

Speech by Mr Henk Vredeling, Vice-President of the Commission of the European Communities, on the occasion of the seminar on "Action against Poverty II", at Chantilly, 19 September 1977

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Mr Chairman, Mr Secretary of State, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It would not be difficult at the opening of this second seminar on action against poverty to present a heart-rending picture of the painful social problems which, in spite of all technological and economic progress, nevertheless repeatedly face us, both outside and inside the frontiers of Europe. What a sad state of affairs still exists - as a result of living in slums, undernourishment and the lack of medical care, as a result of backwardness in education and in the provision of information. And how scanty are the efforts to combat this state of affairs which we have been able to implement so far at European level.

The programme to combat poverty which we have been implementing since the first seminar in June 1974 covers 21 projects. However interesting these projects may be individually and however much relief each project brings in its own area - taken together they only eliminate a small part of the vast amount of misery with which we are faced.

I believe, Mr Chairman, that this should neither encourage us to become sentimental nor should we lose heart. On the contrary: the awareness that such tremendous efforts still lie before us must inspire us to organize the little that we are in fact doing as objectively and effectively as possible in order to maximize its effect.

This seminar must serve the same purpose. It forms the only opportunity for the participants in the various projects to meet each other to exchange information and experiences and to try and learn from each other's successes and failures. I should therefore like to express my satisfaction that so many people appear prepared to make use of this opportunity.

In order to facilitate discussions during this seminar the projects are listed under three categories as follows:

- a. special areas and communities
- b. special groups of persons and
- c. social services.

This classification is probably open to challenge and is certainly not watertight, but hopefully it offers the advantage of preventing the seminar from breaking down into discussion of national projects.

The Commission of the European Communities is indebted to the French Government for giving us the opportunity to hold our discussions in this delightful setting. Our host on behalf of the Government is Mr Lenoir, Secretary of State for Health and Social Security. As you know Mr Lenoir has special responsibility for social welfare and thus plays a key role in the development of social policy in France. In his book "Les exclus" he has made an important contribution to public awareness of the phenomena and background of poverty in France. We shall shortly have the pleasure of hearing a speech by Mr Lenoir.

Later Mr Michel Belorgey will be introducing us to the anti-poverty measures developed in France. On Wednesday we will be given a practical insight into these measures during an excursion to four projects in the Paris region. We should like to thank the project leaders in advance for their willingness to introduce the members of the seminar to their work. I feel that this will give us a deeper understanding of how the French Government organizes its anti-poverty policy and its political, socio-economic, administrative and cultural setting.

In addition, during the seminar you will be able to make the acquaintance of several experts who are not directly involved in our European projects. Professor Michael Miller, a well-known American expert and author on anti-poverty topics and a veteran of America's War on Poverty, is here to share with us some American experiences in running pilot projects.

Professor Wilfred Beckerman who was formerly with the OECD and is now working for the International Labour Office will be putting our work in Europe in perspective from another viewpoint.

Two of our European pilot studies are already complete. Mrs Riffault and Professor Willmott will be introducing them to you tomorrow. In this way you will be able to derive with us the lessons from these cross-national studies which the Commission promotes to supplement and as an accompaniment to the other action research projects.

We also welcome here the representatives of the European Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee, Mr Dondelinger and Mr Carroll. Of course, we do not regard them as outsiders; they have given the Community valuable personal service in preparing the opinions of their respective institutions. Mr Dondelinger and Mr Carroll have played an important role in the development of the European programme and in obtaining the necessary funds. We hope to be able also to rely on their support in the future.

In the course of implementing the Council Decision on the European programme the Commission regularly consults an advisory group consisting of representatives of the nine Governments and independent experts. I should like to extend particular thanks to this group for its participation in the preparation and development of the programme for this seminar. A few months ago the independent experts from the group made a series of visits to assess the projects. The other members of the group you will meet as rapporteurs or chairmen of sessions.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

This seminar is primarily organized for the sake of the project leaders and their collaborators. The poverty programme is their programme; they will have to do the work in collaboration with the poor who are at the heart of it. In fact, it is a pity that I am not able to welcome the poor themselves here. They are not here and they are not directly represented here, for how can you possibly organize and institutionalize such a thing. But for this reason we should be aware of the danger that our fine plans have little to do with the world experienced by those at whom they are aimed. How easy it is for good intentions to get lost in a bureaucratic and technocratic maze. In its Decision of July 1975 introducing support for pilot projects the Council of Ministers attempted to define the concept of poverty. According to that Decision persons beset by poverty are "individuals or families whose resources are so small as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life of the Member State in which they live".

This definition fits like a glove, Mr Chairman, but nevertheless it fails to convey the notion that people do not feel themselves to be genuinely poor until they are in a position to compare the bleakness and hopelessness of their situation with the affluence, superabundance and compulsive ostentation of all those who are better placed. This inequality, of income, possessions, knowledge and power is not only unjust, but also a source of social unrest, here in Europe, but of course first and foremost in the Third World.

I do not wish this seminar to go by, therefore, without stating that the elimination of inequality should be our ultimate goal. It is of course true that this cannot be achieved by means of even the best pilot projects;

to achieve it we need a policy at national and international level which in its breadth and depth is directed towards the achievement of more equality. Such a policy will not be possible until public opinion is convinced of the need for it, for ultimately it is the voters who must bear the burden of the policy. The results of the public opinion survey which Mrs Riffault will presently discuss with you show that the situation in the western world is not very favourable in this connection. The figures show how many people living in Europe still tend to turn their faces away from hunger and suffering. For this reason, too, I hope that during the next few days you will discuss the possibility of involving in your projects, whether directly or indirectly, other people besides the poor alone.

The officials of the Commission, the so-called Brussels Eurocrats, may well plan and draw up fine plans, but ultimately the decisions are taken by the Governments and Parliaments of the Member States and the two sides of industry in the Community countries, and it is their attitudes which are decisive.

Mr Chairman, I should like to come back to the projects which are before this seminar. You are aware that the Governments, meeting together in the Council of Ministers, will shortly be deciding whether or not this programme of projects should be continued and extended. For our part we have already formulated a reply to this question: in all modesty we consider that the projects must be extended - as widely as is humanly possible. The task before us now is to communicate our belief in our work to our Governments.

In the hope that it will contribute to this process I declare this Seminar open.