

# 2015 EESC CIVIL SOCIETY PRIZE

Rewarding excellence in civil society initiatives



## Combating poverty



European Economic and Social Committee

# Civil society: a force in the fight to end poverty and social exclusion in Europe

Combating poverty and social exclusion has to be a top priority in today's European Union for the obvious moral reasons, but also because it is expressly written into the Treaty and because the Union must show that it cares for its citizens in order to regain their support. That is why the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) decided to dedicate this year's Civil Society Prize to organisations that have distinguished themselves by their creativity and success in confronting these problems and making a difference.

Poverty is a violation of human rights. It undermines all aspects of well-being in society, including education, long-term health, and family relationships. Poverty damages the future prospects not only of individuals but of the whole community.

In 2010, the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth identified the need to combat poverty and reduce inequality, enabling everyone to contribute to – and benefit from – a prosperous Europe. One of its seven headline targets was to lift 20 million people out of poverty by 2020. But tragically the economic crisis has knocked the European Union off course. Austerity measures have cut essential services and increased unemployment across Europe, generating more poverty instead of reducing it.

Official statistics show that poverty now threatens five million more EU citizens than in 2008. Last year over 24% of the population – 122 million people – were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. My own country, Greece, has suffered one of the highest rates, with 36%\* of the population at risk: an increase of 7.9 percentage points compared with 2008. Across the Union, almost 9% of citizens were severely materially deprived, meaning they could not afford to pay bills, heat their homes, eat healthily or buy basic goods.

Child poverty is a particular concern. Children are Europe's future and we need to recognise their rights. Investing in children is a social and economic necessity. Member States play a crucial role setting policies that impact on children's well-being, and the EESC wants to see more accountability and the meaningful involvement of civil society in decision-making and implementation of measures nationally.

In-work poverty is another alarming development. Employment has always been regarded as the best way to escape poverty, but the increase in precarious and low-paid jobs in Europe in recent years has left whole families struggling to cope, even when parents are working.



The Commission's communication Taking stock of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth recognised that the number of people at risk of poverty might remain close to 100 million by 2020, concluding: "The crisis has demonstrated the need for effective social protection systems."

It is therefore all the more important for one of the key flagship initiatives of the Europe 2020 Strategy – the European platform against poverty and social exclusion – to be reformed to make it a real hub for involving civil society, sharing social and anti-poverty initiatives and taking more decisive action. The original aim of the platform, which was set up in 2010 and will continue operating until 2020, was to create a dynamic framework uniting EU institutions, Member States and civil society. Yet up until now Member States have been focusing their efforts on economic growth and neglected the vital social and environmental objectives of Europe 2020.

The EESC recognises that poverty and social exclusion can be multi-faceted challenges, encompassing problems with housing, health, education, access to employment, indebtedness and addiction, to name but a few. Civil society organisations across the European Union are addressing these issues, often focusing their efforts on local needs and – crucially – involving people experiencing poverty in their planning and activities.

With its 2015 Civil Society Prize, the EESC is rewarding outstanding initiatives that aim to combat poverty in Europe by improving economic and social inclusion and countering the increasing risk of exposure to poverty. Here I would like to thank colleagues in the Communication Group who managed the process – under chair Jane Morrice during the previous term, and then Gonçalo Lobo Xavier – as well as our Committee's administrative services that assisted them.

I am proud to be able to introduce the winners of the 2015 EESC Civil Society Prize and congratulate them on their achievements. I also take this opportunity to welcome, on behalf of all my colleagues representing European civil society within the institutions, all the women and men fighting courageously to alleviate suffering, to reduce the impact of poverty – or banish it altogether – in their own countries. Their efforts must be acclaimed.

**Georges Dassis**

President of the European Economic and Social Committee

# 1

1<sup>st</sup> prize:

## Armut und Gesundheit in Deutschland

Poverty and bad health go hand in hand. Decisive evidence shows that poorer people suffer more illness and die earlier than their wealthier counterparts. Armut und Gesundheit in Deutschland (Poverty and Health in Germany) was set up in Mainz in 1997, to offer good healthcare to all, regardless of financial resources.



Poverty in Germany is at its highest level since the country's reunification. In 2013, it affected more than 15% of the population: some 12 million people including 2.5 million children.

Poorer people cannot afford the medicines and treatment they need. And as poverty generates sickness, sickness in turn increases poverty. A study in Hamburg showed that disease is the cause of 10% of debt problems.

Armut und Gesundheit implements the innovative "Mainz Model", providing comprehensive medical care to homeless people and integrating them into the regular health system. Its "Mobile Doctor" clinic offers medical, nursing and social support to people on the streets. *"The most fundamental aspect is the basic working approach,"* explains Deputy CEO Jari Trabert. *"This is participatory and based on respect, equality, and contact at eye level."*

This award is a great sign that the EESC stands not only against poverty but also for the health and welfare of every human being, without restrictions.

The walk-in "clinic without borders" supplies services to anyone lacking money or health insurance. In 2014, it treated 1 500 patients from over 30 countries. Another initiative, the Street Jumper, is a brightly decorated camper van that travels around deprived neighbourhoods, giving local children and young people a safe place to read, play games, and share their problems.

*"Receiving a prize is always a great experience, but for a relatively small organisation it is more than that",* says Mr Trabert. *"Publicity and good press are essential for our survival because Armut und Gesundheit is financed solely by donations. In the winter especially, the situation of homeless people is highly parlous, and with the growing number of refugees we are increasing our work in this domain. The prize money will be poured into these projects."*

The organisation also campaigns politically and through the media to raise awareness of poverty. It supports similar projects in Romania, Ukraine, Greece, and further afield in Congo and Indonesia, with a new healthcare unit for street children planned in Kenya.

According to Mr Trabert, *"This award is a great sign that the EESC stands not only against poverty but also for the health and welfare of every human being, without restrictions"*.

#### MORE INFORMATION:

[www.armut-gesundheit.de](http://www.armut-gesundheit.de)

**1<sup>st</sup> prize:**

## **Y-Foundation**

### Reducing homelessness by promoting social housing as a human right

1

The Y-Foundation has a clear objective: to end homelessness in Finland by providing affordable, good-quality rental housing.

In 1985, when local authorities, churches, trade unions, NGOs and others launched the Y-Foundation, there were 20 000 homeless people in Finland. Over 2000 slept in overnight shelters in Helsinki alone. Since then, the foundation has helped reduce the total to 7 100 single people and 420 families.

Its innovative approach involves buying flats on the private market and renovating them into social housing, with rents up to 30% lower than average, making them accessible to some of the most vulnerable people, including ex-prisoners, drug abusers and people with psychiatric problems.

The letter "Y" comes from the Finnish word *yksinäinen*, meaning "lonely". Homelessness is closely linked to poverty and social exclusion. *"We were one of the first organisations to practise the 'housing first' principle,"* explains Chief Executive Officer Juha Kaakinen. *"A home gives people a platform to make other changes in their lives."* It promotes not only human dignity but better health and employment opportunities, too, and benefits welfare systems. For example, two of Y-Foundation's tenants now have jobs in the organisation's office.



A home gives people a platform to make other changes in their lives.

Building partnerships is key to the foundation's success, including cooperating with local authorities and involving tenants in managing their properties. Environmental sustainability is important, so properties are adapted to reduce energy use, and where possible have access to public transport.

The Civil Society Prize will make a big difference, says Mr Kaakinen. *"This kind of European recognition is a great motivator for our personnel. And it's important nationally, to make our work better known in Finland. It also raises awareness of homelessness and poverty, so that it's easier to discuss these issues publicly."* The Y-Foundation has already received other accolades, including the World Habitat Award.

This year, the foundation has launched a new project. *"We have started looking at ways of getting employment opportunities for our tenants,"* explains Mr Kaakinen. *"The prize money can be used in a very targeted way to build up this system to provide jobs."*

#### MORE INFORMATION:

[www.ysaatio.fi/in-english/](http://www.ysaatio.fi/in-english/)

The Y-Foundation now owns 7 700 apartments in 53 cities, and has inspired interest not only in other European countries but also in Japan, USA, Russia and South America.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> prize:

### **National Association for the development of Social and Solidarity Food Shops (ANDES)** Uniterres programme

Our organisation is composed of people who are dedicated to what they do.

Just as food poverty has affected more people in Europe in the wake of the economic crisis, at the same time many small farmers and producers have found it increasingly difficult to make a living.

The Uniterres programme, set up in France in 2011, benefits both groups by supporting social and solidarity food shops selling locally grown produce at below-market prices while paying farmers a fair price. As well as strengthening the link between consumers and producers, this gives poorer people access to fresh, good-quality fruit and vegetables and promotes healthy eating.

Uniterres protects small farmers' incomes by a system of pre-ordering. *"Prices are fixed from the beginning to the end of the season, which is not the case on the conventional market"*, says vegetable-grower Christian Brunet, whose business was on the verge of collapse before he joined the programme.

*"Our organisation is composed of people who are dedicated to what they do; we really function as a team in partnership with many grass-root associations supported by volunteers"*, explains Uniterres assistant manager Isabelle Techoueyres. *"We work with small-scale farmers, food-aid beneficiaries, people in precarious situations, and we are supported by public and private institutions. For each one of these people, the Civil Society award is meaningful and highly gratifying. European recognition for all the people involved!"*

The programme currently supports 124 small farmers in south-western France, supplying 53 social and solidarity shops, providing food aid for 20 000 beneficiaries each year. Contributing, rather than receiving "handouts", promotes personal independence and dignity. The shops prevent food waste by carefully planning the products required, and they counter health inequalities by making good food available to vulnerable people. *"Many beneficiaries are happy to lose or to gain weight, because they feel they eat better"*, notes Ms Techoueyres.



In June 2015, Uniterres won the French prize "La France s'engage". *"The Civil Society Prize represents yet another recognition, which indicates that most EU regions share similar visions of the challenges they face and objectives they want to achieve"*, says Uniterres Manager Véronique Blanchot. *"The prize money will be used to employ a dozen young people to develop relations between food-aid beneficiaries and local farmers."*

Uniterres is eager to share its experience. Partners in Spain and Belgium are considering similar programmes, and it has been asked to help set up a new scheme in Mumbai, India.

#### MORE INFORMATION:

[www.epiceries-solidaires.org/  
news/uniterres-des-circuits-  
courts-dans-le-reseau-des-  
epiceries-solidaires](http://www.epiceries-solidaires.org/news/uniterres-des-circuits-courts-dans-le-reseau-des-epiceries-solidaires)



# 2

2<sup>nd</sup> prize:

**Third Age**

Fáilte Isteach project



Getting old can lead to poverty and isolation, whether in the towns or rural areas of a country like Ireland. Third Age encourages older people to remain actively involved in their communities through a range of activities and services.

Fáilte Isteach (Welcome In) is a community-based project benefiting from the skills, wisdom and experience of older people by recruiting them as volunteer English tutors.

Over the last 15 years, many immigrants have come to Ireland seeking work. They now make up 12% of the population: more than half a million people from 199 different countries. Yet 80 000 of them do not speak good English, preventing them from integrating fully into Irish society. Fáilte Isteach's 800 volunteer tutors deliver 40 000 hours of free tuition every year, catering for all levels of proficiency and helping students to secure work and escape the risk of poverty.

*"Fáilte Isteach gives older people the opportunity to show that rather than being a 'burden on society', they can be part of the solution to many of the concerns*

*we face",* says Manager Ariana Ball. The volunteers also offer their own insight into Ireland's traditional values and ways of life.

It is contributing to a caring society which values diversity and sees our new migrants as a positive force.

The project fosters mutual understanding and helps to counter xenophobia and racism. *"We are acutely aware of the unfolding refugee crisis in Europe",* says Ms Ball. *"Winning a Civil Society Prize will allow Fáilte Isteach to play an integral role in supporting refugees who are resettled in Ireland in the future and to share the project with a wider European audience."*

Third Age launched Fáilte Isteach in 2006, in County Meath, and by the end of 2015 aims to have branches in all Ireland's 26 counties. Each week more than 2 200 migrants and asylum-seekers use its services.



Poles make up Ireland's largest minority community: 53-year-old Maria is just one beneficiary. *"We can socialise with Irish people and other nationalities, but best of all we learn to speak and write in English, which is most important,"* she says.

*"We have seen the sustained change Fáilte Isteach has brought to 83 communities in urban, suburban and rural Ireland,"* confirms Ms Ball. *"It is contributing to a caring society which values diversity and sees our new migrants as a positive force. The Prize validates the tremendous contribution being made by our many volunteers."*

MORE INFORMATION:

[www.thirdageireland.ie](http://www.thirdageireland.ie)

2<sup>nd</sup> prize:

## **Barka Foundation for Mutual Help** Integrated system of support for education and social entrepreneurship

2

The Barka Foundation (Barka means "lifeboat" in Polish) was launched in 1989 during Poland's painful transition years. It creates conditions for the empowerment and growth of vulnerable people and communities, by developing a pro-active system of social and vocational reintegration, serving more than 5 000 individuals a year.

Barka started by establishing 30 self-sufficient communities in Poland, turning former state farms into organic farms and social enterprises. Currently, 1000 vulnerable individuals and families live in these communities.

Between 1989 and 2000, Barka created model institutions and educational centres for the unemployed. At the same time, it worked with the Polish Government to develop four laws governing partnerships between NGOs and public institutions, social and vocational integration centres, social cooperatives and enterprises supporting accessible housing.

In 2004-2015, the Foundation established over 200 social integration centres to support unemployed and vulnerable adults including addicts, ex-prisoners, single mothers and disabled people, and encourage them to become social entrepreneurs. Some 1 200 social enterprises providing tens of thousands of jobs have been created, in partnership with local authorities and voluntary organisations. Two of them were selected as the Best Social Enterprises of 2015 by the Ministry of Labour.

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*"EESC recognition through the Civil Society Prize is important because it confirms that the system based on social economy and social entrepreneurship has been efficient and impactful", says Ewa Sadowska, a Foundation trustee.*

*"It will significantly strengthen our role in developing the social economy internationally." Recently, the Barka Foundation has been approached by NGOs and institutions in Macedonia and Serbia, interested in replicating the Polish system.*

It has also been working with the African diaspora in Europe and local communities in Kenya and Ethiopia to rebuild rural communities in East Africa through local partnership schemes and social enterprises. As a result, Barka's founder was formally admitted to the Council of Elders of the Pokomo Tribe in Kenya.

Barka already works in Belgium, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK, supporting Central and Eastern Europeans who migrated to another EU country for work and a better life, but ended up in need. Over the last nine years it has helped 12 000 vulnerable citizens in Western European cities to reintegrate into their communities at home, through rehabilitation, addiction treatment and vocational training.

One of them is Jerzy, a former seaman, who worked unofficially on construction sites in London until he lost his work and home due to alcoholism. With Foundation support, he recovered and now helps homeless migrants in Ireland – living proof of Barka's policy of breaking down the barrier between support recipients and providers, and recognising the potential in everyone.

The prize money will enable Barka to set up a new Multicultural Centre for migrants and refugees in Poznan, helping them to integrate in local communities and the labour market. *"It will help cover the cost of renovation and refurbishment of buildings and vocational training facilities", says Ms Sadowska.*

#### MORE INFORMATION:

[www.barka.org.pl](http://www.barka.org.pl)

## Due recognition for the role of civil society organisations

The European Economic and Social Committee launched the Civil Society Prize in 2006 to highlight and reward the achievements of active citizens all over Europe who are working to make life better for their communities.

In 2015, the award goes to civil society organisations or individuals who are fighting the growing risk of poverty, and the economic and social exclusion of people living under its shadow.

The EESC is the only body working at European Union level to represent the interests of all sectors of organised civil society. As such, one of its important tasks is to raise awareness of the vital role civil society organisations play, day in and day out, in fostering European solidarity and integration and promoting the common values and principles on which European unity is based. Those principles include the right of every citizen to live in dignity and be free of need. In awarding the prize, the Committee has looked for innovative projects in a wide range of areas such as social support, housing, education and health; in-work poverty (the 'working poor'); energy poverty; child poverty; homelessness; financial exclusion and over-indebtedness; or cooperation with public authorities.

The prize is worth a total of EUR 50 000, shared between the five winners. The annual competition is open to any officially registered civil society organisation or individual within the EU, acting at European, national, regional or local level. But candidates have to be nominated by a Pan-European civil society organisation, a member of the EESC or a national economic and social council.

In previous years, awards have gone to projects supporting Roma people, promoting sustainable lifestyles and creating green jobs, networking, educating, campaigning, combating injustice and defending the interests of young people. In 2015, at the mid-term point of the EU's Europe 2020

strategy, which set a target of saving an additional 20 million people from the risk of poverty, practical and effective initiatives to combat poverty and social exclusion are an urgent priority.

This year, there were more than 100 entries from 24 Member States – the largest number ever received. The 86 eligible applications were evaluated by a four-member group of assessors who made a shortlist of the best candidates. The EESC President, the two Vice-Presidents, the Presidents of the three Groups and the Secretary-General then selected the final winners.

They applied a range of specific criteria to make their choice, from assessing the initiative's success in serving its target audience, its long-term impact and sustainability, geographical coverage, and its contribution to community well-being; to implementing human rights and raising awareness of the problem of poverty. The winners had to be innovative, creative, unique, and above all involve people actually experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

### The Civil Society Prize selection board

**Georges Dassis,**

EESC President, chair of the selection board

**Michael Smyth,**

EESC Vice-President

**Gonçalo Lobo Xavier,**

EESC Vice-President

**Jacek Krawczyk,**

President of the EESC Employers' Group

**Raymond Hencks,**

EESC Bureau member (replacing Gabriele Bischoff, President of the EESC Workers' Group)

**Luca Jahier,**

President of the EESC Various Interests Group

**Luis Planas Puchades,**

EESC Secretary-General



## ***European Economic and Social Committee***

Rue Belliard/Belliardstraat 99  
1040 Bruxelles/Brussel  
BELGIQUE/BELGIË

Published by: "Visits and Publications" Unit  
EESC-2015-83-EN

**[www.eesc.europa.eu](http://www.eesc.europa.eu)**

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*Print*  
QE-02-15-957-EN-C  
ISBN 978-92-830-3016-4  
doi:10.2864/092158

*Web*  
QE-02-15-957-EN-N  
ISBN 978-92-830-3011-9  
doi:10.2864/201277

**EN**