?

Round one

An example in Finland (a teacher without a formal certificate employed largely because his character matched the needs of the job) was one positive among many examples where life skills and 'intangibles' are not taken into consideration. "I have a lot of skills but no little slip of paper, so basically I am screwed," said a young Danish participant who is homeless. A Dutch delegate who ran an academy to help people in similar situations reintegrate through training tried to get the course certified, with some success, but funding ran out: "It was an

effective instrument left to fall.” The certification system needs to be made more effective, less bureaucratic and costly, and to ensure that people’s skills are validated to help them get a job or further training/education. An outreach centre for street kids in Naples focuses on more tangible skills (“formal education has no meaning for them”), confidence building, and bringing families into the picture. In Slovakia, the system is still narrowly focused on formal education, which leads to high drop-out rates (even before secondary) for Roma children and others. Other examples of programmes aimed at Roma children and with general literacy issues were offered. Vocational education is available at high school, but it is needed earlier, at middle school, and it should be adapted to individual needs. A point echoed by an Estonian delegate.

“I didn’t realise that I could do these sorts of things, to care about other people, advocacy, public speaking, and taking action together.”

Round two

Another diverse group contributed their experiences of different models including a ‘green building’ as a non-formal education tool for poorer children to learn about ecology, environmental challenges to society, climate change and how the children can make a difference. Stories of early school-leaving, stigmatisation, formal education failing to stimulate pupils, and an unrecognised non-formal sector in Portugal: “Formal education is a big fallacy; a mix of formal and non-formal is better.” A Czech delegate said there needs to be a more open approach to valuing real abilities and skills rather than formal qualifications. For example, homeless people could work in social centres because they understand the problems faced, but funding authorities demand formal qualification for such roles. A Romanian participant said the Department of Employment offered certificates based on a mix of formal and informal achievements. This is important, he added, but also highlighted a lack of investment in the formal education system, to make sure it was inclusive in the first place. An unemployed, homeless delegate from Denmark spoke of the confidence he gained volunteering: “I didn’t realise that I could do these sorts of things, to care about other people, advocacy, public speaking, and taking action together.”

Round three

A disconnect was highlighted in adult learning; the Portuguese government for example, recognises their diplomas, but employers don’t. Internships are better recognised. A Romanian participant said being poor was depressing and held people back. The formal education does not pay enough attention to life skills, which makes non-formal education vital to give hope and light to children, helping them build relationships: “There is no certificate for this; life gives the certificate.” An Estonian delegate explored ideas for combining non-formal and formal education, such as youth work and after-school activities, but wondered how these



could be validated if no national certification system existed. Common criteria are needed. A shortage of funding has led to more flexibility in Romania, for example teaching assistants with no formal education are given the opportunity on limited contracts, and certificates are awarded for volunteering (e.g. horticulture) – they are even transferable across the EU. NGOs could collaborate with ministries to provide more education like this.

Take-homes from the rounds...

- Lack of papers is a barrier to education, inclusion, job prospects and poverty reduction; real skills, people-centred learning, alternative/creative approaches are not well recognised or funded
- Rigid and bureaucratic formal education systems lead to drop-outs and a cycle of problems; more open and receptive labour markets to 'skills not qualifications' is the key (e.g. the Finnish schools model)
- Calls for a holistic approach to social and economic needs (housing, services, adequate income) combined with formal/non-formal education, including volunteering, that leads to accreditation; but there are major problems of underfunding in the education system and for relevant NGOs

Table 13: How does education strengthen active citizenship, empowerment, and participation?

Host: Aiden Lloyd, EAPN IE

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

Do you feel that access to accurate information and to tools to fight fake news are adequately provided in your country? Are people in poverty able to be well informed about their choices, including political options? What could be done better? Is civic education taught formally in your schooling system, and is political awareness cultivated enough through formal and non-formal means? How can this be improved? Aside education settings, what role does the media play in educating the general public, including its portrayal of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion? How can we challenge negative media perspectives and involve people in poverty directly?

Round one

Based on accounts from delegates round the table, civic education appears at best to be limited to descriptions of how institutions work. Portugal's more flexible curriculum leaves room for subjects such as gender equality, inter-cultural dialogue, and civic education. Children needed to know how they can use the political system to sustain democracy and to make change, suggested a Scottish participant: "Children are able to think. We don't give them enough credit." A delegate from Portugal pointed out that if schools want to impart knowledge and skills in civic matters, they have to be a democratic institution themselves (e.g. by listening to kids, asking for their feedback). Children should be encouraged to

question everything, but schools don't like being interrogated. The conversation moved on to whether schools challenged assumptions (based on race, gender, income) and inequalities. The answer is that they perpetuate them by leading people to a certain career path based on assumptions about their limits. A delegate from France said that three university places were offered to low-income students for every 90 people. It takes hard work to earn these 'free' places: "At the end of the course, rather than looking for a job you have to look for a doctor (to treat the fatigue!)"

"Children are able to think. We don't give them enough credit."

Round two

The conversation focused on empowerment. A delegate from Norway called for a good balance between discipline and freedom, based on her experience in a private junior school. A Maltese delegate said schools didn't think enough about the energy, talents and aspirations of children: "We look at certificates, not at potential." Too many bored students drop out. A successful approach is to let truant kids combine school and work experience, and more generally allow young people scope to shape the coursework. Poor children, in particular, have real-world experience (managing difficult day-to-day situations) to contribute, and schools should encourage everybody to reach their potential. We have to look at the abilities of kids, beyond labels. Participation is empowering in this respect. Some positives from Finland: teachers are skilled and children enjoy school; they go on trips and learn about different cultures. The interaction between teachers/students is less friendly and open in Greece: "In secondary schools, teachers often treat teenagers as half-terrorist and half-animals." A Norwegian stressed the importance of trust in educational systems, which has to be earned by teaching facts about even sensitive historical events. A European Commission representative at the table stressed that schools should not be closed institutions; they have to deal with NGOs and other outside partners, including parents and communities. Teachers also learn and develop at such schools.

Round three

The discussion started by focusing on participation and engagement. A representative of the European Parliament pointed out that people must feel fully welcome to participate, that every voice matters. A Portuguese delegate said children often asked what was in for them if they 'participated' in class; they need to understand it is mutually beneficial to both teacher and student. A delegate from Scotland said teaching 'active citizenship' without an inter-cultural framework could be controversial for migrants, as it could be seen as undermining their culture. The discussion moved to the media's role in informing people. In Hungary, media are controlled by the ruling party; alternative/critical media are not printed (only online), so not everyone gets to read them. In Portugal, social media are powerful and influence people's views, often feeding their prejudices. Media in Portugal portray a very negative image of poverty: "They are poor because they want to be!" In Hungary, NGOs offer

courses on active citizenship: "It's a shame that these tasks are only taken up by the not-for-profit sector and not by the educational system."

Take-homes from the rounds...

- Schools have to let kids experience democracy (by making the school process democratic) allowing them to challenge inequalities (based on gender, race and social class)
- Social, political, cultural education (the essence of 'citizenship') should be part of the curriculum; and historical events taught honestly to promote inquisitive, critical thought, and counter the influence of populism and fake news; schools have to be open (to NGOs and other community actors)
- Active citizenship comes from people feeling their voices are being heard, that they are welcome to participate in classrooms, public debates, elections, or society in general; free and balanced media is an important channel for tackling misinformation about poverty, migration, etc.

Table 14: Are education systems focused on personal abilities and individual talents, or standardized testing and one size fits all?

Host: Stéphanie Genteuil, EAPN Europe

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

Are current educational systems too labour-market oriented or do they support personal development, empowerment and self-esteem? What is the impact of standardised tests when it comes to educational systems? How can assessments and evaluations be improved? What proposals can be put forward for the development of education systems which start from the student and their unique abilities and interests?

Round one

A Dutch delegate started the discussion by saying inclusive schools were not suitable for every child with special needs if they need a lot of additional support and there were not enough teaching resources in the class; teachers struggle with diverse levels and needs, forcing them into teacher-centred mode to maintain order. Inclusion needed good planning, resources and management to work well, noted a German delegate, and content should be more balanced between the basics/mandatory (maths, languages, etc.) and creative/practical/technical subjects (arts, crafts, music, etc.). Students need broad experience to "try out" different things. A Norwegian participant raised the issue of overly theoretical curricula which is hard for many children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); hands-on, fun, engaging materials are needed to balance the day. A Czech delegate, backed up by Greek and Dutch participants, said "talent is lost" because government schools lack resources to promote them: "Basic education is free, the rest is for

a fee, a hidden cost" that only rich families can afford unless parents can track down "social solutions". The Greek added that the financial crisis really hit 'extra' services like that. "That's a luxury now!"

"Talent is lost because government schools lack resources to promote them."

Round two

After a brief recap, a Dutch delegate told his own story of poor career guidance (and flawed evaluation) early in secondary school leading to an eight-year career as an electrician. "My evaluation said I was suited to the military, but look at me!" He is now studying social work and loves it; especially the small classes and "design-based" coursework, which lets students decide which problems to solve based on their own interests. A Luxembourg delegate, who had moved to there a few years before, said every child has some something unique to offer and greatness comes from following their own dreams, not their parents' ambitions (often



conventional professions like doctors and lawyers). Another Luxembourger said he lost contact with his family for 30 years because of a falling out over career choice (he wanted to be a florist, his father disapproved). A Polish mother of two said her struggle is to help her kids explore different talents when time and money are in short supply. And even if you can identify a sporting talent, for example, the

cost of travelling around to pursue it is high. She also proposed better training for parents and teachers in how to spot and nurture talents early on because the "tests are not fit for purpose". A Swedish delegate said the education system was commercially oriented which, in segregated societies, led to "ghetto-minded" decisions (i.e. rich kids don't do trades, while poor ones may never get jobs).

Round three

An Austrian participant kicked off by saying that things like crafts and music can be costly and governments are cutting back. Classes are too big, mixed abilities mean different speeds, and no 'social coaching' means little guidance on future careers. How can you discover your passion if you've never had exposure to something? This was the recurring challenge at the table. "It's not about what skills you have but what you can bring!" Several Macedonian delegates called for a "balance between formal and informal learning opportunities" with more social/career coaching resources to assess this balance and match it to individual needs/interests. The wrong questions are being asked, said a Portuguese delegate: "Instead of 'How are you doing?' everyone is asking 'What are you doing?'" A competitive outlook like this is hard on children. A Bulgarian participant then summed saying that labour market needs were the main reference point; personal talent comes second with

the exception of obviously talented (and rich) people. But generally too much “talent is wasted” and government policy is not adequately aimed at fixing that, “despite the official language”.

Take-homes from the rounds...

- ✓ Inclusive schools (mixing children with different abilities) are good if well resourced to deal with the different needs of the students (i.e. smaller classes, more assistants, social workers)
- ✓ Children need more guidance from both parents and schools, in collaboration, to nurture their talents
- ✓ Extra curricular activities are essential to develop children’s abilities, but there are not enough on offer, they cost too much and they are often too far away; parents need to rely on social programmes (NGOs, ESF, etc.) but these are hard to track down (lack of information)

Table 15: How to better value skills and fight underemployment (people working in jobs that are below their level of skills) and over-qualification?

Host: Amana Ferro, EAPN Europe

Some sub-themes & questions tackled...

In your country, do many people work in jobs that are below their level of qualification? What are the groups mostly affected? What is the root cause for this? Non-recognition of qualifications and diplomas (i.e. the case of migrants) or a lack of quality jobs? What are the implications for people in poverty? Do many employers require degrees and standard qualifications for low-skilled jobs? What measures can be put in place to support the creation of jobs that provide for a better match between the worker’s skills and their employment condition (including adequate wages)?

Round one

Several participants had a tertiary education but were unemployed. Several reported being turned away by employers for being overqualified. Underemployment like this means people get paid less than they deserve and sometimes have to “dumb down” their CV to get a job, which affects their self-esteem. “It is like building Formula 1 cars for village roads”, said a Spanish delegate, an overemphasis on skills with few outlets to use them (“There are too many lawyers, but it’s a problem to find a plumber.”) An overproduction of graduates with heavy student loans leads to a permanent debt hole for many in underpaid jobs. Are universities doing enough to tackle this mismatch? Universities focus on producing a steady (often over) supply of workers for typical job profiles while individual ambitions and expectations are compromised due to financial considerations. Better training is needed on how to transform dreams into a decent living. Lack of information results in young people

making career choices without really knowing what is out there or how to make it happen. Often a decent wage to live in dignity is all people want.

“There are too many lawyers, but it’s a problem to find a plumber.”

Round two

Migrants face additional struggles getting their qualifications recognised. Often they are not allowed to work legally while their applications for asylum or residency are being processed. Many migrants and others whose qualifications are not recognised have to redo their studies and/or take low-skilled, low-paid work (stories of graduates cleaning houses, doctors driving taxis, etc.), which is often in the black. This comes with many risks and downsides, such as poor working conditions and fewer options. Migrants end up doing the jobs no one else wants. The situation is complex; it is not simply about employers failing to offer good jobs, nor about people not having the right skills, but rather the political framework does not encourage a real meeting of “those who seek and those who offer”. Sometimes over-qualification is used to hide racism and discrimination as well. The reality is, there are not enough jobs for all the high-skilled people societies produce – this is what empowers employers over workers. Is there a moral imperative to create jobs? Is it the responsibility of the market, or should governments step in? The underlying issue, the group felt, is that people were not respected as human beings; a rights-based approach is missing, which affects how people are treated, (under)paid, and valued.



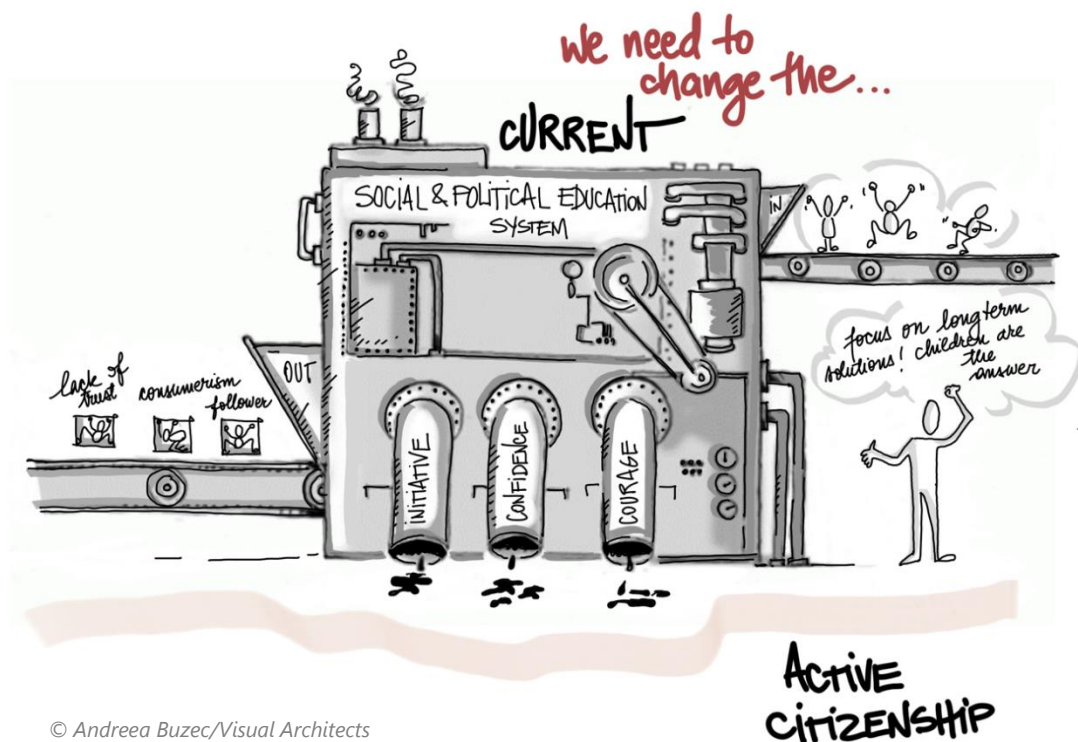
Round three

All jobs are needed, but many are in positions nobody wants to do (so-called “menial work”) which end up being done by people who don’t have a choice because of their education. Young people, in particular, have a hard time getting jobs; they stay in education for a long time, accumulating degrees but with little or no actual work experience. They get turned away from entry-level jobs as they are considered ‘overqualified’. A better system of work-placement experience and better cooperation between universities and employers would be really useful. Older job-seekers face their own challenges; more experience is interpreted by employers as more expensive or they simply don’t want to pay for the experience. A compromise is called for between what the market needs and what people want for themselves. Universities are not helping to find that middle way. Once a student gets their diploma, they are on their own, the group felt.

Take-homes from the rounds...

- More information and mentorships are needed for (young) people to make decisions about their future, including work experience incorporated into their studies, and opportunities to explore how to make a living from their dreams and talents

- Moving to another country is hard if you are forced to wait years for qualifications to be recognised, or need to retake studies (borrow more money or do low-skilled work), in addition to having to wait ages for a work permit
- Lack of good jobs is leading to extended studying and skills mismatches; which for older people can translate into over-qualification for some jobs; people should mean more than markets and statistics (human dignity and access to rights means people can contribute in their own way)



WORKSHOPS ROUND-UP

The Workshop component of the event was an opportunity to take the discussions further and develop more concrete proposals responding to the issues identified during the World Café. These proposals, in turn, form the basis for dialogue with policy-makers on the second day of the PEP Meeting. The following is a short round-up of the proceedings and outcomes.

<p>WORKSHOP 1: RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMAL SKILLS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Recognition of life experience needs to be formalised so employers value it more ➤ Older employees have a lot of knowledge to pass on to younger employees but fear being made redundant if they do ➤ Government should provide incentives to boost non-formal skill acquisition and for jobless people to become self-employed ➤ A European inventory of validation of experience is in progress but needs boosting/clarifying (How can information about this be made more accessible?) ➤ More incentives for companies to employ qualified but 'inexperienced' people and job-specific training are needed ➤ Self-employment through non-for-profit organisations acting as 'incubators' to generate new skills on the job 	<p style="text-align: center;">Concrete proposal</p> <p><i>Raise awareness in Member States that the validation system of skills exists and strengthen the political commitment to get these skills recognised. Encourage Member States to support incubation systems to develop a new professional path towards self-employment.</i></p>
<p>WORKSHOP 2: OVER-QUALIFICATION AND UNDER-EMPLOYMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Need to level the field to ensure everyone has the same opportunities ➤ Many issues affecting achievement of a 'liveable' minimal income (e.g. Part-time jobs are unsustainable; governments encourage self-employment to cut jobless numbers, but these workers rarely make minimum wage, feel insecure and get taken advantage of) ➤ The labour market is staying the same whereas education is being pushed and squeezed, which leads to over-qualification ➤ Governments fail to prioritise learning skills geared towards having a sustainable living 	<p style="text-align: center;">Concrete proposal</p> <p><i>Government schemes to bring young people's passions and dreams to life. Prevent employers from citing over-qualification as a reason for not hiring (a "cop-out to paying more"). Create an absolute minimum income.</i></p>

- Transferable skills and knowledge should be used to fill the gaps rather than constantly having to relearn, which takes time and money
- More diversity is in the economy and labour market (inclusive growth is about how money is generated 'and' shared)
- Employers don't know the real value of their workforce

WORKSHOP 3: EARLY SCHOOL-LEAVING

- Recommended baseline is to use the Socio-Educational Risk Index (IRSE) – a specialised tool to identify and diagnose risks that schools are exposed to
- After-school support and non-formal education are important to keeping students interested and motivated to stay at school
- Stronger ties between schools and social NGOs, especially those with programmes aimed at students from disadvantaged backgrounds, coupled with sensitivity training and dedicated curricula for teachers working with these children
- Integrated measures (as in Spain) need to target not only the child and education system, but also their family and the community
- Widen curricula to include coping skills (resilience to bullying, failure, stress); and kids should be involved in analysing the problems they face and finding appropriate solutions

Concrete proposal

Two solutions: empower teachers to understand the problem and identify those students who are in need; develop broader community support and skills – coming together cohesively with different partners and combining both 'approaches' and 'resources' from the formal and informal system.

WORKSHOP 4: MIGRATION AND REFUGEES

- What prevents migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees from successfully integrating into host-country education system?
- Remove barriers to education before receiving official status, and fix the accreditation of qualifications/skills system (a single test)
- Offer time-limited (interim) permits to work, study, integrate better while waiting for 'status'
- Improve migration and integration policies; set up working groups between officials and others to bridge the gap
- All European countries need to respect their duty to help refugees

Concrete proposal

EU funding for social integration projects is essential. Access to language and education first. Promote inter-cultural dialogue, recognising the value of migrants. Raise awareness of the benefits (positive contributions) of migration. More and earlier information for migrants, help them form 'native friendships' to combat loneliness.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Refugees are the future and they can help to build the country ➤ New ways to change perceptions of refugees are needed to break down barriers 	
<p>WORKSHOP 5: ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Current democracy is weak, under threat, fragmented, and generally broken ➤ There is an overarching sense of cynicism and complacency concerning the current state of politics ➤ People lack the political knowledge, democratic experience, and tools (a confidence gap that needs filling) ➤ There is a large challenge in appealing to politicians at all levels ➤ In neo-liberalism people are the consumers; governments and media divide society; reaction is populism ➤ There are no short-term solutions, therefore there is a need to look at the future i.e. children who need to be empowered to change the education systems themselves 	<p style="text-align: center;">Concrete proposal</p> <p><i>Importance of social and political education should be debated in the European Parliament, with a view to prompting the European Commission to investigate this further. The hope would be to come up with a list of recommendations for the Council of Ministers.</i></p>
<p>WORKSHOP 6: DIGITAL DIVIDE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Access to technology (computers/internet) and learning resources for low-income families is needed to tackle the digital divide and improve education ➤ Internet should be considered a basic need/human right – to access services, to look and apply for jobs, to access education, to break social exclusion ➤ There is also a generational divide – children are very advanced and know how to use all sorts of gadgets, whereas parents are sometimes computer illiterate ➤ In the UK, 8 million people receive some sort of social security, and they can only apply and update their activities online ➤ Better network coverage in rural and remote areas is needed, and support to cover electricity costs ➤ ICT companies are very profitable but there is no corresponding corporate social responsibility ➤ Digital literacy is vital because people in poverty are easily duped and their data sold and trafficked for profit – need to know one’s rights around privacy 	<p style="text-align: center;">Concrete proposal</p> <p><i>Technological access is a human right (which means you can’t leave it up to markets, the State needs to provide it and regulate it), and a basic need (not a luxury). It is the State’s responsibility to ensure equal access to services (and not push them all online), to provide digital training (not just for kids in schools, but throughout), and to protect the privacy of users and workers.</i></p>

WORKSHOP 7: INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

- Individualised solutions are needed for people with mental, learning and physical disabilities, and their families
- Everybody deserves and has the right to their own choice of solutions (full inclusion not exclusion)
- Diagnoses need to be quicker, and each should be valued (specialists in schools and governments play a role)
- There should be action (including legal) taken against bullying
- More teachers and assistants (less children assigned to a teacher means more individual attention to each child) are needed
- More information and education regarding disabilities is needed in all countries
- Parents of children with disabilities should receive free training

Concrete proposal

Reorient funding between two different programmes; one specialising in individualised services for families with children who have disabilities; and the other providing education on how to best learn and live with people who have different needs.

WORKSHOP 8: UNIFIED EUROPEAN EDUCATION

- Differences and inequalities exist at different stages in education across European countries (e.g. what does 'finished high school' mean?)
- Unified educational system would mean unified qualifications
- Unified qualifications means less unemployed and working poor
- Unified education helps prepare labour markets for Industry 4.0 ('smart' manufacturing driven by digital/data advances)
- Equal qualification also means equal pay (in the spirit of the European Minimum Income Network, EMIN)
- Leads to accreditation of qualification outside the European Union
- European Qualifications Framework exists but is too vague

Concrete proposal

In Europe, too many elite schools exist, creating social and educational inequality. To remedy this, we propose a unified education system in Europe.

VISIBILITY ACTION: FREEZE FLASHMOB

Superheroes against poverty

Brussels' Central Station, 8 November. There was an air of expectation as PEP Meeting delegates waited for the countdown. Some posed for selfies, others danced around with their national, EU or rainbow flags draped like capes round their necks like 'poverty superheroes', the evocative theme of the flashmob.



Most held printed signs with probing questions or positions delivering messages about education, poverty and what entwines them. EAPN's flashmob animator rallied the 120 'mobsters' with the call: "Are you all ready to freeze? Three, two one..." Suddenly the foyer of Central Station turned into a stone army, poised and

ready to go into battle for more inclusive societies.

One poverty 'superhero' from Macedonia, carrying a small house, blow-up globe and wearing a cap and vest with the colours of his country, spoke of hope but also worries as his country makes vital changes ahead of EU accession. The little wooden house, he suggested, symbolised a home, a place where



Macedonia can feel secure.



Three Portuguese 'superheroes' dressed as chefs to deliver their message that it is time to cook up a new education system. Everyone carried banners of solidarity or handed out leaflets entitled 'Superheroes against poverty' summing up the whole sentiment. Together, they made a perfect snapshot of a family joined in a common goal, to make education a way

out of poverty for millions of Europeans. And the message was heard 'quiet and clear' by passers-by who stopped to take photos, ask questions and collect leaflets being handed out.

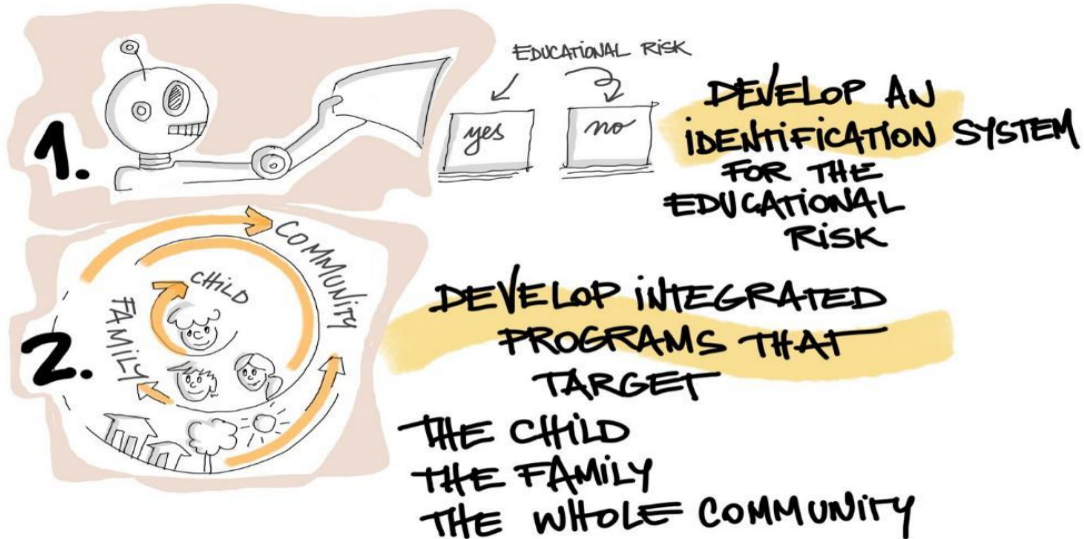


All pictures © European Commission

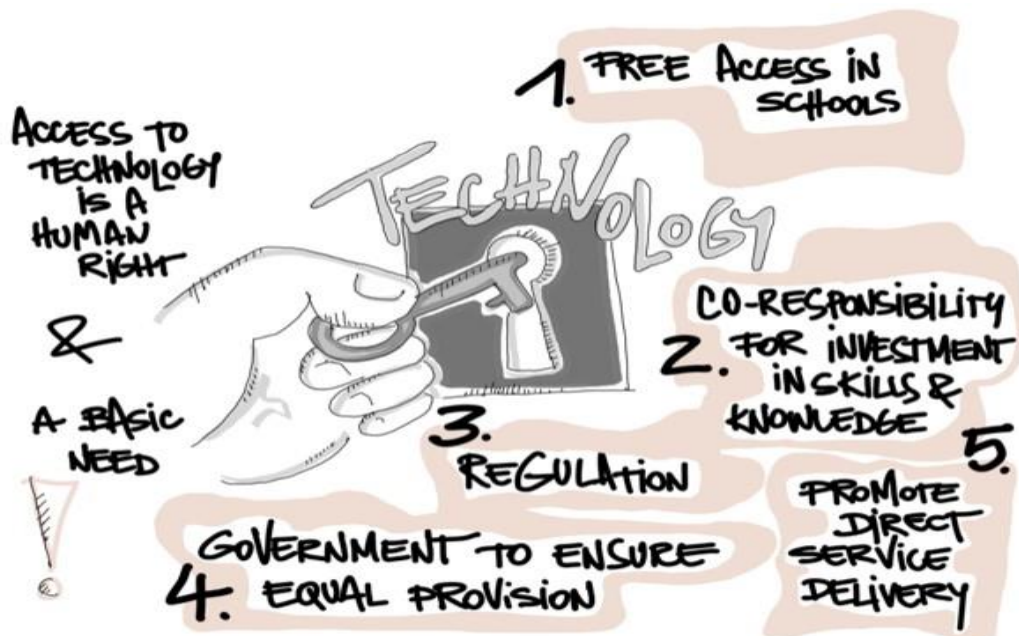
RECOMMENDATIONS

Following on from the discussions and deliberations during the world café, the group decided on four themes to develop as recommendations* to the decision-makers on day two.

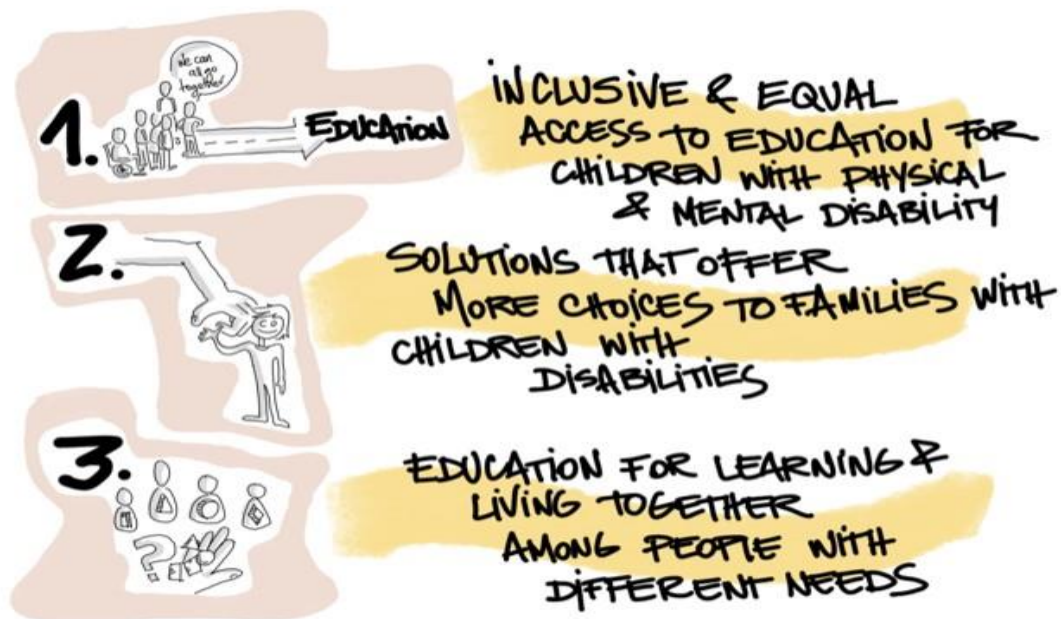
Early school-leaving (delivered by Laura Greta Marin, EAPN RO)



Digital divide (delivered by Twymukye Mushaka, EAPN UK)



Disability (delivered by Marianne Bon, EAPN NL)



Migration (delivered by Ray Oyetunji, PICUM)



All drawing © Andreea Buzec/Visual Architects

*More detailed notes on the 15 table talks and eight workshops at PEP 2018 are available on request: magda.tancau@eapn.eu

THE DIALOGUE

Leading up to the dialogue session, EAPN Director Leo Williams offered heartfelt thanks to everyone taking part in the freeze flashmob at Brussels Central Station earlier in the morning and explained the final preparations for the plenary dialogue with the invited decision-makers. He recounted how the four themes were whittled down from the 15 'table talks' which were refined into eight 'dynamic groups' who further developed the topics ahead of a final pitch. Due to limited time and the profile of the decision-makers attending the dialogue, a maximum of four topics could be taken forward; the most concrete areas which also match EAPN's strategic directions. The other topics are just as important, Williams explained, and the delegates involved in those groups would be given the opportunity to ask a question during the debate. And finally, he said, summaries of the key messages, proposals and solutions are going to be included in the report for use at EU and national level.

With flip charts at the ready, Sian Jones, EAPN Policy Coordinator and moderator of the session, introduced the panel of decision-makers, including two Members of the European Parliament, a representative from DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (European Commission), and education and poverty specialists from Belgium and Austria. Jones then



recapped day one with its powerful testimonies and strong messages about the right to education and importance of investing in quality education for all, reminding everyone of the struggles with health, money, discrimination, inclusion and (for some) the need to fight the whole way. "We shouldn't have to fight for education, it should be a right!" This was a take-away and a clear signal that the current system is failing to deliver on the ground, she concluded.

Too many people remain in poverty, real-life skills are not given the credit they deserve in job-search, children are leaving school early, feeling excluded and that their individual talents are not nurtured. All this, Jones said, calls for "joined-up" solutions involving families, communities, teachers, pupils, school authorities, but also NGOs and the non-formal education sector whose innovative ways of working with children and connecting formal and non-formal education offer the chance to create a "holistic approach". Employment is all good and well, she suggested, but it is not enough on its own. "A degree doesn't pay the energy bills," Jones concluded before introducing the recommendations from national delegations.

Recommended reading this semester...

Presenting the **early school-leaving** topic, Laura Greta Marin (EAPN RO) set the scene with a staggering statistic from her country: 19.1% of children in Romania leave school early, one of the highest in Europe. Reducing the drop-out rate is vital, she said, which is why her group proposed a system to identify educational and social risk factors leading to a child dropping out. The results of the test could be used to design an “integrated programme” focused on children, families, and whole communities affected. “The whole educational environment working together to improve the situation for all, but especially for poor kids and ones at very high risk, such as Roma and those from disadvantaged backgrounds,” she said. Specific activities or modules to mitigate high drop-out rates could include non-formal education projects supporting formal programmes, teacher training top-ups to prepare them for today’s realities (new methods/technologies/ways to approach new problems in education), and engaging children more in decision-making processes. “We don’t ask children enough what they need,” Marin stressed, calling on the decision-makers’ support to implement this recommendation.

Introducing the **digital divide** topic was Twymukye Mushaka (EAPN UK) who explained the importance of technology as a powerful educational tool that people experiencing poverty may struggle to access (poor or no internet, online assignments, wrong or outdated software, etc.). So many courses now are online by default, which is a barrier for those without easy access, she said, and the skills gap is also an issue. Which is why the group recommended access to technology as a basic human right for education. And government needs to invest in and ensure free and equal access to it in all educational settings. That includes people with disabilities, the elderly, rural communities, and other marginalised groups like the homeless and migrants. It also means appropriate levels of protection (data, privacy, etc.) and commitment to co-production principles in place to boost skills in how to use technology for education. The EU should pressure national governments to ensure that “no one is left behind due to lack of access to technology”.

Marianne Bon (EAPN NL) issued nine broad proposals as recommendations to advance **disability** issues in the context of potential poverty and education policy and regulations: more personal education; inclusion not exclusion; faster diagnoses of mental and physical abilities and needs; pay parents for additional support; increased assistant teachers in classrooms; more personalised system; raise awareness of disability issues across Europe; free training for parents on how to care/educate disabled kids; more funding for families with children with a disability; and better understanding of people with different needs and their lives.

Ray Oyetunji (PICUM) gave a succinct round-up on the **migration** front, and what is preventing migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers from integrating better into the education system. She called for EU-funded action to promote cultural integration, including working group between migrants, teachers, governments and better policies to “facilitate access to education before status”. In other words, not leave migrants in limbo while waiting

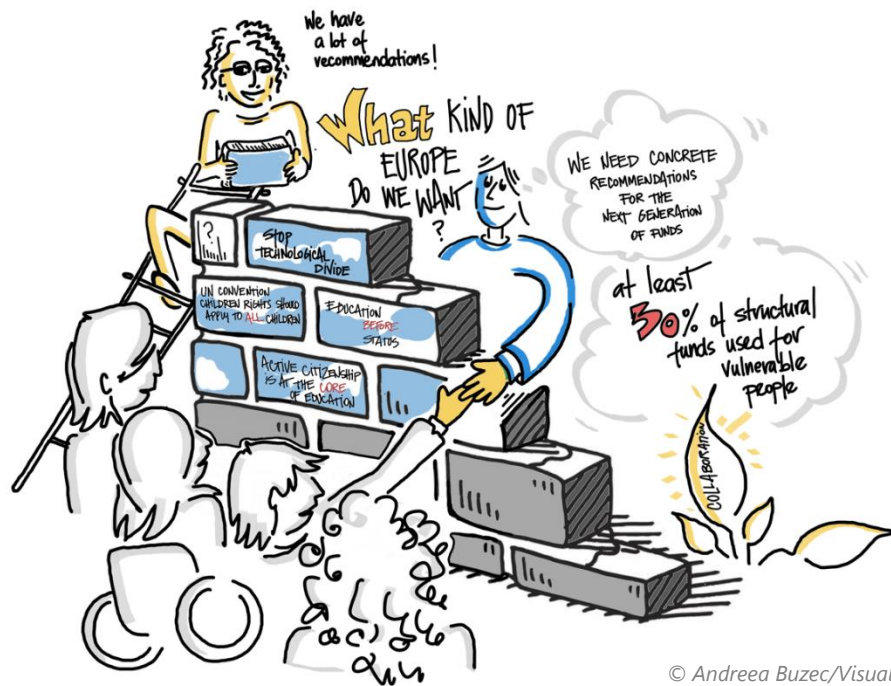
for official permission to work, study and restart their lives. Access to job training and education on first arrival and better and more information on rights and entitlements are key to tackling segregation. Lastly, she stressed the importance of having an efficient, widely recognised framework in place to recognise and validate migrants' prior experience and qualifications, to speed up integration.

Throughout the dialogue session, panellists were asked for their responses and reflections on these four positions. But first, Michèle Vleminckx and Nathalie Debroux from the working group on poverty and access to education, ATD Fourth World Belgium, presented the results of a successful project called 'A school where everyone succeeds'. They stressed the importance of working with all stakeholders, including families and children, and the value of communication throughout the process, especially in establishing the main concerns or reasons the education system is failing some children (e.g. feelings of rejection, different learning rhythms, lack of specialised teaching/social services). The method and academic basis of the study was explained, including the pairing system (a pedagogue and child) for establishing the needs, leading to mixed groups as the topics were developed. Among the many conclusions put forward by ATD, the message that "no one should be on the margins", that there are no 'good' or 'bad' students", came out loud and clear. All children need, and are capable of acquiring, the basics (reading, writing, maths); teachers need to be trained to spot pupils at risk and support them, highlighting the positives and organising everything in a collaborative spirit. It is important to limit class sizes, and to have a minimum of two professionals per class. More focus on the home environment and outside support was identified, as too the need for honest and professional career guidance with emphasis on motivating children to develop their own ambitions and ensuring the orientation they choose is right for them (and, if not, that there is enough flexibility to change direction if needed). They also spoke of Belgium's commitment to international conventions on children's rights. All this, they said, means children become more involved and their confidence grows, mobility between schools is easier, and it offers new insight into the handling of pupils and families in precarious situations.

What can the EU really do to reinforce the 'right' to education?

The moderator asked this question to Michael Teutsch, Head of Unit for Schools and Multilingualism, European Commission, DG Education and Culture, who said the objectives were well established, but there was a failure in the application. While the EU could "reinforce" the discussion (through the exchange of good practice, funding projects, etc.) at the national level, it remained 100% a national competence, he said.

The European Social Fund is the main tool at EU level to fight poverty and boost education with Erasmus+ also playing a vital role. He explained some of the ways Erasmus achieves this thanks to its richer programme of student exchanges, lifelong learn and mobility, and the simplified procedures to make it more inclusive and accessible. He stressed that early school-leaving is certainly on the agenda and there is well-developed EU strategy for this with some notable successes in Portugal and the Netherlands. But it will take more time to roll out, he said.



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The [European Toolkit for Schools](#) on the Education Gateway platform helps to promote inclusion and tackle early school-leaving, he said. It provides practical guidance and examples to teachers while promoting cooperation EU-wide on innovative ways to engage children. He touched on the other topics, but was keen to hear more from the rest of the panel on those. In the meantime, he said the Commission was “happy to promote the good ideas here” reminding people of the importance of “really inclusive education”. On the subject of a greater role for the EU in education, he said the idea of a European Education Area, a trans-national, innovative and inclusive education system, has been discussed among Member State leaders. Ministers are exploring how far this can go, and he thanked the PEP Meeting’s support and good input to make proposals to the European Parliament and Council.

Easy questions... but tough answers

This was an opening for Jean Lambert, Member of the European Parliament, Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance, to come in. She was asked by the moderator for her reactions to the national presentations, in particular in relation to the European Pillar of Social Rights and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The questions were easy enough, she suggested, but the big problem was joining up all initiatives at different levels to give a sense of direction and momentum. Here, the SDGs come in as an overarching way forward including the right to education, equality, what happens in the world of work, etc. It has been discussed and written about a lot, but the MEP said it is arguable how much progress has been made, offering early school-leaving as an example. It was in the [Europe 2020 Strategy](#) as a priority, along with tackling poverty and social exclusion, but more work is clearly needed (referring to the Romanian figure quoted). “We mustn’t forget that school can be a boring place for kids,” she said. If they don’t see it leading to a decent paying job, ‘What’s the point’, they ask. The MEP touched on the transition points from school to work and said it was important to link them with training;

so students see progress and they see why education is important in reality. Better understanding of how this all works at the Member State level, for example, is important. And for this, she said the European Semester process is there to help join the dots and the money follows that.

On asylum/migration, a “big issue” for the Parliament since 2014, she agreed that the sooner they can access labour market, the better. “It makes no sense otherwise,” she said. How can newcomers integrate if they are not working or getting access to language classes. The Parliament has pushed funding to support this, revising some regulations to ensure earlier access.

Fellow MEP Gabriele Zimmer of the Confederal Group of the European United Left, Nordic Green Left, took up on the point of participation and joined-up systems for inclusive schooling. For the Parliament, she said, it is really important to hear voices like PEP Meeting delegates whose experience of policy and application on the ground in Member States is paramount. It is up to the EP, she said, to create instruments, programmes and funding for better policy for all people (migrants, people with disabilities, people experiencing poverty) to ensure their right to education is upheld regardless of their status. Based on the stories heard at the meeting, she said “deep reform” in education – from kindergarten to university to lifelong learning – was needed, spearheaded by Structural Funding targeted at Member States and clever programming to ensure they are based on market needs **and** individual development, to help people break out of poverty. Parliament is working on guarantees of at least 25-30% of ESF funding for different projects allowing individual approaches to education for everyone. Things like free access to transport, kindergartens, school mobility, and basic income support so that children can stay in school and advance to good jobs.

Marie Zvolská, European affairs adviser of the Confederation of Employers and Entrepreneurs Associations of the Czech Republic, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), sees a major civil society role in this more joined-up education system. She spoke of the EESC’s activities dealing specifically with disability and rights and fully agreed with the proposals raised in the panel. “They are all useful and we would like to use them in our opinions,” she confirmed, adding that the right to education should not just be for children but include lifelong learning and that buildings, schools, etc., need to be fully accessible to people with disabilities because that makes them more accessible for everyone by default. Access to information is also important: “Not everyone knows their rights, possibilities ... So let’s support all activities towards better inclusion!”

Participation is at the heart of good policy solutions, noted Sian Jones in her wrap-up. While it is clear education is a Member State responsibility, the EU has a clear role to play in pressuring (“carrots and sticks”) some countries with inadequate education systems, and in creating the conditions for joined-up solutions to the challenges identified at the Meeting and by relevant EP and EESC actors and other studies.

Over to you...

The remaining four umbrella themes discussed in the final round of the world café were invited to formulate a catch-all question to put to the panel.

Active citizen group question: What role does education play to ensure school-leavers are equipped for the societal challenges ahead, and to ensure that education is a way out of poverty?

Over-qualification-underemployment: How can EAPN help you build a strong education base on which dreams of a good career can be achieved without falling into the trap of constant re-education?

Recognising life skills (adult learning): How many countries, except Portugal, have applied European Commission requirements on formal education; what pressure is there on Member States to implement them?

Unified education systems: There is a great education gap in Europe; we believe in a single education system for everyone to have the same opportunities; how can this be achieved in practice?

Michael Teutsch took up the active citizenship question first, saying that the EU has recommended key competences including literacy, maths, science **and** citizenship and cultural awareness. Many Member States employ these recommendations in the formal curriculum, even among disadvantaged communities, and it has helped build civic pride. To close the gaps, these ideas need to be mainstreamed, he said.

Gabriele Zimmer tackled the common education system question and concluded it would be a complex challenge, because even within Member States different systems exist (e.g. 16 Länder in Germany). A more realistic goal is accepted criteria and “levels” to facilitate mobile education. In the end, she said, it comes down to what sort of EU we want, how far we want it to go. Everyone would have to agree to a single education and social system, which means giving part or full competence to the EU.

“That is a big discussion!” Teutsch added that on basis of the EU Treaty, a single education system is not foreseen. But he questions whether it would really help. “What is important for me is to give everyone the chance, the individual right, and I’m not sure we need the same system to get there,” he said.

On recognising life skills question, Marie Zvolská spoke about an EESC report on the formal/non-formal education mix and concluded that informal skills should bear more weight in establishing qualifications, offering Dutch and German examples, such as online validation of skills, which can work, she said, but need to be further developed. Teutsch acknowledged that over-qualification existed, but stressed that it should not undervalue the overall importance of a good education, which typically increases employability. On the

question of which Member States have validated work practices on this, he had no immediate answer.

MEP Zimmer took the final opportunity as the dialogue session concluded to thank everyone for their concrete, innovative recommendations that will help the Parliament in its legislative work and to substantiate allocating more Structural Funds (under the current MFF negotiations) towards the worthy mission of ending poverty in Europe. She asked for any and all suggestions to further this cause. Vera Hinterdorfer, EAPN Vice-President, replied that the Network will share a position paper on this topic with the panel after the event, but jokingly warned that the MEP had opened Pandora's box. "Maybe your email box will fill up with suggestions!"

CLOSING and EVALUATION

In the tradition of the PEP Meeting, each year EAPN gathers all delegates together one final time to reflect on the past days, what they will take home from the experience, what they liked about it, and what they would like to do differently. The responses are evaluated and the feedback goes towards making future PEP Meetings even better.

Leo Williams, EAPN Director, also took the opportunity to thank everyone for their invaluable contributions and to praise staff and volunteers for the hard work and dedication before, during and after the event. He informed everyone that the drawings and report of the event will be shared in due course with delegates, MEPs and the European Commission, including the contributions from the 15 table talks and other great moments and images of the event.

It is up to everyone to use this work and stimulate discussion back home, with heads of state and with their future MEPs ahead of the European Parliamentary elections in May 2019, according to Williams: "Participation is really in EAPN's DNA, at national level and here at the PEP Meeting. We're doing a long-term strategic reflection on where we want to be, and we want to base this on people experiencing poverty around Europe."

He offered examples of questions to reflect on until the next Meeting: What would a strong grass-roots anti-poverty movement in Europe mean? What is the main political problem that you would like your anti-poverty movement to tackle? How would you like to participate in grass-root anti-poverty measures?



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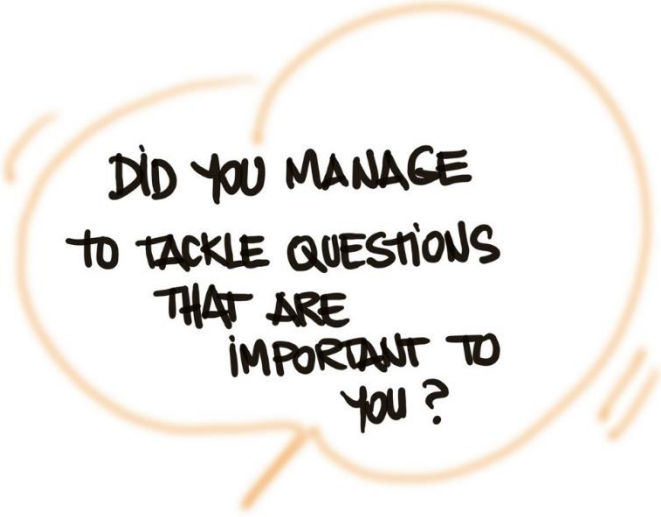
How can we do better?

And the final question to delegates at the Meeting is, 'How can EAPN do better? How can the Meeting be improved?' As in previous years, participants were asked to 'vote with their feet' by moving up and down an imaginary line in the conference room depicting how satisfied they were with proceedings; one end totally 'satisfied', the other end 'unsatisfied'.



**DID YOU MANAGE TO
KNOW NEW PEOPLE &
EXCHANGE EXPERIENCES
& IDEAS?**

The vast majority of delegates moved to the satisfied end of the room with just a few mid-way. One delegate said: "We met so many friends here." A table host in the world café said it was her first experience of the Meeting and that she was really impressed with the "rich conversations" and how much people knew about the subjects.



**DID YOU MANAGE
TO TACKLE QUESTIONS
THAT ARE
IMPORTANT TO
YOU?**

Again, the populace drifted or stayed largely at the positive end, but this time some improvement was noted. One delegate nearer the dissatisfied end said the technology divide question was not adequately answered, "yet we know it is a driver in breaking poverty going forward". Williams agreed and said that that is indeed a long-term issue which will be further explored by EAPN. Another delegate felt there was so much discussion on the symptoms and rough ideas on where to go, but not concrete enough action, planning or strategy to deal with it. He hoped to get closer to delivering what is needed to the decision-makers together with a simple question: "Do you need our help with it or can you do it yourself?"

Another delegate added that while very satisfied with the work, conversations, colleagues and EAPN, more concrete dialogue with decision-makers next time would be appreciated, "otherwise our preparations and work here has little effect at the policy level". She suggested more close and consistent dialogue with decision-makers be programmed into the event, even a whole interactive session with the politicians. "I know they're busy, but we need to find a way to keep them here longer, and when we leave here, to have a plan on what to do moving forward."



The event was a qualified success in terms of empowering delegates. One delegate said: "It was not the meeting itself that empowered me. The response today from the decision-makers didn't empower me. We feel privileged to be here and the panel should also. Some questions were not answered."

Another delegate offered something of a fable to explain his feelings about the PEP 2018, which explored the magic of education (see below).

"This PEP meeting made me think about school in a different way. We came here knowing that change is needed and we were empowered to do that. At our (EAPN Estonia) stand in the market place, you find two pictures; one of a boy who can't read. He steals apples from his neighbour, falls from the tree and gets caught. 'Do we tell your parents?' the neighbour asks. 'Please don't. I'll do whatever you want,' the boy replies. The neighbour says he likes reading but can't see very well, so asks the boy to read to him. And after a while, when the boy goes back to school, the teacher discovers the boy can now read (better). What the teacher couldn't do, the neighbour could with new methods. We need to change the schools. Thanks."



FURTHER READING

To learn more about the European Anti-Poverty Network's People Experiencing Poverty events and EU actions to combat poverty, consult the following links.

European Anti-Poverty Network: www.eapn.eu

European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty: voicesofpoverty-eu.net

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion: ec.europa.eu/social/home

European Pillar of Social Rights: ec.europa.eu/social/pillar

Europe 2020 Strategy: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/europe-2020-strategy_en

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See all EAPN publications and activities on www.eapn.eu

The European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) is an independent network of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and groups involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the Member States of the European Union, established in 1990.



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