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More than 30 million people in the European Community live in poverty, on the margin of what are considered "acceptable" living conditions. Five years after its poverty programme was first launched, the European Commission has drawn up an evaluation of the results.

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AGEING : The Greying of Europe

Our planet may be ageing but, at the same time, the population of Europe is also growing older, confronting modern society with a new challenge. For instance, it has been estimated that in 10 years time old people will form 20 percent of the Italian population. In Western Europe in general, it has also been predicted that by the year 2000 persons receiving pensions will number close to half the actual working population.

These demographic facts also bring with them harsh social and economic realities which will have to be urgently faced by modern European societies in the near future. That is partly why the United Nations proclamation of 1982 as The Year of the Elderly may be just in time to raise public and political awareness about the challenge. Also timely in this respect is a report and recommendation by the European Parliament's Committee on Social Affairs and Employment about the entire issue. The document was prepared by an Italian member, Vera Squarcialupi, at the panel's own initiative, as opposed to the usual pattern of waiting for a proposal by the EEC Commission. The group, in its report, outlines the emerging problem and calls upon the other Community institutions to set in motion a five-year programme to help ease the plight of this growing population.

The problems are manifold, but only sporadically and inadequately attacked by public authorities facing difficulties in providing additional services or pension rights. The report relates some of the efforts undertaken by authorities to improve the lives of the elderly. This includes installation of telephones at the bedside of elderly people in Belgium who are alone and ailing, a service for hot meals and special laundry in Britain, and special universities or part-time work programmes in France. But among the most pressing problems noted are housing, health and alienation. The breakdown of the nuclear family pattern and economic trends have left the elderly without the presence of their families and left them without a useful role in society. The problems are accelerating, it is noted, because of the rising life expectancy and lower mortality rates in most countries. Since women tend to live longer than men and frequently are not economically independent, the problems are especially acute for them.

The report proposes a number of actions to help relieve this situation. It urges the Community to work towards more flexible retirement schemes, improvement of pensions, a possible reinsertion into suitable employment and special health, housing and other services.

Talking turkey - Europe's poultry war

The traditional turkey sizzling on your Christmas table may not look controversial, but it is at the centre of a furious row over a British ban on poultry imports.

The so-called "Turkey War" began in August with a decision by Britain to ban all imports of poultry, eggs and egg products from countries which failed to comply with its new health regulations for the control of Newcastle disease (sometimes known as fowl pest).

Since the new policy of slaughtering (instead of merely vaccinating) birds suspected of having contracted the disease was only subscribed to by Ireland, Denmark and, outside the Community, Sweden, the more effectively excluded all Britain's main European competitors from the lucrative British market.

EEC officials, who have taken Britain to the European Court of Justice over the ban, believe that it was inspired more from protectionism than serious health considerations. Vaccination was declared "satisfactory" in Britain in 1974 and since then the disease has declined to negligible proportions. But British turkey farmers have expressed growing fears over what they see as unfair competition from increasingly efficient subsidised French producers in Brittany.

The giant Bourgoin turkey processing plant at Guiscriff in southern Brittany enjoyed French government regional aid subsidies to the tune of 35 percent of its construction costs (which totalled some 8.5 million pounds) and has a capacity of 20 million turkeys a year, roughly equivalent to total British consumption.

The British believe that the aim of the plant is to flood Britain with cheap turkeys. They say that two of the factory's three production lines are designed to produce whole frozen birds which are destined for export to British markets.

But the European Commission has ruled that regional aid subsidies to producers in Brittany are acceptable under Community law and says that objections by British Agriculture Minister Peter Walker, on the grounds of unfair competition, are out of order.

Britain's sudden decision in August to ban imports on health grounds at three days notice is generally regarded as a pretext to get around the Commission ruling. Wholesale orders for the immense British Christmas market for turkeys are generally made in early September, and producers were threatening to picket incoming shipments of cheap French turkeys.

Commission officials are particularly annoyed over the ban, as they see it as Britain copying France's illegal blockade of Italian wine after consistently criticising it.

France faces charges under Article 30 of the Treaty of Rome, which outlaws quantitative restrictions on imports from member states of the Community, except in special circumstances. Britain is charged with breaching Article 36, which bans changes in animal health regulations that are in fact concealed trade barriers, and Article 6, which disallows sudden changes in regulations which disrupt trade without prior consultation.

Initial French reaction to the poultry ban was to comply with British demands and introduce their own slaughter policy. But Britain shows no signs of lifting restrictions, at least until the case has been heard by the European Court.

But despite delight among British producers over the ban, British consumers are less than enthusiastic about paying considerably more than would otherwise be necessary for their Christmas turkey. Chicken and egg prices have also risen sharply in the shops, although imports up to now have only accounted for between 3-5 percent of the market.

Food manufacturers who depend heavily on Dutch supplies of dried eggs were also infuriated at being given only three days to find alternative suppliers. Since home producers cannot provide the four and a half thousand tonnes needed annually by the industry, it seems likely that Britain will have to scrap the notion that dried products can carry fowl pest and constitute a health risk.

Doubts also remain as to the benefits of a slaughter policy over vaccination. Not only has vaccination proved to be highly effective in stamping out the disease throughout Europe, but it has also been much cheaper than slaughtering birds and paying producers compensation.

Turkey production has boomed in Europe over the past decade, and now stands at about six hundred thousand tonnes per annum. Consumption has more than tripled in the Community as a whole.

The British ban on poultry and egg imports, like the French ban on Italian wine, illustrate a protectionism which threatens the very foundations of the free market principles on which European unity is based. In the long run, neither producers nor consumers benefit from protection, and experience has shown that the best solutions to common problems generally lie in common action through the European Community.

DEVELOPMENT : Europe a beacon of hope for Third World women

In all the developing countries and most of the time in Europe as well, a child is raised largely by its mother. In its early stages of life, it is the mother who provides a child with its accompanying cultural, social and, later, even political baggage. As a baby discovers the world, its mother is more often than not its first point of reference. But in the developing world, women comprise the largest group of illiterates. In addition, the largest number of poor persons are also women. Women are also among the least-trained and excluded elements of political and social life.

It is therefore difficult to imagine how they can exercise much of a positive influence on their children or the development policies of their countries since they have to depend on men for nearly everything. How can they inspire hope themselves if they are often among the most unfortunate of human beings.

It is for this reason, as well as for many others, that to create a new equality between men and women in society, women must escape from the vicious cycle imposed upon them by tradition.

It is not, therefore, by pure accident that the Ministers for Aid and Development of the ten members of the European Community put on the agenda for a recent meeting in Brussels the role of women in the Third World. They were probably conscious of twin pressures on them - on the one hand from Third World women and on the other from women of the Community countries who want to participate in the policy decisions affecting them in this field.

This feminine reaction is an outgrowth of numerous international meetings and conferences in Mexico in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980 and others. A world action plan was adopted and the decade of women was proclaimed for 1975 to 1985 by the United Nations. The year 1975 was also the year of women. A meeting was organised in Copenhagen in 1980 to designate major objectives for the next five years. Since then, information has been exchanged and contacts have been established between women from industrialised countries and their sisters from the developing world.

The European Community has a sound reputation for generosity for aid to the developing regions of the world. It has participated in food aid, commercial accords, tariff preferences and a number of other activities. The Community has played an active role in this field throughout the world and, because of historical ties, has made a special effort in Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific (ACP). As a result, more than 60 such countries have concluded two treaties with the Community known as Lomé I and II after

the site of their signature. These represent contracts involving financial aid, industrial cooperation, stabilisation of export earnings, trade preferences and other elements.

In connection with the general North-South dialogue, the EEC and the ACP countries are pursuing the experience of their original cooperation. It is for this reason that women are placing much hope in the European Community to conceive a policy for development in which women are not excluded.

The Community was a driving force in the improvement of the conditions of women's professional life in Europe. Why shouldn't it play a similar role for women of the third world.

SECURITY : A bad trick

Practical jokes and other pranks have always attracted certain mischief-makers, young and old. Like the caves of Ali Baba in the past, there are nowadays stores specialising in such false whiskers, masks and other disguises. However, their wares are sometimes more offensive than they seem.

For instance, sneezing powder, stink bombs and tear gas pellets cannot be classified as innocent pleasantries, since researchers have discovered that they may contain chemical substances that could be dangerous.

For example, take sneezing powder (figuratively that is) which sometimes contains a product named 3,3 dimethoxy-benzidine and the gag could turn sour. This product represents disturbing characteristics that are similar in structure to the benzidine which has been found carcinogenic.

Stink bombs are also deemed to be dangerous once ammonium polysulphide enters into their composition. They then give off noxious gases that are corrosive. It has been found that even small quantities of this substance can cause inflammation of skin and eyes.

And the respiratory system and eyes can be damaged by tear gas that contains methyl bromoacetate.

Some suspected substances are already forbidden on several European markets. However, no steps are underway to coordinate such European laws. That's why the European Commission, as a step toward child safety, has proposed a directive for the Community countries. Producers would be obliged to change the contents of the products containing harmful substances and use other less-toxic substances. Even then, pranksters will still have fun.

SOCIAL : 30 million poor Europeans

As a result of hearing about rising standards of living and economic growth for so many years, many of us have forgotten about the existence of poverty in Europe. We know that there are hundreds of millions of poor living in the countries of the Third World who are too frequently beyond our ability to help. But few realise that there are also 30 million poor living in our midst in the European Community.

This number represents an estimate made by the European Commission during the 1970s when Greece was not yet a member. It showed that the deepening economic crisis had added to the traditionally poor a growing number of new poor who have been denied the opportunity to work.

According to a definition used by European Community authorities, those considered poor include "individuals or families whose resources are so low that they are excluded from the minimum acceptable life styles prevailing in the member countries where they live." A number of untrained young persons, immigrants and handicapped persons are especially found in this category. Social aid services cannot assist all of them and often the concepts of "social justice" or "the welfare state" remain only a theory for them. Nevertheless, a political willingness to help was displayed as early as in 1975 on a European scale. In July of that year, Ministers of the nine Community countries adopted the first five-year programme against poverty. This programme included research and studies into the scope of poverty, on the attitudes toward it and also on its different aspects as well as the preparation of national reports on poverty in each of the member states.

But it also pledged action "in the field" centred principally on a series of pilot projects spread throughout the Community member countries. The aim of these projects, most of which are still underway, was to test and develop new means of helping persons who are the victims of poverty. The European Commission has just published a voluminous report in which it evaluates the first results and which also calls for a mobilisation of public opinion to intensify the struggle against poverty and counter the risk of seeing the social fabric of Europe deteriorate.

Due to the year-end holidays, EUROFOCUS is interrupting its publication for two weeks. The next number will be dated the 11th of January 1982. While awaiting the renewal of our contacts, we wish you a Happy Christmas and present our best wishes for the New Year.