

Tilburg University

This is the time for action on inequality

van Reisen, M.E.H.

Published in:
Social Watch E-Newsletter

Publication date:
2011

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
van Reisen, M. E. H. (2011). This is the time for action on inequality. *Social Watch E-Newsletter*, (23).

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

This is the time for action on inequality

*By Mirjam van Reisen**

Social Watch Europe presented last week a report: "Responding to Poverty, Social Exclusion and Inequality in Europe and Beyond", with a subtitle: "Time for Action". The launch took place in Brussels as protesters in Tunisia, Egypt and neighbouring countries went to the street. The report identifies exclusion inside and outside Europe as the cause of frustration and social unrest, which in countries neighbouring the EU has been exacerbated by political exclusion. Within the Arab region 92 million people live in poverty.

The parallel with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is striking. Identical to the current crisis, the protests then were caused by social and political exclusion of the majority of people in their country, not as a reaction to the geo-political reality at the time. It demonstrated the failure of the military strategy (at the time of the Soviet Union) that underestimated the importance of bread and butter issues. In 1989 the heads of state in office were completely taken by surprise and were finding their feet step by step in the new reality, as we find is the case in the current crisis. All eyes were focused on (the old) President Bush and President Gorbachev of the then USSR – and the key question as to whether they would grasp the opportunity to end the Cold War. The question today is, will the opportunity be seized for a new order in the Middle East that could make peace in the region possible?

The final parallel is the momentum that the change in the East gave to Europe itself, which under the leadership of President Jacques Delors seized the momentum for an assertive approach to strengthen the European Union's global role, foster democracy in eastern Europe and bring prosperity to impoverished countries in the region, by uniting the continent of Europe under the political flag of the European Union. Enlargement increased the European market and brought political stability in the Europe-wide region.

The crisis at the Southern border is of equal significance and the following key aspects need to be fully integrated in Europe's response:

1. The current social-economic policy based on a raw version of extreme neo-liberalism in the Arab region can no longer be sustained. Apart from its ethical dimension in which such policies have maintained corrupt, dictatorial regimes at the expense of the their people, it can no longer sustain a policy that seeks stability in the region – a review of the economic policies in the region is therefore most urgently needed;
2. The extensive aid provided by the EU to regimes that lack key institutions of democratic governance leads to unbridled corruption that does not trickle down to the majority of the population – aid to foreign governments which lack democratic institutions and adherence to international law must be stopped.

The second point also requires a complete overhaul of the EU policy to Israel, which enjoys economic and military support from the EU while it systematically ignores international law in its approach to the Palestinian people. The political exclusion of the Palestinian people in the Israeli governance system which creates apartheid based on religion and ethnicity also needs to be addressed. Unless Israel operates within the boundaries of international law and democratic governance all EU aid to the Israeli government should be stopped immediately and without reservation.

The report also asks that independent civil society is supported in Israel and in the Arab region. The Social Watch report points to instability emerging inside the European Union as a consequence of the lack of financial controls on speculation in the international system. Pointing to the crisis in Ireland which has a debt of more than 100% of GDP accrued by the banks but which the government agreed would be repaid by the Irish tax-payers accompanied with the harshest of measures in social cuts, the authors warn that the European Union itself might not remain immune to political instability.

The report asks for “a model that faces up to the private sector – which is led by a financial sector that socialises losses while privatising profits.” The report warns of the danger of credit taps being completely turned off for families and small businesses. The report asks that the commitment adopted by the UN to establish a universal ‘social floor’, which the EU itself promoted, is implemented. To be consistent this would require a common ‘social floor’ for the EU. The authors of the report further call for progressive tax reform and an effective clampdown on tax evasion in Europe and beyond, warning that the European Union itself might not be immune to a popular response if inequality is allowed to increase.

** Mirjam van Reizen, Professor International Social Responsibility, Tilburg University, member of the Coordinating Committee of Social Watch*