

Spain: High rates of poverty a political choice, says UN rights expert

MADRID (7 February 2020) – Spain is utterly failing people in poverty, whose situation now ranks among the worst in the EU, [said](#) the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, at the end of his official visit to the country.

“Although Spain is thriving economically, far too many people are struggling,” Alston said. “The post-recession recovery has left many behind, with economic policies benefiting corporations and the wealthy, while less privileged groups suffer fragmented public services that were severely curtailed after 2008 and never restored. The bright spot in the situation is that the new coalition Government is firmly committed to achieving social justice, but the challenges are great.”

26.1 percent of people in Spain, and 29.5 percent of children, were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2018. More than 55 percent had some degree of difficulty making ends meet, and 5.4 percent experienced severe material deprivation. The unemployment rate of 13.78 percent is more than double the EU average, and has topped 30 percent for those below age 25.

“Spain today needs to take a close look in the mirror,” Alston said. “What it will see is not what most Spaniards would wish for nor what many policymakers would intend. Deep widespread poverty and high unemployment, a housing crisis of stunning proportions, a completely inadequate social protection system that leaves large numbers of people in poverty by design, a segregated and increasingly anachronistic education system, a fiscal system that provides far more benefits to the wealthy than the poor, and an entrenched bureaucratic mentality in many parts of the government that values formalistic procedures over the well-being of people.”

“People in poverty have been largely failed by policymakers, and social rights are rarely taken seriously. Low cost housing is almost nonexistent and the system for providing social assistance is broken, impossible to navigate, and leads to wealthy families benefitting more from cash transfers than poor families. Meanwhile companies are paying half as much in taxes as they did before the crisis despite strong profits.”

“I visited areas I suspect many Spaniards would not recognize as a part of their country,” Alston said. “A shantytown with far worse conditions than a refugee camp, without running water, electricity, or sanitation, where migrant workers have lived for years without any improvement in their situation. Neighborhoods of concentrated poverty where families raise children with a dearth of state services, health clinics, employment centers, security, paved roads or even legal electricity.”

“The word I heard most frequently over the past two weeks is ‘abandoned,’” the expert said. “I met people who lost their savings during the crisis, who have to choose between putting food on the table and heating a home, and who are staring down the prospect of eviction, unable to find affordable housing. Almost everyone I met was avidly seeking decent work.”

“Certain groups are particularly neglected by policymakers, impacted by structural discrimination and experience disproportionately high rates of poverty. Spain has one of the largest Roma communities in the EU, nearly half of whom are in severe poverty. Women, people in rural areas, migrants, domestic workers, and people with disabilities are all extremely underserved by current policies and unfairly impacted by poverty.”

The UN expert travelled to Madrid, Galicia, Basque Country, Extremadura, Andalucía and Catalonia, and met with individuals affected by poverty, government officials at the municipal, autonomous community and central level, as well as activists, academics and representatives of civil society organisations. He visited numerous community centers and schools, NGO offices, a center for people with disabilities, a social services office, an informal settlement for migrant workers, a privatized housing block, a domestic worker center and several Roma communities.

“Spain now needs innovative leadership at the national level, backed up with resources to encourage the autonomous communities to support far-reaching reforms. With its embrace of social rights and fiscal justice, and prioritization of the most vulnerable, the new government’s message is a welcome one, but its actions must live up to that rhetoric,” Alston said. “Poverty is ultimately a political choice, and governments can, if they wish, opt to overcome it.”

His final report will be presented to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in June 2020.

Photos from the Rapporteur’s visit are available for press use [here](#).

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Philip Alston (Australia) took up his functions as the [Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights](#) in June 2014. As a Special Rapporteur, he is part of what is known as the [Special Procedures](#) of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council’s independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures’ experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

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