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Mailed from: Brussels X

SOCIETY: Poverty in Europe ...

... as seen by Europeans themselves.

How do Europeans perceive the poor? For one European in three they are the victims of the injustices in our society. But for a third of the population the poor are either unlucky or an inevitable part of modern progress. And some 17% see them as victims of their own laziness or lack of willpower, according to the Eurobarometer survey on the perception of poverty in Europe, conducted last summer on behalf of the European Commission. In a survey carried out 13 years before, in the 9-nation Community* of 1976, social injustice had ranked equally with laziness.

As for the immediate causes of poverty, unemployment was cited in all European Community countries with the exception of Germany and Luxembourg, where drink and drugs were evoked, and Greece, which put illness as the main cause. In all three countries the level of unemployment is below the Community average.

The aim of the survey was not to define poverty, nor to determine the number of poor in the European Community. Even so, the Europeans who were polled had similar ideas of what is needed to maintain a reasonable standard of living. For more than 90% of them, housing with running water, electricity and an indoor toilet were essential, together with access to social security benefits, such as unemployment, illness, handicap and old age, when needed. Having a good education and a healthy diet were regarded as indispensable by 80% of those polled. However, only a minority of Europeans regarded a car and vacations as absolutely necessary.

Among those polled, 35% felt they were continually having to hold back because their income was inadequate to their needs. This was the case of one Irish person in two and of 40% of the Greeks, Portuguese and British. However, the situation has improved in all the countries of the 9-nation EC* since the 1976 survey, with two exceptions: Belgium and France. In any case, this survey hardly gave "genuine" paupers an opportunity to express themselves. As those responsible for the Eurobarometer survey point out, researchers are unable to sound out the homeless, while the worse off often refuse to answer questions.

Only one European in five claimed to have had an opportunity to see for himself how the poor live. In villages and small towns, more than half of those polled claimed there were no poor people in their neighbourhood. However, in the large cities only a minority claimed to have never come across paupers in their neighbourhood.

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Some 70% of Europeans felt that social inequalities are growing; the proportion rose to 80% in fact in Britain and Ireland. In all the countries of the 12-nation Community, the majority of those polled had the impression that the poor are becoming much poorer and the rich much richer. Nevertheless, more than half the population believes that the poor stand a chance of escaping from their poverty, and more than two-thirds that their children can escape the clutches of poverty.

The Community's citizens generally know little about the measures taken by their respective governments to fight against poverty: except in the Benelux countries and France they do not know, for the most part, if there is a system of guaranteed minimum income in their country. From a wider point of view, two out of three of those polled took the view that their government does not do enough for the poor.

The action taken by the European Community is even less well known: fewer than one third of those polled had heard of it. The Belgians and Portuguese appeared to be the best informed, the French the least. Among those who claimed to be aware of the Community's activities, a majority regarded them as inadequate.

* The present Community less Greece, Spain and Portugal.

SOCIETY: ECU 55mn. for the fight against poverty until 1994

The European Commission wants to act in a modest but exemplary way.

Between now and 1994 municipalities and regional and local associations throughout the 12-nation European Community will receive funds from the Community's budget to carry out their projects in the fight against poverty. The aim of 27 of these projects is to develop a problem neighbourhood or area, while another 12 seek the reintegration into society of groups in difficulty: former drug addicts or prisoners, invalids, the mentally ill, unmarried mothers. These 39 projects make up the third anti-poverty programme of the European Community, called "Poverty 3". If they are successful, they will provide the Twelve examples they could usefully follow in order to improve their national policies.

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The Community programme has received ECU 55mn.* from the EC Council of Ministers for the period 1990-94, or ECU 11mn. a year on average. With means as modest as this, in relation to the stakes, the European Commission has no plans to eliminate poverty from the Community. The number of people whose incomes amounted to less than half the average for their country came to some 44mn. in the mid-1980s; this figure had fallen to 38.6mn. in the mid-1970s. In 1988 the number of homeless was estimated at one million.

It will be seen that poverty is not falling but changing. The elderly, for example, are still the hardest hit, but they now represent a smaller proportion of the poor; their proportion in fact is tending to fall. Their place has been taken by the long-term unemployed, who now make up the largest group of poor, along with one-parent families.

The European Community has already contributed financially to experimental projects undertaken under the two earlier anti-poverty programmes, one in the second half of the 1970s, the other in the years 1984 to 1988. But in the European Community responsibility for dealing with poverty rests basically with the national authorities. The Treaty of Rome, the Community's "Constitution", gives the EC itself few powers in this field.

The Commission nevertheless has obtained more funds for Poverty 3 than for the earlier programmes, and it has selected a limited number of projects to make sure they are as effective as possible.

Of the 39 projects integrated in the Poverty 3 programme, three are in Ireland (Limerick, Letterfrack and Dublin) and four in the U.K. (Liverpool, Craigavon, Edinburgh and Bristol). Information on activities at the national level may be obtained from:

Ireland - Cera (Conway Economic Research & Analysis)
72 Monastery Drive, Dublin 22
Patrick Commins, Patricia Brand
Tel.: 353 1 59 32 71
Fax : 353 1 59 13 56

U.K. - The Local Government Centre
Warwick Business School, University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL
John Benington, Claudia Martin
Tel.: 44 203 52 41 09
Fax : 44 203 52 37 19

* 1 ECU = UK£0.74 or UK£0.76

TRANSPORT: Airports must not take advantage of their monopoly position

The European Commission envisages a regular dialogue between airport authorities and passengers.

Airports, by their very nature, are in a position of monopoly. This can lead to imbalances, which can be all the more serious, given that the growth in air transport is adding to problems of capacity as regards not only airport infrastructures but also passenger and freight handling services. The European Commission is therefore asking for more dialogue between airport authorities and the airlines, with agreements that are clear-cut as regards both the use of airports and their fees. These vary a good deal at present, prompting the Commission to ask for explanations, because it feels that aeronautical fees must not discriminate, in principle, between internal and international flights. On the contrary, they must be harmonized in as clear a manner as possible, so as to encourage the certain, effective and economic use of airport installations. They must also be levied on the basis of tables which are clear and comprehensible, and be in line with the cost of services provided. These costs must be calculated in an equitable and integral manner, on the basis of healthy commercial and economic principles, although certain requirements of regional policy could be taken into consideration in the case of regions that are isolated or otherwise difficult to reach.

If competition between airports is still limited, the situation will change with the liberalization of air transport in the Community, especially for charters, freight and even certain scheduled long-distance flights. Competition could be in terms of price but also, in the case of certain airports, their links with other transport networks, such as high-speed trains.

When all is said and done, airports will continue to offer a public service. This is likely to influence their schedule of conditions, especially when it will be a question of ensuring air links with remote areas of the Community.

ENVIRONMENT: World's fair would put Venice under sentence of death

The European Environment Commissioner opposes the "Venice-2000" project.

Venice has faced numerous threats since the severe yet wise laws of the former republic were violated, even forgotten.

The forests have been destroyed, rivers and land polluted and the lagoon has been opened to the sea. It's a miracle that the City of the Doges had not yet succumbed to floods, the poisons given off by the chemical industry and the fumes given off by the land. The horror reached its peak last summer with the decision to authorize a rock concert on the night of the traditional Venetian festival, the "Redentore". A crowd of 200,000 from outside ran wild, destroying everything in its path. The next day newspapers and television stations across the world showed the havoc wreaked on St. Mark's Square and the desecration of the "calli" and "campielli". All who really love Venice felt the city had had a narrow escape.

But the sentence of death had perhaps been no more than postponed. It could be pronounced in Paris on June 14 by the International Office of Expositions, when it decides on which of the three cities in the running - Venice, Hanover and Toronto - should host Expo 2000.

It is no exaggeration to speak of a death sentence. All the assessments made so far show that this world exposition would have worrying repercussions on the city, especially in view of the number of tourists that would flock to it. More than 15 million people in all would be present, with a peak of 175,000 and more each day. This is nearly nine times the daily tolerance level of 20,000. It would be the equivalent of the highly damaging rock concert every three days!

Not surprisingly, a very large number of voices - of leading personalities as well as organizations - have been raised against the offer to organize "Venice 2000", given that its consequences could be fatal to the city, which is part of the cultural heritage of the whole world. The municipal council of Venice is firmly opposed to the project. One quarter of the population has signed a petition against it, and demonstrations against it have been taking place in Venice itself and elsewhere.

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It was in this context that the support of the European Environment Commissioner, Carlo Ripa di Meana, was sought by Mr Alvisè Zorzi, who is president of 21 organizations from 13 countries. In a letter to the European Commissioner, Mr Zorzi asked him to make sure that the EC directive on safeguarding the environment was respected. Mr Ripa di Meana did not hesitate to take a stand in the matter. He stated that at this stage the European Commission expected the Italian authorities to implement faithfully the Community's environmental legislation as regards all the activities resulting from an eventual decision in favour of Venice as the site of the Expo 2000.

The directive in question stipulates, among other things, that all plans for the construction of motorways, through-roads and airports, and for improvements to the existing infrastructure, must be assessed in terms of their likely impact on the environment. It is clear that given the unity of the urban tissue of Venice, it is particularly susceptible to the dangers inherent in such projects.

Venice already received far too many tourists and Expo 2000, which will attract visitors from all over the world, would generate pressures of a kind the city could not absorb without suffering irreversible damage. The argument invoked by the promoters of "Venice 2000", that the fair would not be confined to Venice itself but spread over the region of Veneto, is clearly absurd: the flood of visitors from the distant parts of the Americas, Asia and Africa could not be expected to steer clear of Venice itself.

The danger to the city is therefore both concrete and imminent. The lobby in favour of Venice 2000 has worked well and the city could well be chosen by the International Office of Expositions. This is why Mr Ripa di Meana has insisted that all the organizations which have taken a stand in the matter must be consulted. The European Commission, for its part, has already sent a task force to Venice to gather all the information it needs to follow the matter.

"I am aware of my responsibilities", the European Commissioner has noted. "I have therefore decided to write to the Italian government to remind it forcefully of its obligations under the Community's legislation. I am also writing to the International Office of Expositions, to express my concern that a choice could be made without an appropriate assessment of the environmental impact of the exposition."

CONSUMERS: The European Commission wants to ensure they are better protected

It is launching 22 measures to this end in the context of the single market.

The European Commission has just adopted a 3-year action programme which includes 22 concrete initiatives regarding consumer representation and the information, safety and trans-border aspects of consumer choice in the single market. This programme should be completed between now and 1992, so as to ensure better protection for consumers.

As regards consumer representation, the programme provides notably for finalizing the setting up and development of the Consultative Consumer Council and, if necessary, encouraging the creation of similar bodies in the Member States.

As for consumer information, the Commission has decided to promote cooperation between consumer organizations and the educational system, through the exchange of material to improve consumer education. The Commission is also concerned to guarantee a maximum of transparency, especially as regards the banking and insurance sectors. It is prepared to draw up Community legislation, if necessary, in order to guide consumers in making their choice. The existing directives on labelling will be improved and the idea of providing a distinctive mark for quality products will be developed.

The Commission's programme also favours comparative tests and will encourage advertising which compares products.

The Commission will seek to encourage all measures which favour consumer safety. "Consumer confidence will be the true key to the success of the single market", the European Commissioner for consumer protection, Mr Karel Van Miert, pointed out when presenting his 3-year plan in favour of the Community's 320mn. consumers.

WORKFORCE: No formalities for Spanish and Portuguese workers ...
... who come to work in the "Ten" for their company.

No work permit is required by Spanish and Portuguese workers who come to work in one of the 10 other European Community countries for a firm located in their country of origin. The EC Court of Justice ruled on March 27 that a Portuguese building company that brought its own workforce to France, to work on the TGV Atlantique for a limited period of time, should benefit from the free movement of persons - including Portuguese workers, who are supplying their services.

This means these particular workers are not covered by the ground rules for Spanish and Portuguese workers, in force since their two countries joined the Community in 1986. Under these rules, workers from these two countries are being treated as "foreigners" in the 10 other EC countries until 31 December 1992. It is only after this date that they, too, will enjoy the right of free movement.

INTERNAL MARKET: Buying your car where it is cheapest

The European Commission authorizes dealers to buy vehicles in the EC country in which they are cheapest.

A French service company located in Rouen, Ecosystem, discovered that new French cars were available on more favourable terms in Belgium and Luxembourg than in France. It therefore decided to offer its French customers the possibility of buying their cars in these two countries - or wherever in the 12-nation European Community the terms were most advantageous.

The French car manufacturer, Peugeot S.A., sent a circular to its dealers in Belgium and Luxembourg, instructing them not to supply Ecosystem. The latter lodged a complaint against Peugeot S.A. with the European Commission. The fact is that Ecosystem imported around 4,000 cars in 1988, 1,200 of which were Peugeots.

The European Commission has now imposed interim measures on the French car manufacturer, requiring it to allow Ecosystem to buy up to 1,200 vehicles a year from Peugeot dealers in Belgium and Luxembourg.

At heart is the issue of whether the activities of professional agents, such as Ecosystem, are compatible with the selective and exclusive distribution network authorized for the motor vehicle sector by a 1985 Community regulation. The French car manufacturer has argued they are not. The European Commission, having provided interim relief to Ecosystem, will now tackle this more basic issue.