

Small steps – big changes

Building
Participation
of People
Experiencing
Poverty



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Small steps – big changes

Making participation an everyday reality in our organisations

For almost 20 Years, National Networks of the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN) have been working to make the participation of people experiencing poverty a reality in the public sphere, as well as in their own organisations. Although they are all at different stages in the process, their combined knowledge is diverse, enriching and empowering people experiencing poverty, supporting their engagement in influencing matters affecting their lives.

Participation is a topic thoroughly researched and everybody finds a meaning according to their own context. Instead of finding the right answer, for EAPN it is more important to raise the right questions around the issue of participation and to create the space for people experiencing poverty to discuss these questions based on their own reality. No matter what level of engagement, whether it is direct or indirect participation, whether there is a defined methodology or a one-off experience, people experiencing poverty always come back to the same question – what is the impact of my participation? With this in mind, the challenge remains to encourage, promote, and further develop participation as a tool for empowering people experiencing poverty.

Meaningful participation is a sign of good participative democracy, where citizens and civil society organizations can enter into political dialogues and complement the work of those elected through the process of representative democracy. Despite the random practices, reality shows that many people at risk of, or living in, poverty are often blocked from exercising their right to participate as active citizens. It leaves much to be desired in terms of implementation in all of the member states of the European Union and both civil society actors as well as public authorities have work to do in setting up the right conditions for a sound partnership. Before challenging the attitude of public authorities vis-à-vis the participation of excluded groups, as civil society actors we have the responsibility to look at our own practices and to see how we mainstream participation internally.

The experiences gained by members of EAPN through local, national and transnational initiatives highlight achievements and challenges that lie ahead to empowering participation of people experiencing poverty. This is the first attempt to showcase the *diversity* of participation practices in EAPN, looking at the converging points between European and national actions and helping members of EAPN as well as the social NGOs throughout Europe to continuously foster the participation of excluded individuals and communities in their work.

Building Participation

The Beginnings of Engagement

Participative democracy gives a chance to everyone to contribute to societal debates. For people experiencing poverty, their participation in democratic life is a key to understanding and changing society to give everyone access to a dignified life.

Individual participation starts in neighbourhoods, community groups and initiatives that affect local realities. People experiencing poverty want to feel empowered and have their say both in public discussions, but also in policy and decision-making that affects their lives.

According to anti poverty organisations, time and mutual understanding are two key factors in ensuring meaningful participation of people experiencing poverty. It takes time for people experiencing poverty to feel prepared to share their lives and to engage in dialogue, and it takes understanding on both sides for participation to have an impact.

For a person experiencing poverty, participation starts with building their self-esteem and confidence, gaining courage to express their opinions as equals and to participate in making decisions and implementing them. A favourable environment for that should allow individuals and their organisations to contribute actively and not be taken as mere subjects for discussion. Participation by a person experiencing poverty and social exclusion, who is ready to share their daily reality can break the barriers of stigma, question the use and impact of the policies or services concerned and empower people to challenge the inconsistencies of social systems. Often people in organisations, social services or public authorities start with stigmatizing pre-conceptions about persons experiencing poverty with which they work. Therefore, both parties need to reach a point of mutual trust and understanding for participation to make an impact.

Benefits of individual participation are manifold. It empowers individuals, sets the foundation for more cohesive society and increases the impact of policies – ultimately contributing to a more socially just and fair society.



Engaging in anti-poverty NGOs

Engaging in anti-poverty organizations and participating in decision-making processes are critical to ensuring good policy outcomes.

EAPN has had a strong commitment to establishing and increasing direct participation of people experiencing poverty in the

organisations that represent their interests. It is these organisations that help EAPN stay directly connected with the everyday concerns of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, and highlight the value of mutual learning and working together.



In the social arena there are organisations that work to improve the lives of people experiencing poverty, organizations that provide services for people experiencing poverty and self-advocacy informal groups or organisations that represent the interests of people experiencing poverty. Regardless the type, structures need to be put in place to ensure that people experiencing poverty have a say on the work done by all of these organisations. In reality self-advocacy groups are often underfunded or do not have support in the initial phases of establishment and growth, and as a result they cannot reach out to involve as many people interested in participating. Despite these objective barriers, more and more organisations are becoming reflective about their own principles of participation and inclusion as part of their growth.

Framework for participation in decision-making

The Mainstreaming Social Inclusion project carried out by the Combat Poverty Agency of Ireland, in which members of EAPN have participated, sets out a framework of participation in decision-making processes. The Framework identifies four stages of involvement: information, consultation, participation and co-decision, and the impact of each of these stages. These are described below:¹



- * **Information** and the sharing of knowledge is the 'life blood' of involvement, as without the full and complete availability of information on the policy initiative, which is made available in good time, it is not possible for either consultation or participation to be meaningful.
- * **Consultation** provides those individuals or groups who are interested and involved to express views on a proposal and to influence the final decision but not to be involved in the making of that decision, which remains the prerogative of the policy-makers who may, or may not, take into consideration the views put forward through a consultation process, in making the decisions. Consultation cannot be effective unless those who are been consulted have all the relevant information on the proposed policy.
- * **Participation** recognises the contribution made by all the stakeholders in the decision-making process equally and it provides individuals and groups with

1. Mainstreaming Social Inclusion www.europemsi.org

the ability to influence the process and to have their views incorporated in the final outcomes.

- * **Co-decision** making goes one step further by ensuring that a consensus is reached during the decision-making process, that policies are arrived at jointly and that they reflect the concerns and priorities of all those who will be affected by the decision, resulting in all the stakeholders having a joint ownership of the final outcome.

This framework highlights the challenges that anti poverty organizations face in their work with policy-makers. While in reality many countries are only in the initial phases of this paradigm, policy makers are slowly changing their approach towards ensuring that people experiencing poverty and the organizations that represent them participate in policy and decision-making.

Participation in the context of EU Social Policy

Since the launching of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, EAPN has been instrumental in promoting the specific focus on participation of people experiencing poverty in the governance process of the Social Open Method of Coordination (OMC) at national and European Union level. As well as directly supporting the organisation of the yearly People Experiencing Poverty meetings, organized by the EU spring Presidency, EAPN has lobbied to strengthen participation in the governance processes throughout the OMC process, particularly in the development of the National Action Plans on Inclusion² and in the yearly Round Table on Poverty. This demand is now well reflected in the European Commission's Guidance Note on the National Strategic Reports, "...the report should outline how the quality of this involvement is assured. This requires examining to what extent a genuine participatory element is ensured, e.g. through exchange of views, rather than mere information sessions, whether stakeholders' views and experiences both with respect to needs identified and proposed solutions are reflected in policy development and implementation."³ EAPN has continued to press for better quality engagement in the design, delivery and evaluation of national anti-poverty policies and measures and the need to go further by establishing an on-going structured dialogue between governments at national and local level and stakeholders which include people experiencing poverty, in the whole cycle of the strategy development and delivery.⁴

EAPN Pooling the Knowledge Together At European Level

Participation is an important pillar of initiatives taken in the fields of Social Inclusion, Structural Funds, Employment or network development. This is why we have

2. EAPN Response to the Guidance for the Strategic Report 2008-2011, www.eapn.eu/content/view/168/lang,en
3. Guidance note for preparing national strategy Reports on social protection and social Inclusion 2008-2010, http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/docs/social_inclusion/2008/080207_guidance_note_nsrns_cln_en.pdf
4. EAPN Report on the National Action Plans 2008-10

been looking at how participation is *mainstreamed* in our work. Much work has been done to oversee how the inclusion of people experiencing poverty becomes a reality not only in projects but also in our structures and work. Throughout the last 20 years, EAPN has been addressing participation by:

- * defining and understanding what participation means for EAPN and its members;
- * identifying conditions for including people experiencing poverty in the democratic debate;
- * gathering and exchanging good practices and methods.

As an advocator for direct participation of people experiencing poverty, EAPN has been defining a methodology of national coordination and preparation to input in European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty, organized every first half of the year by the country holding the EU presidency together with the European Commission and with support from EAPN. The methodology focuses on preparing people who are directly experiencing poverty to engage actively in the debates around various policy aspects affecting their lives, and to check what impact the European policies, particularly the OMC on Social Inclusion and Social Protection have on the people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

The enriching experiences of the yearly organisation of the European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty has convinced governments of the added value of developing similar processes and forums of participation in many countries, where involvement of people experiencing poverty is part of the main focus of the national anti-poverty organisations. Today several countries are organizing National Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty – initiatives that started as projects and are now fully developed processes in their own right. Cross-border meetings of people experiencing poverty are helping National Networks compare their models and learn from each other's experiences. The list of achievements is long as participation is part of every project, lobby or policy-making action throughout the European Union member states.

In preparation for 2010 – the Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, EAPN has carried out a thorough reflection on the values and principles that we would like to see in a socially just Europe for all. The common values that were identified reflect, among others, values of a democratic society with respect for human rights, with no poverty and with increased participation. EAPN aims to pursue these and mobilize society behind this work, showing the enriching impact of participation of people experiencing poverty.

Nevertheless, participation is very complicated in its simplicity. It is not always a success from the very first attempt if certain conditions are not respected, and it takes resilience, persistence, resources and much work. In addition to having a right infrastructure to facilitate participation, we must also look at the psychological and sociological impact of getting involved for the individuals concerned. Some mem-

bers of EAPN are only beginning to look at participation through project work, while others are improving methodologies that are already in place to reach out to more people experiencing poverty. Regardless the starting point, every initiative brings experience and leaves an impact on those involved, and the aim is to develop participatory practices in the work of the National Networks. The following case studies will describe some of these experiences that we hope will inspire more initiatives to involve people experiencing poverty in the work of EAPN and its members.

National Networks of EAPN – their Experience

People experiencing poverty are part of working groups and governing bodies of national anti poverty networks. They are actively involved in lobbying and dialogue with public authorities, provide training and feedback to social services, are running public awareness campaigns and are making significant improvements for their own lives and the lives of their families and communities.

Some transnational projects have helped National Networks develop methodologies that not only have stayed in the Networks and their members, but have been taken up by organisations active in the social field, and even by public authorities. By developing close cooperation with public authorities at various levels, National Networks have achieved in some member states the establishment of permanent structures that give people experiencing poverty the chance to actively engage in policy making and implementation in their communities.

Focus in this Publication

This publication will highlight the diversity of approaches among members of EAPN to participation of people experiencing poverty and exclusion in community work, in our own organisations and in policy and decision-making. 20 years of EAPN members' experiences have been largely passed and multiplied via projects, structures and exchanges. This publication seeks to make these experiences of building participation more visible.

In describing the case studies, each National Network tried to reflect on the following questions:



What is our definition or understanding of participation? What was the context in which the experience emerged? What have been the achievements? What were the challenges and what impact has it had on the National Network?

Belgium's Experience Expert describes how people with direct experience of poverty un-

dergo training and guidance to become poverty experts and are hired in organizations and public services to mobilize and support people who live in poverty in their relations to social service providers and policy making in general.

Austria's Forum Theatre introduces a participative model of policy-making that starts from individual experiences presented in a play and invites community members and



and decision makers to participate in the play, taking the place of one of the actors and proposing a different course of events which renders another solution. Afterwards, the audience is invited to reflect together on the problems and solutions identified during the play and place them in the reality of their community.

Portugal's Activating Participation gathers experiences of empowering local groups through capacity building. All of these contributed to the establishment of participatory anti poverty work at organizational level and in communities throughout Portugal. The publication "Small Hopes – Great Experiences" recounts this experience and shows how the methodology was developed in the course of the programme.

Netherlands' Local Poverty Conferences explore the richness of inclusive conferencing, when social service beneficiaries organize an event that brings together public administration, private sector, employers, service providers, people experiencing poverty and other relevant actors from the same city with the aim to develop simple and practical solutions to the problems faced by various excluded groups. These conferences have created long-term policies in municipalities throughout the Netherlands.

Hungary's Coordination Committee illustrates the model of co-management between social welfare professionals and individual persons experiencing poverty in a national anti poverty platform. The case study reflects on the needs of individuals and the conditions that organizations must respect for a real empowerment of people experiencing poverty to get engaged.

Spain's Participatory Network Building, addresses the challenges of building a common understanding of participation in a network where local and regional experiences and visions differ, and how those differences highlight the richness of an open network. Participatory evaluation by beneficiaries of social policy is one of the many models developed at the level of autonomous regions in Spain, which has been taken up by the network and further promoted in other parts of the country. A methodological guide on participation drawing on these experiences is the result of a first phase of this participation-defining process conducted by EAPN Spain.

Belgium's Dialogue Groups is a method of consensus-building, where people experiencing poverty and social exclusion are given time and space to reflect on policy-makers' proposals and feed their concerns and proposals at the different stages of policy-making. It is a community empowering tool that helps people suffering poverty exercise their citizenship rights.

France's Working across Boundaries project builds the link between European social policies to the local realities of people experiencing poverty, ensuring an equal dialogue between the service providers as policy implementers and people experiencing poverty as service users. The results reflect a realistic assessment of the existing policies, their improvement and the development of tools to enable people experiencing poverty to contribute to policies that affect their daily lives.

United Kingdom's Bridging the Policy Gap looks at how peer reviews can be used as a learning exercise to increase governance and engage community activists in evaluating policy impact and developing proposals to reduce poverty.

The Norwegian Poverty Hearing highlights the importance for anti-poverty groups and NGOs to take their place in the public arena and use mobilisation and awareness-raising to increase public institutions' accountability towards people experiencing poverty and society at large. Being a network of primarily self-organized groups, the success of a mobilization day is important to motivate and keep these groups going in their struggles.

EAPN Europe's own involvement in organizing the yearly European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty describes the long road to developing a method of organizing meetings where people experiencing poverty take the floor and dialogue with European policy makers. All these meetings have empowered national anti poverty organisations and governments to set up similar forums at national level, empowering more people experiencing poverty to have a say in social policy, and to feel part of democratic society.

Finally, the concluding chapter draws on the successes and challenges of all the case studies presented here, and highlights a set of principles and conditions necessary to ensuring that participation is possible!

Tanya Basarab, EAPN



And something more...

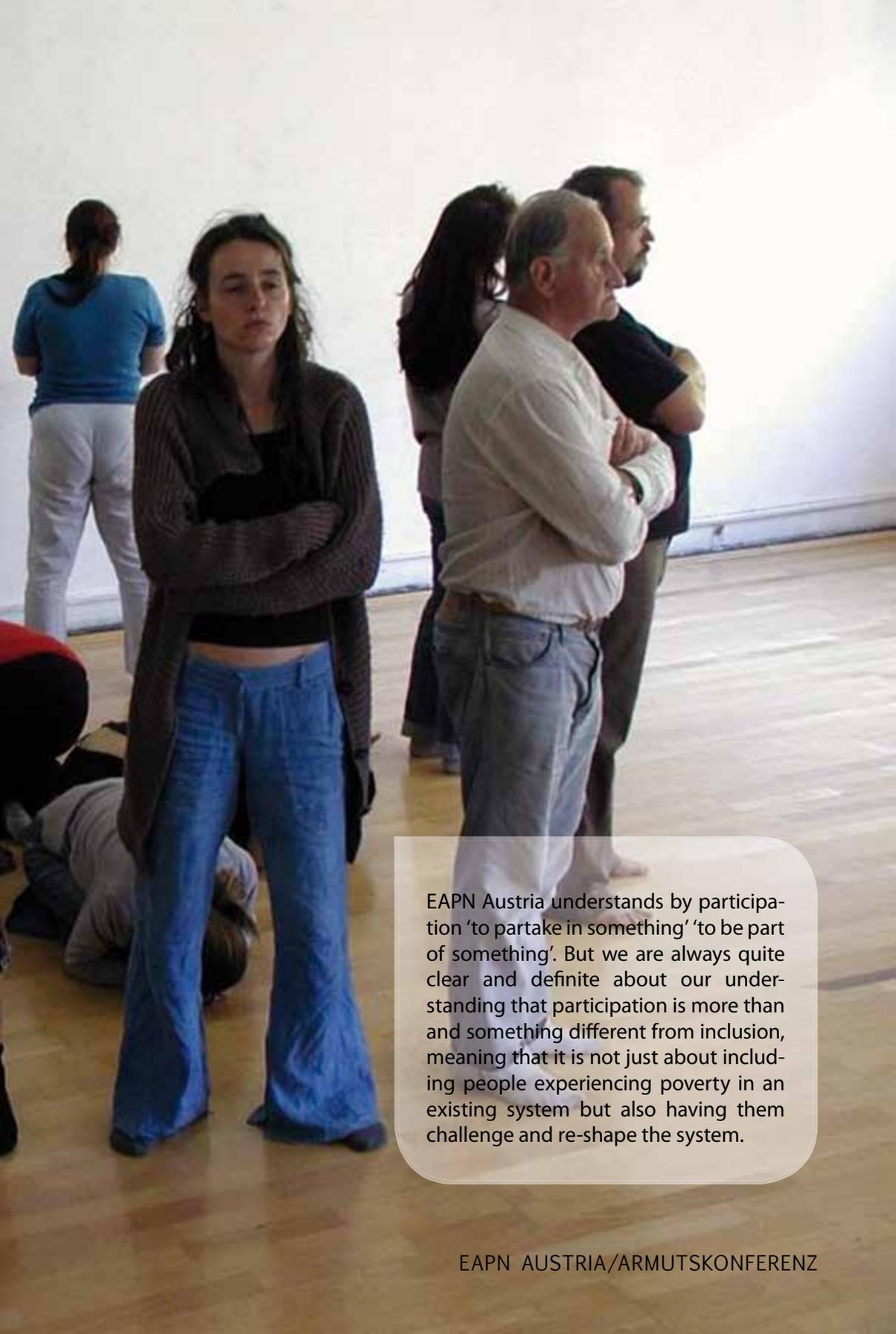
EAPN's membership includes a broad spectre of organizations active at national and European levels across Europe. While this publication highlights National Network experiences, several European organisations members of EAPN have also developed extensive work on participation of people experiencing poverty:

Visit the website of ATD Fourth World, to learn about their experience of individual participation www.atd-fourthworld.org

Visit FEANTSA to learn about involving homeless persons in homelessness services and their other work on participation: www.feantsa.org/code/en/hp.asp

Visit Eurochild to learn about their work with participation of children in decision-making. www.eurochild.org

Visit AGE to learn about their work on increasing the role of older people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in policies that affect them. www.age-platform.org



EAPN Austria understands by participation 'to partake in something' 'to be part of something'. But we are always quite clear and definite about our understanding that participation is more than and something different from inclusion, meaning that it is not just about including people experiencing poverty in an existing system but also having them challenge and re-shape the system.



Close the gap!

Forum Theatre as an innovative activation, research and lobbying method for and with people experiencing poverty

Context

In 2006 EAPN Austria was approached by the Styrian socio-cultural organization InterACT, who had just set out on a new project focusing on poverty and ways to overcome poverty and social exclusion. InterACT has been working with methods of interactive and participatory theatre to stimulate solutions in fields of social problems and conflicts for many years and the Austrian network has been happy to cooperate. It was only shortly before that the network had started to organize regular meetings of self-organizations of people experiencing poverty under the theme “Get visible!” and cultural work was central to these activities from the beginning, as were political discussions and public relations work. The main focus of our work in the area of participation has been to explore new ways of getting visibility for people experiencing poverty, their realities but also their proposals for change, and to find innovative methods to increase their impact in policy making, media representation and poverty research. The suggested theatre project thus was not only a brilliant opportunity to do so, it also proved to be a very effective approach with regards to bridging the gap between the experiences of people living in poverty and exclusion and political decision makers and the broad public. So far three national meetings of self-organizations and initiatives of people experiencing poverty have been organized by the Austrian network. The meetings included exchange and discussion, but also working with theatre methods and the organization of the first ever public demonstrations of people experiencing poverty in the cities of Linz and Graz.

Description

The Forum Theatre project called “Kein Kies zum Kurven kratzen – Neuer Armut entgegenwirken” (No doosh to get round – Counteracting new poverty) started with a one week theatre workshop for people experiencing poverty. 65 people from across the region of Styria applied to participate in the project with 30 of them finally taking part in the workshop and five being engaged as actors in the play that was to build the core of the project.

Participants represented different backgrounds and experiences. Most participants were employed and paid for their participation in the workshop, with some being able to participate as part of their labour market training programme, financed by the employment services. With the help of various theatre methods, participants exchanged and reflected on the realities of people experiencing poverty in an alter-

native way, identified situations of stigmatisation and exclusion and explored possibilities of creating a change. The whole group developed an inter-active Forum Theatre play that shows how an 'ordinary' family in Austria gets deeper and deeper into poverty and exclusion and searches for ways to get out of poverty.

Forum Theatre is an interactive form of theatrical performance in which – during a second performance of the play – the public is invited to take part in what happens on stage, to try out ideas for solutions or changes in a conflict or a problem shown on stage. The methodology is based on the interactive theatre methods as developed by the Brazilian Augusto Boal and combines processes such as gaining understanding and awareness raising, with the search for change in one's individual, social and political real life.

The play "Kein Kies zum Kurven kratzen" (No doosh to get round) that was developed in the workshop was performed in about twenty towns and villages in the region of Styria, each time with the opportunity for the audience to intervene and to try out different solutions. Each performance was followed by discussions in small groups and in plenary between the people experiencing poverty involved and the audience, generating ideas for change, which were collected and documented after each performance into a final booklet towards the end of the project.

Both the play and the solutions were presented to decision makers at various occasions. At this point Forum Theatre becomes what is called Legislative Theatre as it aims to directly influence the process of policy making. Meanwhile at least one of the proposals made in the framework of the project has been taken on board by the responsible regional politicians and concrete changes in the regional social assistance system will be implemented in the months to come. The theatre play was also performed at the 3rd national meeting of self-organisations of people experiencing poverty in Graz and parts of it were used at the 7th Austrian Poverty Conference as a tool to stimulate reflection of social workers, NGO representatives and researchers with regards to their interaction with people experiencing poverty. All in all theatre methods proved to be a very effective way of empowerment, interaction and publicity work and have been part of all activities in the "Get visible!" project ever since.

What worked well



The method proved to be ideal to actively involve people experiencing poverty and give them an opportunity to raise their voices and tell their stories without having to expose themselves in a stigmatising way. Forum Theatre is a successful and powerful instrument to empower people, who are affected by a social problem such as poverty and social exclusion. It supports community building and motivates people to express

their experiences and views on the issue at stake. Theatrical scenes show the daily and emotional effects of poverty in an authentic and down-to-earth way. Forum Theatre supports personal and political empowerment and encourages people to use their own voice and take responsibility to bring forward desires and fight for their interests. As an interactive, participatory theatre and drama based method it also contributes to research on poverty and social exclusion and



helps to establish better connections between concrete realities, academic theories, and different levels of social political participation, ensuring that the voices of people experiencing poverty are heard in all of these fields. Not only the actors of the play but also those who were involved in the project as workshop participants or audience felt empowered by this involvement and were encouraged to discuss and to keep bringing forward their own proposals for making a change.

Those interested could be reached very directly and those who have never experienced poverty themselves got the opportunity to learn about the concrete realities of people living in this situation. People experiencing poverty got the possibility to challenge the audience and especially the political decision makers present at the performances to listen to them not only with regards to their problems but also when it comes to developing and implementing solutions.

The play highlighted the limits of individual ways of action, clarified the degree to which they can change a problematic situation and identified the structural need for change and for the involvement of people experiencing poverty with regards to developing and implementing concrete strategies and measures. The approach thus strongly contributes to closing the gap between the realities of people experiencing poverty and existing (or future) strategies and measures to fight poverty and increase social cohesion. This proved to be true not only for politicians and representatives of public authorities but also for social NGO leaders, researchers and media people who have been challenged to better involve people experiencing poverty in their work. The project created an important learning experience also for the Austrian network itself and led to better inclusion of people experiencing poverty in its general work and especially in its big biannual conference. At the latest conference, which took place in spring 2008 people experiencing poverty had a much stronger presence than ever before – both in numbers and quality of engagement.

For the people experiencing poverty involved in the project as actors, it proved to have an empowering effect. First of all it provided them with a job for a certain period, which at least for one of them helped to generate the energy to look for and find another job later on. Secondly they experienced that they really had something to say and that what they did could make a change.

Those who only participated in the workshop at the beginning and the participants of the “Get visible!” meeting who took part in theatre workshops and one interactive performance of the play experienced the same motivating energy to improve their lives. All of the actors and many of the workshop participants are still in touch with each other and there are now plans to establish a Styrian anti poverty network with strong involvement of people experiencing poverty.

What were the difficulties

So far the approach could only be fully implemented in the framework of a two-year project in one Austrian region. Continuous work and a more widespread use of the method would help get more people experiencing poverty involved and increase the effect of this work.

Political will and public funding to pursue such an approach on a national scale are key factors, but it is rather difficult to find, as the method is not yet well known and only few responsible politicians can imagine that ‘playing theatre’ could lead to an increase of effective anti-poverty measures.

Experiences with the project in Styria also have shown that a close cooperation between theatre experts and Anti-poverty networks and social organisation is necessary in order to ensure that the results of the plays really are transferred into political lobbying activities and the solutions of people experiencing poverty are backed up and enforced by the results of studies and poverty research in order to increase the possibility for getting heard.

For EAPN Austria, the project has been a learning experience and proved a great motivating method to empower people experiencing poverty to take charge of their personal lives and the political decisions that affect them. We will continue to promote this method of work.

Michaela Moser, Die Armutskonferenz./EAPN Austria

And something more...



On getting people experiencing poverty and exclusion visible

To increase engagement of people experiencing poverty in the network, EAPN Austria has been carrying out the project ‘Sichtbar werden’ (Getting Visible), which strengthens the self-organisation and network of various groups of people experiencing poverty. The idea/strategy behind it is based on various social theories and also on

the experiences and work of community development work.

Some of it is based on a model that includes 4 steps, starting with 'perceiving information' followed by 'taking part in', and later by 'co-deciding' and finally by 'self-administration/organisation'.

On top of this our participation work includes the following elements/principles:



- A. To start from what is there and 'nurture' it: this means working with groups of people experiencing poverty that have already somehow started to organize themselves. Sometimes these groups might be very small self-help groups maybe including only two or three people; what matters is that some impulse has been already there to get organized and thus that people are not left alone (again) after having participated in the seminars/conferences organized by EAPN Austria, but have a group to share with and continue their work/reflections/struggle.
- B. To bring together various different groups of people experiencing poverty it has also been important for us to include various diverse groups of people experiencing poverty, such as groups of single parents, self-help groups of people with mental health problems, initiatives of unemployed people, migrant organizations etc.
- C. To create and provide space and possibilities: for exchange and information on rights, for dialogue with other stake-holders/politicians, public actions and other forms of visibility, development of projects...
- D. To strengthen the involvement of people experiencing poverty into other elements of our network activities.

Doing so we have also started to initiate dialogue between researchers (being part of our academic advisory board), e.g. the ones involved in the Austrian EU SILC survey, between people experiencing poverty and civil servants etc.

For more information on the Get Visible project, please visit www.armutskonferenz.at/armutskonferenz_news_sichtbarwerden.htm.

Another initiative of EAPN Austria together with the Vienna Theatre "Hungry for Art and Cultures" has become in a few years a national programme of supporting people living in poverty and social exclusion to get access to galleries, theatre and other cultural establishments. Social NGOs and cultural institutions all over Austria have joined the initiative, which culminates every year with a public celebration and awareness raising event including concerts, exhibitions and street manifestations.

Views and Experiences

“30 people, 30 destinies, and God knows – no easy ones. Different age groups, various social backgrounds. And one thing that unites: the experience of financial difficulties.

The workshop: five days together with theatre work. My feeling: a mixture of curiosity, scepticism and excitement. The introduction gives already an impression, that some emotional ballast might be set free. Playful exercises to warm up, it’s surprisingly easy to get in touch with others. The first evening: exhilaration and being moved by the careful way in which these different people treat each other. You are taken seriously, you are heard, every voice is equal. Having lunch together. My god, how good you are treated here, so much care you usually never get. I am thankful, I sit there and cry, because this warm feeling has become so strange to me.

Day after day experiences get more tense, the images that have been developed out of intuition give witness of the rich experiences behind them. Dramatic individual stories get visible, desperate situations – sometimes seemingly hopeless. In between there is a lot of laughter, sometimes also to reduce tenseness. It’s so good not to have to hide oneself. Every emotion has its place, is justified. We work with high concentration and nonetheless playful, relaxed. Excessive happiness suddenly emerges as protection against deep pain. Tears are falling. It’s all right, the group keeps a compassionate silence. A moving moment. Where else do you get the chance to just be ‘human’ in such an unashamed way.

The last day: Still so much to do. The scenes take shape, solutions occur, where none seemed possible. So much creativity from people, you are usually denied ex officio having any life competencies. It’s so good not to have to hide oneself... to be taken seriously, to be heard, to experience that each voice is equal. (...) Where else do you get the chance to just be ‘human’?

And this (the workshop) won’t be the end, we have just built the foundation for a theatre project that will be continued by some of us as actors. But also the paths of the rest of us will be crossing again and again, I am sure. This week was like our lives – with all ups and downs, pain, despair, hopelessness, but also unlimited power and hope. Each of us is a hero. I’ve hardly ever been touched like that.

Who says that art can’t change anything. Such a powerful energy must create waves! I truly believe in this!”



Participant in the Forum Theatre workshop.



An experience expert is a person who lives or has lived in poverty who follows a training especially developed for this profession and who is engaged as a specific kind of worker in all kinds of sectors of society that come in touch with people in poverty.



Experience Experts

A new profession for people experiencing poverty in anti poverty policy

Context

For many years already a view on human rights has emerged, through which poverty is referred to as a responsibility of society as a whole. More and more a consensus has grown that the best way of policy making is to actively and intensively involve the people concerned. In anti poverty policy this means involving people experiencing poverty.

In Belgium two tracks are followed: “associations where people experiencing poverty take the floor” and the “experience expert”, a new profession for people experiencing poverty that we will describe here.

Description

In the challenge of combating poverty, it is obvious to involve the disadvantaged but there lies a missing link between the social worker and the person living in poverty. If both are unaware of the gaps between them this makes social assistance fail. That is why involving the people experiencing poverty in the fight against poverty is necessary.

With this view on poverty five gaps are distinguished:

- * the gap of structures and participation: Lots of rules and structures are meant for average situations, based on a middle class culture. People experiencing poverty, not belonging to the middle class, cannot enjoy the benefits of many arrangements such as study grants, family allowance, housing allowance, fiscal benefits.
- * the emotional gap: The wounded inner life of unprivileged people, the heavy weight of guilt they are often charged with by society, the great longing because of unsatisfied basic needs, sorrows they never really came to terms with. All this blocks them in their emotions and paralyses their functioning.
- * the gap of knowledge: Disadvantaged people have an astonishing lack of knowledge of society and its institutions. They do not know how society is functioning. And when both sides – people experiencing poverty and society – are not aware of it, the gap cannot be bridged.
- * the gap of skills: People who grew up in poverty never had the opportunity to learn the skills needed to maintain themselves in our society in a manner ac-

cepted by the dominating culture. Many parents do not have those skills themselves and cannot pass them on to their children.

- * the gap of positive power: The incredible motivation and power that these people bear in order to improve their own and their children's situation is remarkable. The more people in poverty get the opportunity to free themselves of the weight of their wounded inner side, the more these strengths are revealed.
- * These gaps have an intrinsic link: they feed and influence each other continuously. A clear view of each of them gives an overall picture on poverty. Of course every person has his or her own story and experience and one will never find all of this concentrated in one person.

Training and employment

To do the job of an experience expert, it is not enough to have experienced poverty; an education is also necessary. The training institute "The Link" was created to organize such a course. The experience expert is an interpreter and has a bridging function. In order to fulfil these tasks he must learn to distance himself from his own personal history. He will have to deal with his own pain and feelings of guilt in order to see his story as one of those many stories of people in poverty.

Underprivileged people develop survival-mechanisms that are based on a deep distrust of society and social services. Getting in touch with this can be realised by concentrating on the wounded inner of the poor. By recognising the pain and relieving the weight of guilt, they can create room for the experiences of others and for society.

The experience expert also has to develop specific skills for the job; communicative skills are particularly needed. Therefore a four-year education (3 days a week) is required.

What worked well, What were the difficulties

When people living in poverty gather together, we see that they have a lot of support from other people with the same experience. But in many situations like in care, or confronted with public services, they stand alone in front of a society which they do not understand and which does not understand them. In such situations it is a blessing to have an experience expert besides you.

On the other hand, it is an immense step in life that the experience expert has to take from claimer, client or patient to the opposite position of experience expert, a position of insight and understanding of the other side. Those who go through this course gain the positive power people in poverty often show when given the opportunities.

The team in which the experience expert is working also has to go through a change. The expert is not just an extra worker who makes the job lighter. It requires another way of working which the team has to be prepared for. Mostly experience experts work in tandem with a social assistant. They do the same job as a social worker but

they bring another perspective: they reflect, interpret, confront, check if the proposed care suits the case.

Impact on the National Network

The Experience Expert idea was first developed over many years in the practice of an association of people experiencing poverty called “The Circle”. In March 1999 “The Link” was founded from this association as a non-profit organization with the explicit intention of setting up training as well as employment of experience experts in poverty and social exclusion. It was complementary to the system of associations of people experiencing poverty facing those situations where the group of people living in poverty can’t support a person in his contacts with authorities and services. But more than only assisting people in care, experience experts are also brought in to evaluate and support the development of social policies.

The development of this new profession was at the same time an intensive way to approve participation of people experiencing poverty in many domains where decisions made affect their lives. It can multiply the capacity to assist people experiencing poverty in difficult situations of confrontation with authorities. It has also led to an initiative of the federal administration Social Integration to set up an additional training program for experience experts in all kinds of administration services of the federal government.

Ludo Horemans, based on documents of the training institute for Experience Experts “The Link”.

And something more...

On expert experience and sharing problems and solutions across borders

Experience expert is not a profession only in the anti-poverty organizations. Those who undergo the four-year training work in partnership with staff members of a variety of state social services, both sides finding it an enriching experience. For more information, please visit www.vlaams-netwerk-armoede.be

Views and Experiences

"When years ago I came to the conclusion that if I would try to participate in society (once again), first thing I needed was information on how to communicate with people who seem to have different norms and values. A story with ups and downs began.

The discovery of a 4 years course called experience expert in poverty and social exclusion was the next step. Being able to be a member of a group of students and reflecting live experiences on each other gave the word participation a bit of a lesser hollow sound and although it still had a negative attraction on me, I decided to give it a go. Years have gone by since and after travelling to and visiting new settings and buildings plus working with a variety of people going from homeless people over social workers and even governmental persons.

It is my experience that the side effects of participation are as important as the issue itself.

It is true that participation is a strong tool on condition that there is a feeling of equality.

During my work sometimes I felt like I came from Mars. Every now and then a tsunami of emotions came over me and most of the time it had something to do with how we look at injustice, or how we justify our actions.

Moments like this are learning moments about prejudice and give an idea about certain thresholds and how to cope with them or even how to lower these thresholds. Individuals or organisations whom are willing to look at their own functioning and are prepared to discuss their norms and values have my full respect.

For years I did the same with my norms and values and know how difficult it can be.

At the end I have to say that for me real participation takes place when different opinions on values and norms can exist in full respect and if necessary discussed with an independent way of thinking or handling."

Toon De Rijk - Experience Expert



In Belgium antipoverty work is carried by entities in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. The Walloon perspective views participation as ensuring that the word of every group concerned is taken into account. The quality of the input must be guaranteed by a method adapted to each group's specificities.

In the Flemish decree that was made with the participation of the associations, participation is described as "the participation in social life with the aim to improve the individual and collective welfare, resulting in personal control on their own life conditions and on the external factors which define/influence these life conditions".



Dialogue groups

A consensus building method



Context

The method of dialogue groups sets out to give people living in poverty the opportunity to have an active role in exchanges and discussions focused on making policy proposals, and does this through associations that bring them together and give them a voice. The essence of the method is that the planning and process of decision making is adapted to the pace of the group. It was developed and first used in Belgium in 1994 in the preparations for the General Report on Poverty (1996).



Description

There are three broad phases to the method:

The first phase is consultation between associations where the poor take the floor. This is where the expertise of those most affected, i.e the experience of people living in poverty, is concentrated. It starts with a debate within each association, followed by consultations between them. Both kinds of consultation go on in parallel, and require ongoing feedback to the whole group in each association. Getting participation of people living in poverty taken seriously also means ensuring that the dialogue groups have a say in choosing which issue they will work on. People in poverty choose topics that are most important to their daily lives. The experiences, cited in the General Report on Poverty, are put to intensive use here, to see how far they can provide a starting point for taking the discussion further in the phases described below. It is at the end of this first phase that the elements of input to policy-making are determined.

The second phase is consultation with the “partner” private and public services, institutions and their offshoot agencies, where they add their specific expertise to the associations’ experiences and proposals. In this - and the following - phase, a sufficiently large group of people living in poverty must remain involved. Several members of the group do not represent associations along classic “delegate” or “spokesperson” lines, but collectively. It is very important to maintain feedback with the rest of the group who are not taking a direct part in the consultative process. This means making allowance for the association resuming in-house discussions on particular issues from time to time, which obviously has a knock-on effect on the pace of the debates and meetings and decision making. A large contingent of people living in poverty should also be present at meetings, not to “outnumber” the rest, but to feel that their input and contributions are really central to the process as a whole.



The third phase is consultation with policy bodies (government agencies, departments and politicians) that have policy-making authority in the areas concerned.

During this final phase, there are inevitably times when it is necessary to go back to second and even first phase meetings, regardless of how the policy-makers react to the evidence and proposals put forward by the

associations. If the political authorities reject these proposals, but the atmosphere nevertheless remains positive and constructive, the dialogue process will probably have to start again from scratch around specific alternatives put up by the authorities.

What worked well, What were the difficulties

- * To apply the dialogue groups method enough time has to be foreseen. It's not something that can be done in a few weeks. It rather takes at least half a year. Especially the first phase takes a lot of time.
- * There are two impulses: the dialogue method is used either for advice asked for by the authorities or it is held on the initiative of the associations themselves. In the first case the problem is that policy makers mostly have little patience. Often they ask for the advice of associations of people experiencing poverty in the last phase of their decision making process. They should have the reflex the moment they are thinking to change something or to take a new measure, to invite the people concerned to start the dialogues process.
- * The situation is different if the initiative comes from the associations themselves. Moving forward to the second or third phase then lies more in their own hands. Services and decision makers are brought in when associations of people experiencing poverty are ready for it.
- * If the policy-makers put forward solutions that are only slightly different from those initially floated by the associations, the process could be started over but cutting out part of the first phase. It will obviously take more time if the new alternatives proposed by the authorities differ fundamentally from the proposals initially put forward by NGOs. The worst-case scenario - where no positive and constructive climate can be established - will mean facing up to the fact that the process is stalled, and that in the new situation, the associations will have to consult together again, which may mean working out a different form of response.
- * The three phases of this process are not always as linear or as clearly delimited as described. Depending on the situation and reactions, there may be rapid progress in which phases two and three may run concurrently, or sometimes there will be a need to return from phase three to phases one or two before the dialogue process can be properly concluded.



Impact on the National Network

The method of dialogue groups was used for the first time for the work in the frame of the General Report on Poverty (1996). For the first time in Belgium the government didn't ask scientists for such a report but associations of people experiencing poverty together with the association of cities and municipalities (a national association with the support of the King Boudouin Foundation). The Belgian Anti Poverty Network participated in this two-year process which led to the publication of the General Report on Poverty. The method included people experiencing poverty being implicated in the process from the start until the very end, including rereading the chapters of the report. The drafting of the report was a common process between people experiencing poverty and social workers from public centres that deal with the investigation and allocation of minimum income in Belgium. Since then this method has remained one of the most important ones in the participation of people experiencing poverty in decision making processes.

Unfortunately there is not always enough time to use it as intended and therefore a few variations exist, but the main principle of direct participation of people experiencing poverty, including in the third phase of contact with decision makers, remains regardless.

Ludo Horemans, Coordinator, Belgian Anti Poverty Network



And something more...

On Participation and anti poverty work in Belgium

Anti poverty work in Belgium is coordinated under the Belgian Anti Poverty Network and implemented by three different entities:

- The Walloon Anti Poverty Network
- The Brussels Anti Poverty Forum
- The Flemish Anti Poverty Network

The Flemish Network has been established by Decree and government must consult it on all matters affecting people experiencing poverty. It primarily uses dialogue groups and expert by experience methods of participation and members of the network must make up their own membership with at least 75% of people experiencing poverty. For more information, please visit www.vlaams-netwerk-armoede.be



The Walloon Network uses the method of citizen intelligence, which is a structured consultation, to ensure that people experiencing poverty participate in policy making.

The Brussels Forum was established by social workers to exchange and address issues of social exclusion. For more information, please visit <http://geocities.com/lutteisa03>

Views and Experiences

"The General Poverty Report in 1996 was an important moment for us. For the first time politicians listened to us, not once but during 2 years. In that way we could say what it means for us to be doomed to live in poverty.

But we thought it couldn't stop after one period. It should be made possible all the time... a "permanent dialogue" like we called it. Because so much is happening in such a short time, that you have to tell more about it all the time. Unfortunately, we have to repeat again and again and again the same things, because it seems not to "enter" from the first time.

It's the case with several different issues like housing or energy or work... we have to repeat all the time what's going wrong and how we think it can be improved. Finally we could obtain that politicians accepted our method of dialogue and that they even made a law about it, I think.

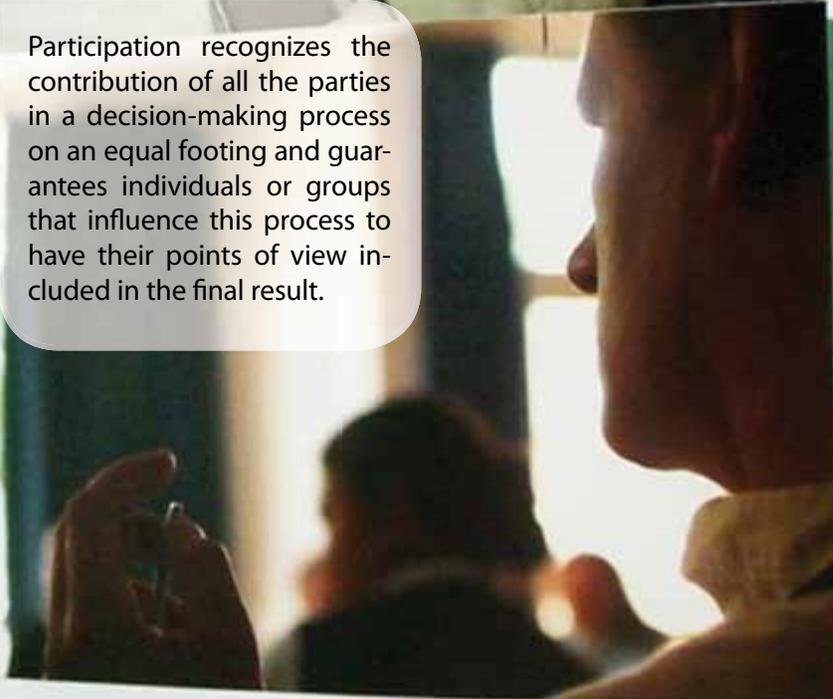
This method of dialogue is used now about energy with Flemish and Belgian ministers concerned. But we do the same in our city with the public welfare service that decides about the minimum income. We see what's going wrong, we discuss how it could be better and we do some proposals to politicians who have the power to decide about it. It doesn't mean that it changes immediately, but after a while it sometimes happens like this, although it can take sometimes so long that we get despaired."



A Belgian participant in the European Meeting of people experiencing poverty.



Participation recognizes the contribution of all the parties in a decision-making process on an equal footing and guarantees individuals or groups that influence this process to have their points of view included in the final result.



« ..

À quand une grève des loyers,
essayez seulement d'imaginer
l'effet domino si une telle grève
se produisait ???

EAPN FRANCE



Working across boundaries on social inclusion policies

Context

The French voluntary sector, especially the social services sector, has little input into social inclusion policy-making (especially the National Action Plan for Inclusion - the NAP INCL). Sometimes it is even kept out of the loop. Also, the people experiencing poverty who are directly affected by the European social inclusion process are far removed from the policies, decisions and guidelines.

The European Union promotes equality of opportunity for all, so the poor community also has the right and duty to know about European and national social inclusion policies.

This, coming at a time (June 2006) when EAPN France and its members were discussing the new French NAP INCL, was what prompted the “Working across boundaries on social inclusion policies” project submitted to the European Commission by the Salvation Army Foundation and its partners (EAPN France, UNIOPSS and its regional outposts along with the Social Affairs Ministry which was responsible in particular for drafting the NAP INCL), drawing on their wealth of experience on participation of people experiencing poverty as active citizens.

To be even more effective in building awareness of European social inclusion policies, the project emphasized that it was people experiencing poverty in the associations that would carry out the approach.

Description

Generally, the “working across boundaries” project set out to support people experiencing poverty and social service providers in taking ownership of and assessing the NAP INCL 2006–2008 so as to be able to participate in the development of the next NAP INCL.

More specifically, the idea was to:

- * Get the NAP INCL **understood and recast**;
- * Get a **critical interpretation** by checking the policy text against the daily reality;
- * Give **agenda-shaping input** and build bridges between all those involved to promote dialogue and mutual understanding, but especially to develop a com-

mon voice in preparing to input into the next NAP INCL

- * **Promote participatory democracy** and peer training through:
- * Reading together and taking ownership of the NAP INCL
- * Drawing up a detailed glossary on all the acronyms used in the NAP INCL
- * Setting up meetings between stakeholders and people experiencing poverty in 3 French regions (Haute Normandie, Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Champagne-Ardenne) to discuss the 3 strands of the NAP INCL (getting people furthest from the labour market back in work, integrating young people into society and work, and expanding the provision of quality social housing and accommodation). The other aim was to come up with proposed improvements, which were compiled into a summary document.
- * Creating tools to inform and raise awareness: website (www.inclusion-sociale.org), CD-ROM, photo exhibition, etc.)
- * Holding a national one-day feedback and discussion conference to take stock of the work done.

The project's target groups were all the stakeholders of the NAP INCL linked together in partner associations: social service providers and people experiencing poverty. Each working group was made up of equal numbers of social service providers and people experiencing poverty.

"For those already included in the system, knowing how it function is power, and it's important to learn which we often don't realize.", Alain telling his experience to the national feedback conference.

What worked well

One highlight of the "working across boundaries" project was that **all those concerned were engaged and responded in equal measure.**

Because of the process, the people experiencing poverty and social service providers went from being beneficiaries or professionals responsible for applying rules and measures to formulating public policies together.

"We must be recognized as interlocutors by public authorities and policy makers", demanded Virginie.

In terms of processes:

- successfully evaluating and making proposals for the next programming period together;
- developing a two-way communication between national/European and local policies in which people experiencing poverty and social service providers legitimately formulate their joint and equal opinion on national and even European policies.

In terms of content:

- It was the first opportunity for people who experience or implement European and national policies to put forward views developed collectively;
- the approach also enabled participants to draw on individual situations when putting forward common conclusions;
- the outputs were constructive and relevant.

In terms of partnership:

- The project brought together a broad partnership ranging from politicians to official agencies, welfare workers and the NGO community – members and staff – to people experiencing poverty.
- People experiencing extreme poverty were involved through the Community Life Councils, various advocacy groups, and more broadly through advocacy and servicing associations.



What were the difficulties

In terms of processes:

The process is still limited and direct consultation of all stakeholders (social service providers and people experiencing poverty) is not yet automatic. It still has to be demanded, it is not yet a natural process.

Europe seems very remote to participants who would rather talk about what happens to them locally.

In terms of contents:

Random attendance at meetings meant having to repeat what had been said about the content of the approach and the NAP INCL, and going back over things that had already been discussed.

The NAP INCL's topics were very broad and there was not enough time to deal exhaustively with all the points raised.

In terms of partnership:

It was easier to get social services and people experiencing poverty involved in the project than official agencies or policy makers, who did not necessarily engage with the issue, being themselves disconnected from the process.



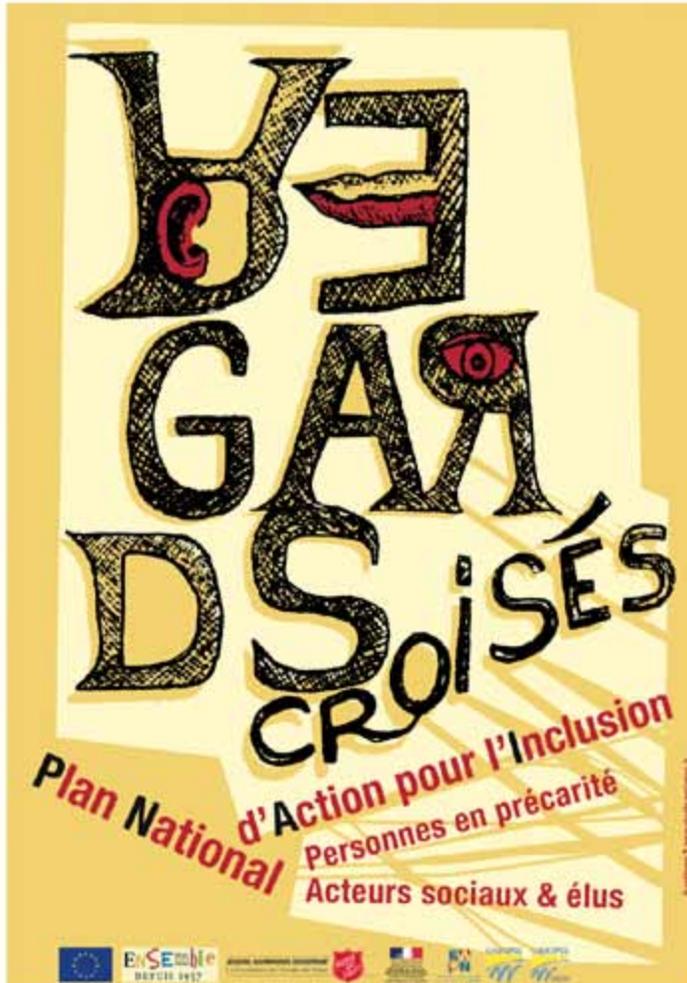
Impact on the National Network

The project showed that participation is well integrated in EAPN-France, despite being only at the beginning.

All the stakeholders needed guidance to keep the energy and motivation going in their involvement with evaluating and following-up on the European and national strategies to tackle exclusion

The joint policy-making approach helps to build individual capacities, proving the need to involve people experiencing poverty in all the work of the network.

Geneviève Colinet, EAPN France





And something more...

On EAPN France's work on participation

The project "Regards Croisés" has produced a series of tools and recommendations for the next programming period and includes a thorough methodology of multiple stakeholder involvement in evaluating National Action Plans for Social Protection and Social Inclusion. You can find a detailed presentation of all the work and results on the following website www.inclusion-sociale.org.

For more information about the work on participation and poverty reduction conducted by EAPN France please visit: www.eapn-france.org

Views and Experiences

"The Working Across Boundaries project

The scope of the Working Across Boundaries project gave us a chance:

- *To share the way welfare workers and people living in precarious conditions see poverty*
- *To list down the problems and develop ways out of them with welfare workers.*

People living in poverty do not want welfare workers to do things for them. What they need from welfare workers is help, not welfare charity.

The regional process was the best, with excellent participation!

Since it was the first time, there were some misunderstandings at the Paris wrap-up, where people's expectations were not met with an equal offer.

The conclusions and proposals from each region were taken into the National Council for Action on Exclusion; we would like to know what became of them.

We would like to be involved at an earlier stage both in writing the NAP INCL and its projects."

Mahamoud ELMI, Serge GAULTIER



For the Hungarian Anti Poverty Network, participation – both in theory and in practice – means that everyone can practice his/her citizen's rights; everyone can express his/her opinion regarding questions that affect him/her directly or indirectly; everyone can experience that he/she is a competent person in his/her own life; finally, it is about the manifestation of knowledge of different types and degrees and also opinions; through all these, it is about getting to know the world better, having a chance to make decisions that serve better the interests of all.

2008/



Notice it, name it and solve it... but together with us

Functioning of the Coordination Committee of the Hungarian Anti-Poverty Network



Context

The Hungarian Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN Hungary) was established in April 2004 as a result of the joint efforts of civil society organizations working for the reduction of poverty and social exclusion. Since the very beginning we chose as a principle and objective to promote the involvement of people experiencing poverty in our work. At that time, however, we did not think about the details of its implementation.

In EAPN Hungary we have been preparing and selecting Hungarian participants for the European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty since 2004. Annually some 10 to 15 persons attend these preparatory training courses. As a result of this internal training system every year new persons get in touch with EAPN Hungary and many of them remain active members. For those living in poverty the participation in the Brussels meeting is a particularly determining experience.

Today in Hungary there are very few civil society organisations, which have been created as a result of the self-organisation of people experiencing poverty. This meant that quite soon after the establishment of EAPN Hungary we were facing the problem that there were no self-organizations that could facilitate people living in poverty in joining EAPN Hungary. By spring 2006 it became clear to us that we should create more structured joining and participating possibilities for those individuals experiencing poverty who had already contributed as volunteers and helpers to the work of the EAPN Hungary. We started from the transformation of the Coordination Committee which runs EAPN Hungary.



Description

In the summer of 2006, the General Assembly of EAPN Hungary doubled the membership of the Coordinating Committee, half of which included people experiencing poverty. Work at the regional level has ever since been coordinated by a pair of one person living in poverty and one expert. From that date on, in accordance with the same principle, half of the coordinators supporting the work at the national level have been people living in poverty and the other half professionals.

To start with, job sharing between those living in poverty and the professionals is not clarified in writing; it is, however, obvious that in the course of common work, coordinators living in poverty focus on involving and promoting the participation of more individual members and professionals concentrate on organisational members.

At the 2006 EAPN Hungary Coordinating Committee elections, 7 of the 11 candidates from among members living in poverty had already participated in Brussels meetings; we have been cooperating with them ever since. During the two years since then, 4 of the 11 have dropped out; and we had been cooperating one of them for several years.



What worked well

It is hard to evaluate the cooperation between those experiencing poverty and professionals with a black and white, “what is good, what is wrong” approach. We have, nevertheless, tried to collect the most important positive features:

- The majority of people experiencing poverty who have been involved in the decision-making structure of EAPN Hungary has remained active in the long run, playing a continuous and determining role in running EAPN Hungary. Therefore, the theory was functioning in practice.
- Many of the persons living in poverty who have been involved in EAPN Hungary could see that positive changes have come about in their lives. They have been equipped with information, knowledge and relations and, as a result, they can now better stand for their interests. Some of them started to learn or established an own organisation. In summary, practice has promoted changes at the individual levels also.
- Within the Coordinating Committee joint work is functioning basically well. Difficulties that may arise compel us towards a more conscious approach regarding the question of involving people experiencing poverty and creating the forms and structures of and for their participation.
- The continuous participation of people living in poverty in managing the activities of EAPN Hungary has resulted in the inclusion of new points of view, new knowledge and experiences. It is important to stress that coordinators from among people living in poverty carry out crucial tasks in the activities of EAPN Hungary; for example, year after year they contribute to organising the annual meetings of those experiencing poverty, and to organising and holding regional forums which prepare the national meetings.



Every year we prepare the Monitoring Report of EAPN Hungary on the situation of families living in poverty, building on the active participation of our members living in poverty. Those experiencing poverty participate in the events, conferences and press releases as lecturers or interveners. Joint work, therefore, has basically enriched EAPN Hungary.



- By intending to make the participation of people experiencing poverty a real practice in EAPN Hungary, we have become more authentic in the eyes of those living in poverty, making it easier to convince others to support the causes represented by EAPN Hungary. This means that transforming the coordinating committee was very important in strengthening and broadening the base of EAPN Hungary.

What were the difficulties

Stating that we have not been facing serious difficulties and problems would, of course, be a lie. The most important challenges remaining include:

- The transformation of the Coordinating Committee was carried out as an ad hoc “experiment” without any antecedents and previous experiences. We did not think over in advance possible difficulties and traps, therefore, we were not prepared to solve them. As a result, we often try to go after the events and happenings, or treat cases on the individual level, which is sometimes very difficult.
- Cooperating within the Coordinating Committee, or performing the role of regional or national coordinator supposes certain necessary skills and knowledge on the part of professionals. In fact, we did not have the resources that would have allowed us to ensure adequate training and skills development courses. Parallel with the elaboration and further development of a methodology, we should pay more attention to this aspect in the future.
- Playing a role in EAPN Hungary also supposes the preparation of members living in poverty. These persons find themselves in situations that are unknown to them, facing expectations that they have never experienced before. It is not rare that tensions appear in the family and small community relationships of those living in poverty. In order for them to be able to participate in the work of EAPN Hungary without experiencing frustrations and failures we should provide for their continuous support (mentoring), offering the possibility of voicing their experiences on a regular basis. We have already taken some steps in this sense.
- The fact that today we are still missing a clarification of roles, expectations and

interaction from the members of the Coordinating Committee may occasionally cause conflicts and confusion, but we are working to improve that.

- Often, topics raised in meetings that are very far from practical daily problems may occasionally cause difficulties in motivating people (e.g. involvement in EU topics). We hope the improvement of the methodology will help overcome these difficulties.



Lessons learned

We have already described the most important positive and negative lessons; therefore, we would only detail two questions here.

In connection with the practical involvement of people living in poverty, we consider that participants of the process should be aware of the fact that while professionals have a relatively stable role deriving from their professions, the role of those living in poverty is basically temporary, which originates from their life situation.

As a conclusion of the case study, it is important to state that the transformation of the Coordinating Committee – a joint work of those living in poverty and professionals – has greatly contributed to creating a special image, also resulting in a more conscious and determined attitude for promoting the active involvement of people experiencing poverty and representing their cause both internally and externally.

Izabella Marton and Zoltanne Szvoboda, EAPN Hungary, with essential support from Eva Szarvak, Geza Gosztonyi and Laszlo Weber from the Coordinating Committee of EAPN Hungary



And something more...

On participatory evaluation in EAPN Hungary

Participation of people experiencing poverty is not only part of the structures of EAPN Hungary. In 2007, EAPN Hungary decided to monitor the result and impacts of implementation of the „Let them having better” National Strategy against Child Poverty and some other government actions affecting people living in poverty. The monitoring was planned to be carried out through interviewing members of families living in or at risk of poverty with the involvement of people experiencing poverty as interviewers too.

Finally we managed to get 47 interviews altogether and some members of the coordinating committee, who are persons experiencing poverty themselves, took part in the preparatory and the data gathering processes.

These experiences have made EAPN Hungary determined to focus on developing self-advocacy groups of people experiencing poverty in the coming years. For more information on EAPN Hungary's work visit www.hapn.hu

Views and experiences

“What does it mean for me to be a member of the Network and work together with others in the Co-ordinating Committee? It is an opportunity for development, for making the „dream“ come true, for working together... It is like scales which should be thought over and evaluated day after day, or after each event. It is the task of our „tandem“ (the pair of a professional and a person living in poverty) to keep the scales in balance, so that none of us fall down from the weighing pans. To become a diamond from gravel by polishing each other.



In this work, there are things that work very well...

An unknown situation, though experienced on your own skin, is what we are talking about (poverty). You can talk about it, the others are curious about what you say. They do not take it as a complaint or self-pitying.

The world is expanding; you will get to places where you have never thought you would get. Your secret wishes come true; you can travel abroad, and learn a lot.

You can be acquainted with people who take you very seriously. You respect, appreciate and understand them. We learn not to talk to each other without being listened. You are taken seriously, you are needed.

They support and help your development. All of us are developing and changing. We are becoming a community and a well functioning organisation.

And sometimes there are things that work not so well...

To get into a community where they speak a very special language; you feel lost at the beginning of a sentence. Very frightened, you ask whether they really mean to listen to your opinion, and if you are really needed.

Sometimes you have the feeling of being a stranger.... Your environment does not understand what you are talking about. They are disgusted with you for you are bringing home an “unpleasant” situation. Your family is also feeling badly as kids are being flouted at the school because of the media show.

It may happen that we are making efforts for something that we, by no means, can change. We always talk about it, but nothing ever happens. The result comes slowly; we must recognise that we do not have a magic wand. Changing a social perception or prejudice is not an easy task.”

Zoltanne Szvoboda



"ZORG dat je het
ARMOEDECONFERENTIE
Gemeente
L
Uitkomen
Wat heeft het Budgetbehoor
- Budgettering als mens
- ongaan
- Schuldregeling voor
- schulden
- Budgetbegeleid
- Budgetadvies
Wat wil het Budget
- Signalering en

To us, participation means *taking joint responsibility to create possibilities and ensure that all people are able to participate in all the areas related to human life and human rights.*



Local Poverty Conferences

Writing a recipe book against poverty and social exclusion

Context

From the moment that it was created, EAPN Netherlands has worked to convince policy and decision makers that a respectful dialogue with the people experiencing poverty on the policies directly affecting them should be at the basis of any initiative. The idea of organising local poverty conferences is based directly on this philosophy.

Following a successful transnational project with partners from Portugal, France, Italy, Germany and Belgium, which compared and established poverty reduction indicators among the participating countries, EAPN Netherlands tried to test the idea at the local level, and started advocating to local authorities who must, by law, consult users of their social services. This advocacy culminated in a simple working method that had not been implemented before – Local Poverty Conferences.

Description

The objective of the Local Poverty Conferences was to gather all kinds of people acting at the local level, give them a platform and let them discuss about how they could raise awareness in their community about the need to fight poverty and social exclusion.

We (EAPN Netherlands) invited people experiencing poverty but also policy makers, political party representatives, shop owners, childcare workers, teachers, welfare organisations' representatives, and any other interested parties to be part of the Local Poverty Conferences.

The method is in fact very simple: Invite people from the local community and give them an open but well structured platform to be able to exchange experiences and to link creative ideas in order to have a decisive impact on poverty at their level.

We started by contacting local municipalities – especially the services working on social issues – and asking them to be the host of the conference. EAPN Netherlands was responsible for the methodology and everything necessary for the organisation of the conference.



What worked well

How we involved the people experiencing poverty

1. In the methodology we tried to involve whenever it was possible the people experiencing poverty (People living on minimum income and other social benefits, Boards of clients of social services, etc.) and asked them to act as a link between EAPN and their municipality.
2. When we had direct contacts with municipality representatives, we would always invite the board of clients of social services to actively take part in the whole organisation process of the conference.
3. The people who were welcoming, handing out the programs and badges, and answering the participants' questions - during the conference day, were all people in poverty.
4. People experiencing poverty were at the heart of the conferences. All the ideas generated came from listening of their experience and their needs. For us this is a bottom up approach at its most effective.
5. So far EAPN Netherlands has organized about 20 of the local poverty conferences. Funding was provided originally by the central government and now local authorities cover all the costs. We have been requested to organize follow-up conferences in some cases.

"This is the first time that I feel that I am important for my municipality, that they 'do' care about me".

For EAPN Netherlands, this bottom up approach represents the most important aspect of the conferences but it has had other positive elements.

Local poverty conferences had an impact on the policy-making and decision-making processes as it enriched people and helped them to better understand each other. It also helped in creating new local alliances.

With every new meeting, we discovered a positive change of attitude among local decision-makers.



What were the difficulties

One of the challenges is now to get the people experiencing poverty engaged in a continuous participation process. To put them in the spotlight is not an easy thing, but we have managed it most of the time.

The real challenge however is to overcome the fear that the municipality services felt, especially the civil servants working in the social welfare departments, about engaging in a real dialogue with the people in poverty.

It takes a lot of energy and time to reassure civil servants and show them that the positive approach of the conference will overcome their fear of negative outbursts.



Lessons learned

One of the main impacts has been the positive change in a number of policies following the ideas which emerged from the local poverty conferences.

A lesson that we've learned is that if you work patiently and are willing to invest a lot of time, people will come together to join their hands in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

The other – sometimes painful - lesson that we've learned is the lack of awareness and willingness to acknowledge that this new participation approach takes time and costs money.

Although EAPN Netherlands tries to reduce the costs to a minimum when organising the local poverty conferences there are still municipalities which think that working with people in poverty means that it should be very cheap. It is also ironic to see that big conferences dedicated to other kind of issues like research for example do manage easily to get better funding from the same municipalities.

Quinta Ansem, EAPN Netherlands, www.eapn.nl



And something more...

On the recipe book against poverty and exclusion

An important result of these local conferences is the Recipe book against poverty and exclusion, which gathers simple ideas that came out of the poverty conferences. These are simple and often cost-free steps divided into the following categories:

1. Information
2. Minimum of policy/service
3. Entitlement of claimants
4. Image forming
5. Debt support
6. Exclusion
7. Housing
8. Others/third parties
9. Do it yourself/self-help
10. Employment/work
11. Role of the schools
12. Projects
13. Education
14. Miscellanea
15. Repetition
16. Stimulation
17. Examples

The recipe book can be found in Dutch on the website of EAPN Netherlands. If you are interested in this project and how it has changed the way of thinking of local authorities, feel free to contact us at www.eapnned.nl

Views and experiences...

"To have been able to participate in several conferences as a working member of the organization has been very important to me. As a volunteer and a person experiencing poverty on a daily basis it was much easier to make contact with the participants who came to the conference. Not only could I bring in my personal experiences but my creativity as well. To be able to do this has given me a first hand insight into the reality that changing things is possible if people respectfully exchange their views as well as their ideas of solution to combating poverty. This feels good, and has given me new hope.

The change of attitude towards the policymakers and the people experiencing poverty that have been achieved as a direct outcome of these conferences is what I appreciate the most. The conferences have improved the communication between them and now there is more respect and understanding of each other's problems and positions.

What made my contribution definitive and added value to the conferences is the recognition of people experiencing poverty that I am one of them. It surely helped them to be more open in creating new ideas regardless of the fact that they have been told that there would be little or no money at all to begin with. So everybody had to be creative without a big bundle of money.

To have conferences to discuss poverty problems and to try to find some creative solutions with as many local participants as possible is important. But it wouldn't have been as sufficient as it has been without the people experiencing poverty. To place them at the heart of the conference is crucial, because they themselves know what they need the most for achieving positive changes in their lives. Money isn't always the only solution to solve poverty and social exclusion. Feelings of shared responsibility, willingness to keep and broaden cooperation and work together to combat poverty can really make the change."

Marjo van Vliet, Vice President of the Client Council of Social Welfare and Employment Vlaardingen – no income from a paid job, living on minimum standard welfare.



Voices from the Ground!

EAPN Norway builds alliances with relevant actors to create a stronger voice in favour of social inclusion in Norway. 85% of our member organizations are self-organised associations consisting of people that are facing social exclusion. We demand real influence for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in the policy making processes on national level. EAPN Norway demand to be heard and considered as valuable contributors in the development of participation strategies and principles, on political, system and individual levels. Our members are mobilizing to contribute to the decision making processes – not only to be heard and consulted, – but to have real influence in the decision making processes on the 3 mentioned levels - political, system and individual.

Making poverty visible! A story about mobilization



The poverty hearing Oslo 24 August 2007

Context

During the last 10 years our member organizations have mobilized every second year before each election.

Promoting the poverty issue as one of the main topics during election campaigns has been one of our main success factors in the period that EAPN Norway has existed.

Objectives

In 2007 the Norwegian Government had no plans for arranging a poverty hearing. Instead EAPN Norway took the initiative to arrange the hearing before the election in September. Our goal was to make the poverty issue visible during the election campaign. Together with Batteriet, which is a division of one of our member organizations, The Church City Mission and The Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers (FO) we established a working group 6 months ahead to combine our resources in a preparation committee.

Involvement from people experiencing poverty

The involvement of people facing poverty comes naturally since EAPN Norway consists of 26 NGOs, and 22 of them are organisations, associations and groups in Norway that consist of and work for the financially, socially and legally disadvantaged. The arrangement had a bottom up approach during the whole planning period and they also chaired the whole event on the date of the conference.

Other contributors

RIO - Recovered addicts Interest Organization, Mental Health, The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), Save the Children, Red Cross, SAFO (Network of NGOs organising disabled people) and the Salvation Army also gave their contribution to the hearing.

The arrangement took place in a huge party tent on a square in the capital of Norway, Oslo. The Minister of Finances, Minister of Labour and Inclusion and many other top

politicians participated during the whole event. More than 300 people attended and national television and newspapers took part during the whole day. The day ended with launching the report "Making a Decisive Impact on the Eradication of Poverty".

What worked well

The hearing gave the poor a genuine face, and it gave them a feeling that the fight against poverty is not in vain.

The media coverage was substantial.

The impact on policymaking was substantial as well, and did enlighten society on the problems of the poor.

It has strengthened the bonds for lobby activities, from members of government all the way through parliament, ministries and directorates.

The participants representing the poor felt victorious.

What were the difficulties

One challenge of significance is the wish to do this on our own, without resourceful partners. We have tried it and failed on our own.

Another challenge is how to engage our member organisations in the planning and actual work. Painful experiences are now turning into valuable knowledge.

Impact on the National Network

The government has issued funding for further development of NGOs.

The government has invited NGOs to form their own group of representatives from multiple areas of poverty, to meet with the government and ministries 4 times a year, when the NGOs set the agendas of the meetings.

It has become easier for EAPN Norway to recruit new member organisations, and thus more power to fight poverty.

The cooperation between the member organisations has been strengthened.

Finally, what will we do in the future?

Keep developing cooperation with resourceful organisations in order to increase the impact of our activities.

Keep developing the cooperation and interaction between our member organisations in order to strengthen our individual and collective fight against poverty.

EAPN Norway, Dag Westerheim and Gunnar Paaske



And something more

On poverty and social assistance in Norway

Norway is one of the richest countries in the world. But it has no rights-based minimum income scheme for social welfare benefits. The benefits vary from each social security of office and are decided by each municipality council. The situation for each applicant of social welfare is arbitrary.

As the partnership network of organisations/associations/action groups for financially, socially and legally disadvantaged groups in Norway, the Welfare Alliance/EAPN Norway works to:

- abolish poverty
- ensure increased user participation
- improve life quality and conditions for our membership groups and improve financial and working conditions for our member organisations.

For more information about the Welfare Alliance and its work, go to www.velferdsalliansen.no.

Views and Experiences

"I am Hanne Haug, the host of the poverty hearing 07, Oslo. My impressions from the day are that we touched on many different topics like:

- *how poverty effects children,*
- *how drug addicts face problems within the welfare system, and*
- *how the finance minister Kristin Halvorsen took on the challenge to reduce poverty in Norway.*

As for myself, experiencing poverty for real, I could also tell the public how I dealt with day to day challenges. The fact that the minister of work and inclusion Bjarne Håkon Hansen sat in front all day listening to what was said from the podium was very comforting. The media was also very eager to find angles to cover the hearing. The day before a newsteam followed me at work visiting homeless and sick people, and at the same time, I could give good reasons for introducing minimum social standards."

in memory of Leiv Mørkved, Hanne Haug

We think of participation as a process in which more than two persons who share something (material goods, an idea or a project) decide to act and work together towards a common objective.



Activating Participation



Context

EAPN Portugal's clear aim with the "Activating Participation" project was to engage with the implementation and strengthening of the National Action Plan for Inclusion 2003-2005, working to deliver strand 4, a) *To promote, according to national practice, the participation and self-expression of people suffering exclusion, in particular in regard to their situation and the policies and measures affecting them.*

This is where the project stands, as a contribution to turning into reality a policy goal that we are fighting for: personal participation of disadvantaged groups in deciding how their problems should be addressed.

EAPN Portugal took the first steps to give a participatory voice to disadvantaged groups in 2002 through six regional forums organized throughout the country and one national meeting of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. It had then become essential to give continuity to these actions, which is where the development of the "Activating Participation" project came in.



Description

The "Activating Participation" project developed in 2005/2006, with the key aim of *"Promoting and strengthening a culture of participation in the local institutional structures, by enabling the empowerment of disadvantaged groups benefiting from social policy measures and services"*.

The key activities in the project were:

1. Collecting disadvantaged groups' experiences of participation and setting up *Local Observatories*
2. Developing 10 training workshops in each local area
3. Testing and strengthening the participation methods: *Micro schemes*
4. Spreading the results

The starting point in developing the local observatories on *Participation* was to spread the idea of the project around, inviting official agencies to take part in them. 4 observatories were set up - in Braga, Oporto, Coimbra and Évora, so as to cover the entire country – each comprising on average 12 public and private agencies working with a varied mix of target groups.

With the observatories set up, EAPN Portugal and all the partners who had voluntarily taken up the challenge engaged in a two-stage process. The first one included

the 10 local training workshops for social workers and organization leaders developed with the key aim of building awareness of practices and perceptions on the issue of participation, (re)defining concepts, identifying the risks and obstacles related to participatory processes and learning the methods and tools of participation. The ultimate goal of this stage of the project was primarily for the participants to reach a consensus on what they understand by participation and at the same time to develop the more traditional forms of social outreach to identify an action (or actions) that trial-ran participatory methods.

The training period therefore prepared them to move on to the following test phase, which was put into action through 8 participation micro-schemes, designed, planned, run and evaluated with the users (disadvantaged groups) of the engaged local institutions and organizations' services.

THE MICRO-SCHEMES AND PARTICIPATING GROUPS

MICRO-SCHEME	PARTICIPATING GROUP
"Nós e o Nosso Bairro..." – We and our neighbourhood	Group living in a low-income area of Braga
"GAFE – Grupo de auto-ajuda para familiares e amigos de pessoas com esquizofrenia." – Self-support group for relatives and friends of persons suffering schizophrenia	Parents and friends of people living with schizophrenia
"Traçar Caminhos" – Drawing pathways.	Young people living in a low-income area - Guimarães
"+ CIDADÃO" - + Citizenship	Users of services with public participation
"REI'S - Rede de Encontros intergeracionais" – Network of intergenerational meetings	Elderly people and children
"Activar Vozes e Saberes" – Activating voices and thoughts	Elderly users of day centres.
"Promover a participação" – promoting participation	Elderly users of an organization in Évora
"Acendalha" – Firing up	Young people in the municipality of Évora

After the micro-schemes, a final seminar was held involving all those who had taken part in the first phase of the project and people from other organizations around the country. One outcome of the project was the book: *"Small experiences, great hopes"* which opens many doors for thought and discussion of ideas around the issue of participation.

What worked well

The project was very positively evaluated by all the stakeholders involved. Among the highlights were the active engagement and mobilization of local actors, the close cooperation and exchange of knowledge between social workers and disadvantaged groups, the testing out of different models of participation and what was learned from that, and the way the actions were re-enacted once the schemes developed had given impetus to subsequent activities to promote participation in those and other situations

What were the difficulties

During project development, we encountered problems due to the lack of a real culture of participation in Portugal which needed to be dealt with in future schemes, such as:

- * The risk of creating false expectations among the target groups which cannot be satisfactorily addressed, which means analysing the resources, potentials and obstacles for the people with whom the scheme is to be developed.
- * The risk of prioritizing personal/institutional interests over collective interests.
- * The risk related to taking ownership of the scheme– either too much ownership being taken by an organization or individual, or no ownership being taken at all, calling into question the participatory principles.
- * The risk of the skills learned not being used to best effect, and of the good practices resulting from micro-schemes not being applied in the organizations where people work, for example where there is job insecurity.

Impact on the National Network

The project created participation working groups which got involved in actions subsequently run by EAPN Portugal, such as participation in the European meetings of people experiencing poverty in Brussels.

The “*Activating Participation*” project is seen as a good practice in participation and a key means for Portuguese government to put the National Action Plan for Inclusion guidelines into practice. This was an incentive to carry on the long and difficult path of participation, not for but with people experiencing poverty and social exclusion as a pathway to active citizenship and the full exercise of rights and obligations by all.

The main lessons we have taken from this project are:

- * Participation means sharing (common objectives, interests, capacity)
- * Participation works better through “networking” (in partnership rather than rivalry)
- * Participation requires geographical and relational proximity
- * Resistance to change/inflexibility in some organisations adds difficulty to the participation process

- * Participation takes time... and the different levels of participation are not always (or do not have to be) fully achieved
- * Participation is Possible!

Júlio Paiva and Ana Cláudia Albergaria, EAPN Portugal



And something more...

On participation in Portugal

Activating participation also resulted in a great resource book based on the experiences of all the communities and partners involved. www.reapn.org/publicacoes_visualizar.php?ID=66

In addition, EAPN Portugal has developed training, research and awareness- materials on working with specific groups.

Internally, EAPN Portugal promotes participatory practices of work with different groups and it regularly monitors the satisfaction of beneficiaries through a “Consultative Council on Quality”.

EAPN Portugal regularly applies participatory practices in its external work with the local, regional and national stakeholders. As an example, local participatory assessment workshops have been implemented in many communities throughout Portugal, and many were conducted at the request of local authorities. For more information, visit the website of EAPN Portugal www.reapn.org



Views and Experiences

“Until last year, I was one of the long-term unemployed, having joined their ranks in 1995. The National Employment Institute did not manage to help me out, claiming that my age was the problem. As a result, I have spent years being shunted from unemployment to minimum income benefit, and every kind of training course offered by the Employment Institute.

My connection with EAPN Portugal (REAPN) is a way of working actively with society. I have a long-standing involvement with civic groups. For 15 years, I was a volunteer in a children’s hospital, where my job was to play with sick children in an attempt to help them forget that they were a long way away from their families. After that, I was selected to work in the scouting movement, teaching children and young people to respect other people, and to respect and love animals and plants.

Another very worthwhile experience in participation was when I was asked by the local council of where I was living at the time to look after the children of families who lived on camp sites (people living in dire poverty) during the daytime in the summer holidays (July, August and September). I would take them to the beach in the morning, while the afternoon was spent playing games. I also worked with the Portuguese Animal Rights League to help improve the conditions of dogs and cats, which also meant improving people’s conditions. I have been involved in the Food Bank in more recent years.

EAPN Portugal’s meetings (regional meetings) have strengthened the idea that voluntary agencies bring added value in addressing social problems. EAPN not only helps reach out to people who at some point in their lives have known what poverty is. It also links together welfare workers who inform people how to cope in difficult situations. But it has one further critical characteristic - in my view, the most important – and that is to bring these issues into the public arena.

The European Meeting in Brussels gives a voice to people from all EU countries that helps put everyone on an equal footing in the fight to get minimum social conditions for all.

All the situations I had experienced helped me understand that everyone is needed for the physical and psychological development of those around them, which has an additional effect that improves everyone’s life.

My name is Ana Laura, and I am 55 years old.

I have been living for the past 13 years in Alentejo, a few miles outside the town of Portalegre, in southern Portugal.”



A group of five people are seated around a round table covered with a white tablecloth in a meeting room. The room has large windows with white curtains and a brick wall. The participants are engaged in a discussion. A woman in a black and white patterned headscarf is on the left, looking towards the center. Next to her is a man in a colorful patterned shirt. In the center, a bald man with glasses in a light blue shirt is looking towards the right. To his right is a Black man in a dark jacket, and further right is a man in a grey jacket. In the foreground, the back of a woman with long brown hair is visible, looking towards the group. There are water bottles and glasses on the table.

Spain is organized in autonomous regions with large administrative powers, which is why participation of people experiencing poverty is different in most of them. The objective of EAPN Spain to build a common understanding of participation is a long-term one, and there is no one applicable definition in this context.



Building a Methodological Guide from Regional Experiences

Context

EAPN Spain was relaunched in 2004, and the participation of people living in poverty and social exclusion became one of its strategic lines of action. This is something that goes beyond the preparing and holding of a National Meeting or the participation in the European Meeting as a delegation.

In a context that includes the European Strategy for Inclusion, the Plans for Social Inclusion at State and Autonomous Community level, regardless of the phenomena addressed, whether it is immigration or changes in the labour market, the reality is that people directly affected are becoming invisible. Usually the opinion of those to which all these strategies, plans and projects are directed is missing. In other words, their voice is not being listened to.

Nevertheless, across our country, there are experiences where the assessment and the views of the people towards which projects are directed are being taken into account. In EAPN Spain we have experiences along these lines and they are unprecedented in the framework of the social participation of people living in poverty and social exclusion. For instance, in Castilla la Mancha the people who are directly affected by the Social Inclusion Projects are consulted.

All of this, with the objective of “promoting the participation of people living in a situation of poverty and social exclusion, and the bodies in which they participate, giving them the means to attain it”. As a Network we aim to fight against poverty and also to prevent that these situations lead to one’s inability to fully participate in social life.

Objectives

Because of the structure of EAPN Spain, there are various ways of working on participation with different rhythms and processes, making it more difficult to have a commonly-held definition. It is also true however that the work on participation is thereby enriched by the multitude of visions and practices.

To collect all these visions and practices from the different regions of Spain, EAPN Spain had established a Participation Group that looks at the way meetings of people

experiencing poverty are organized and what methodological guide EAPN members need to increase participation of people experiencing Poverty in their work.

The main references for the Group's work are:

- * The groups of people living in poverty and social exclusion
- * EAPN Europe
- * the relevant Ministry that has entrusted us with the work of making proposals on the participation of groups of people living in poverty and social exclusion.

It is clear from all the assessment conducted by the Group that National and European Meetings of people experiencing poverty should continue their own course on the basis of the working objectives the group set out and sharing the strategy of EAPN Europe. One of the goals is to answer the following question posed at the last National Meeting: *Why don't we, the people living in poverty, decide what must be discussed in the Meetings?*

As for the objective of gathering experiences, in this new phase, one of the essential targets is more involvement of people living in poverty and social exclusion at all levels across the country and building the mechanisms to achieve their ongoing participation.

What worked well

Talking about good work or successes is difficult when so much still needs to be done. But we have made significant efforts in this field.

At EAPN Spain, with the steering of the Participation Group, we have been working on a "Methodological Guide on the Participation of People living in Poverty and Social Exclusion" for two years. This work, divided in two stages, has meant a great commitment on the part of all people involved in it. In the initial period we drafted a proposal enabling us to obtain a detailed diagnosis on the social participation of the people affected or at risk promoted by the EAPN Spain members in order to move towards a joint conceptual framework that will serve as a reference model. All this information has been published at the end of 2008. In the second stage, we will continue with defining an important educational component, as we believe that only the processes that incorporate education enable individuals and groups to become re-acquainted with their reality and increase their capacity to change it.

How do these collective awareness processes start? What conditions have to be met for these to be possible and effective? Who are the actors in these processes and what are their roles? What methodologies can be used? What experience does the EAPN have in them? These are a few of the questions that the Guide tries to answer.

Furthermore, we have local experiments, like the one of EAPN Castilla La Mancha.

In this Autonomous Community, it is the actual users of the Regional Plan on Social Integration (the equivalent of the National Plan on Social Inclusion) who assess the projects they have taken part in.

During this experiment a great effort was made to convince people that the participation of people living in exclusion in the planning, analysing the situation and proposing solutions to the problems that affect them is

an indispensable component of the inclusion process, and improves the processes pertaining to the fight against poverty and social exclusion. This has been recognised in European policies since the Lisbon European Council in 2000 and the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion.



In this way, it was necessary to look into the real experience of the people involved in the projects and see whether these projects help improve their actual living conditions: one must study the causes why some people have not been able to improve their conditions; see how many have taken steps towards integration, and how much of that is the result of individual conditions and/or access to resources. This information is necessary, not only because it makes the participation of vulnerable people an essential part of social welfare policies (political reason) but also because it will help devise more defined projects that are more geared towards satisfying their users (technical reason).

At State level, the challenge of EAPN Spain is to obtain a Law on Social Participation. In the same way, participation of people living in poverty has been reflected in the new National Action Plan on Inclusion, through a Participation Congress of People living in Vulnerable Conditions to be held in 2010 under the Spanish Presidency of the European Union. That way the victims of exclusion can also have their say on how social policies have influenced their lives.

What were the difficulties

Working on the participation of people living in poverty is complicated when there is neither a suitable framework nor processes. In addition, there is the often difficult personal situation of the people concerned that must be taken into consideration.

As we have mentioned above, Spain's national and political configuration complicates participation processes but also enriches them. This means that there are different situations and different rhythms and visions of what social participation is. In addition, the social entities do not have the necessary tools to integrate participation processes. We are planning to remedy this soon by implementing the Methodological Guide on Participation that is currently being drafted.

In addition to these obstacles, we often see the main obstacles faced by the victims of exclusion and/or poverty. Here are a few examples of these obstacles:

- * Lack of self-esteem: *a woman who makes interesting contributions to the group and displays intelligence when talking about others, who nevertheless says that she herself is "not worth shit".*
- * Loneliness: *"I don't have a family (...). I don't go out because I can't even afford a beer."*
- * Lack of social support: *"The project allows me to go out, meet people, have someone to talk to (...), someone like me."*
- * Fears (fear of participating too): *"...People take advantage (...) of those in an inferior position..."*
- * Abuse: *A Roma who had worked in a company for a long time recounted that every time a machine broke down on a Saturday or an unexpected problem had to be resolved in the factory, sometimes at night, the boss would call him, and never the other workers. He never refused because "I can't say a thing, because I am a Gypsy, and if I don't go, the boss is going to think that I am like all the others..."*
- * Negative stereotypes/identity: *A Latin American with Indian features says that "women cling on to their bags when I approach them"; a former convict bitterly states that "It looks like it's written on my forehead that I've been in jail", or a member of the Gypsy community says that "They think we're all thieves."*



Lessons learned

Generally speaking the impact of these experiments on participation has been very positive. This was the conclusion drawn in the different Meetings held at State, Autonomous Region and local level.

Nevertheless we must improve the preparatory process and the involvement of people participating given that, in some cases, the periods are short and more long-term work should be done.

In the next few years we must ensure that the social and other public and decision-making entities integrate participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. In this respect, obtaining a Law on Social Participation is indispensable.

José Javier López, EAPN Spain

And something more...

On Participation and anti poverty work in Spain

Spain is a country where migration has been a topical phenomenon in the last years. EAPN Spain believes that immigration brings much to social participation and enriches a pluralist society by opening people's minds to other cultural and social concepts and by breaking stereotypes about "the other". While social and political participation of migrants is a prerequisite for their integration, this does not always happen in reality. In this context, EAPN Spain members have developed a pool of knowledge, actions and tools for integration of migrants in their new environment and have contributed to the acceptance of the phenomenon in the Spanish society at large through public debates, information and awareness raising work.

With regard to participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, in the coming years EAPN Spain will be advocating for a Law on Participation which will be a tool to improve social conditions. The Law should start from the premise that active citizenship involves drafting and implementing public policies. The Law would establish:

- Consultative and participative bodies established by the law itself;
- Participation councils and other formal mechanisms where people experiencing poverty and social exclusion can participate;
- Participative processes on general or specific questions that public authorities wish to organize on matters related to social services.

For more information on this and other work of EAPN Spain, please visit their website www.eapn.es

Views and experiences

"I reached Spain fleeing Algeria, the country that in the nineties went through a war-like situation due to the proliferation of terrorism. Security was almost none.

I've been here since 1992, the time when Spain became a host country for immigrants. My early days have been difficult due to several factors: I was not speaking Spanish, I was not familiar with the Spanish administrative system, I lacked information and guidance due to my language problems. All these barriers and lack of financial resources brought me to the moment when I had to choose between plans to return, admitting that my migration plan failed, or face barriers mentioned above and go forward.

I chose to fight and improve my situation. I was fortunate to meet Spanish Catholic Commission of Migration (ACCEM), pioneer in dealing with the phenomenon of immigration. They helped me move forward, offering Spanish classes, information and guidance to legalize my situation in the country. As I'm fluent in Arabic and French I started collaborating with them as an interpreter, and later carried out other work of raising awareness and leisure activities.

After nearly three years I obtained legal status in very delicate circumstances and started working for ACCEM, continuing with my job as an interpreter and monitor of leisure activities. Then I was appointed coordinator of the awareness raising and mediation departments. Meanwhile I gained education in these areas, as a trainer and social intercultural mediator.

As intercultural mediator, I began to participate in the development of several projects for community mediation in order to facilitate communication and promote intercultural spaces between the native and foreign communities.

I take this opportunity to say that one can get out of situations of exclusion always when there is strategy for insertion, guidance and information to make the period of adaptation as short as possible."

Driss Sadi, ACCEM (Association of Spanish Catholic Commission for Migrations – Asociación Comisión Católica Española de Migraciones – ACCEM), organization member of EAPN Spain.

Note: Driss Sadi was appointed national coordinator for 8th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty and Social Exclusion (he was a Spanish delegate for 7th EU Meeting of PEP).



The UK network has four Networks active in Wales, England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. For EAPN England participation is strong involvement of grassroots people in planning and running our organisation and activities, whilst providing them with the support and training needed for this.

Participation is also working to open up more public institutions and wider processes to informed and empowered involvement of grassroots people especially those where decisions are made that directly affect them. We see participatory processes as strengthening democratic processes and enabling better government. The Networks in Scotland and Northern Ireland have participation defined in their strategic plans.



Bridging the policy gap

The methodology of bridging the gap policy peer reviews and lessons for governance

Context

For many people there is a large and growing gap between what national politicians say they are going to do to tackle poverty and what actually happens 'on the ground.' *Bridging the Policy Gap (BTPG)* was a 12-month project in the UK, lead by the Poverty Alliance (the Scottish anti-poverty network), designed to help understand what was working at the local level to tackle poverty and promote social inclusion. Crucially the project aimed to involve people with experience of poverty and social exclusion in understanding 'what works'. The project put participation at the heart of the awareness raising work; achieving increased awareness through actively engaging a cross-section of people and organisations in the development and evaluation of policies designed to tackle poverty and social exclusion at the local level.

Description

The project adapted the European concept of a 'Peer Review' as a basic structure that allowed for thoughtful and reflective discussion amongst participants. Importantly it also introduced the idea of 'policy peers', establishing a clear message that the experience and knowledge of all participants was equally valued; regardless of whether it was gained through professional exposure to the policy or through lived experience of the impact of the policy. An additional benefit of the Peer Review format was the flexibility it offered which lent itself to a great deal of participant involvement in determining the structure and content of the event.

Three local authorities participated in BTPG, each looking at a different policy but each relating back to at least one of the four themes of the UK National Action Plan:

- * Swansea: Children's Play Strategy for Swansea
- * Newham: Access to employment for disabled people
- * Glasgow: Working for Families Fund

In each of these areas a two day 'peer review' event took place, all gathering about 300 people. This meant that there were various 'entry points' for people with experience of poverty, ensuring that they were able to contribute where they felt their input would have most impact. There were four key areas where people experiencing poverty and social exclusion were directly involved in the project: the Reference Group, the Preparation Meetings, the Peer Review meetings, and the Follow-up Meetings.

The Reference Group: This group played a central role in the project, helping determine the policies and initiatives under review, advising on the structure for the Peer Reviews, as well as participating in each of the Reviews in order to help draw out lessons. The commitment required to take part in the Reference Group should not



be underestimated. Attendance at meetings of the Group took place in London, with each of the three two day Peer Reviews generally requiring at least one night away from home.

Despite the significant time commitment, four grassroots participants took part in the Reference Group, one from each of the areas where the Peer Reviews were taking place and one participant with experience of national dialogue through his participation

in the group which launched the project. All of the grassroots participants brought a range of experience to the Reference Group – experience of being active in their local community, of living on a low income, of low paid employment, of disability, of being a paid worker in a community setting. All of this experience enriched the working of the Reference Group and made it more responsive to issues that could be raised in the Peer Reviews.

The Preparation Meetings: These meetings were designed for the service users and people with experience of poverty who had volunteered to participate in the Peer Review. The purpose of the two preparatory meetings was to build people's capacity to ensure they could participate as fully as possible in the Peer Review event. Evaluation of the project highlighted that these meetings were central to creating a balanced dialogue between local and national policy makers and people with experience of poverty.

The Peer Review: These were the central part of the process. The purpose of the Peer Review was to create a purposeful conversation about policies aimed at tackling poverty and social exclusion between people whose lives and/or work are affected by those policies. The aim of day two of the Peer Review was to understand why (or if) the policy implementation was successful and determine what lessons could be applied to social policy implementation in the future. During day two all participants were split into small groups made up of a mix of grassroots participants, local authority representatives, voluntary sector representatives and national or devolved Government representatives. Each small group had a facilitator and a note taker to ensure accurate recording of discussions.

The Concluding Meeting: This meeting was held six weeks after the Peer Review and was intended to give grassroots participants an opportunity to feedback on the

draft report from the event. This was an important opportunity to find out whether people valued the experience and if they had any suggested changes to the format. In addition, it further demonstrated the project's commitment to involving grassroots participants, and ensuring that their views and experiences were properly represented in the key findings in the report.

What worked well

Including all of the 'Peers'

The diversity of the participants involved in this project was central to its success. Particularly unusual but important to achieving the aims of the project was the participation of both local government and central and devolved administrations with people experiencing poverty. This was essential if the project was to identify the gaps between what 'ought' to be happening according to national policies targeting poverty and exclusion and what is the implementation and outcomes of those policies.

Participation must take place in all aspects of the project

Participation begins with project planning. The BTPG project engaged people from the communities we were working in from the early stages of implementation. These community representatives were people who had lived in the local area and had a deep, personal understanding of the issues facing local residents. Their unique insights and contributions were invaluable for project planning and they also provided excellent contacts within the communities themselves. Not only was this important for recruiting other local community participants but it also confirmed the project's commitment to participation to other people engaging with the project.

Preparation before engaging in participatory policy assessment

As described above the project had two pre-Peer Review meetings built into the programme. These meetings were solely aimed at community participants and were conceived as both a 'capacity-building' exercise and as an opportunity for community participants to highlight the key priorities for discussion. An important element of the BTPG project was to have a policy and implementation assessment of 'what works' and what does not work, from the perspective of the target group themselves. Part of this process was for people to realise the importance of their personal experience, and how this can be used to influence government policy.





Impact on the National Network

The project achieved its aims of engaging grassroots participants in evaluating and making policy recommendations for the future government proposals to fight poverty and social exclusion. Most of the community activists involved in the project have stayed actively engaged with the Network in the other actions it takes. Furthermore, the project chose one key recommendation for the next government National Action Plan for Inclusion, i.e. to organize peer reviews on key policies to combat poverty and social exclusion. These peer reviews have proved a good reality check instrument and brought about a wealth of knowledge of people experiencing poverty who are affected by the NAP strategy. Therefore, their involvement is crucial from the outset!

Peter Kelly, Poverty Alliance – member of the EAPN UK





And something more...

On other participation related work in the UK

In addition to Bridging the Policy Gap, the Get Heard project was set up by the Social Policy Task Force (SPTF) – the Anti-Poverty Networks in the UK – and received funding from the European Commission, the Department of Works and Pensions, Oxfam and the Church of Scotland. The anti-poverty networks who took part all donated time and resources to make the project successful.

The project published a Get Heard Toolkit and conducted over 100 seminars throughout the UK to empower people with direct experience of poverty and social exclusion to understand and get involved in government's social policy-making work www.ukcap.org/get-heard/downloads.htm#tkit. The project also served as inspiration and support to initiating participation in other countries.

Subsequent projects run throughout the UK have been Building Bridges for Social Inclusion and Bridging the Policy Gap. For more information on all this work and its relevance to participation work conducted by the four members of EAPN UK – EAPN Cymru (Wales), EAPN England, EAPN Northern Ireland and the Poverty Alliance in Scotland, please visit please visit www.povertyalliance.org

Views and experiences

“Every where I go I mention bridging the policy gap, as I think it is a brilliant way to work, getting everyone involved from government, local authority, voluntary sector organisations, clients and especially community members involved. This is really the only way to work to get the best results - for people in positions where they don't have experience of ground work, to get this first hand experience is great stuff. The community members feel that they are appreciated and their opinions are valued. I think all policies should be written with their input.” Community activist, Swansea

“It would be lovely to get this policy implemented on a wider scale - I would like to see more of these type of events, it helps grassroots feel empowered” Activist, London Borough of Newham

“We need to include more clients of services in events like this; people with grassroots experience provide policy makers with information on the impact of their policies on ordinary people, and the things that can make them work better.”

Community worker, Glasgow



European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty

A Catalyst of Participation

In 2001, holding the spring European Union Presidency, the Belgian government proposed the idea of co-organizing together with the European Commission a European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty. At that time, this was a revolutionary idea, and its results showed the need to offer such space for reflection and dialogue on a continuous basis. EAPN members attended this first meeting, but EAPN became more actively engaged in this exciting work since 2003, in partnership with the countries holding the spring presidency of the European Union and the European Commission.

The seven meetings held until now have developed a new dynamic around the aspect of participation of people experiencing poverty. Every meeting came with its challenges, innovative ideas and methodology improvement. Engaging participants in the evaluation process, the meetings have evolved every year in several ways:

1. introducing a preparatory process
2. testing and improving the working methodology
3. identifying topics of most relevance to people experiencing poverty
4. challenging language and introducing non-verbal communication elements, and most importantly
5. creating similar national processes advancing participation of people experiencing poverty.

Introducing a preparatory process

Although participatory preparation was not part of the first meetings, now a national coordinator works with every delegation to help people experiencing poverty to prepare in advance of the European meetings. National delegations meet, discuss issues related to the topics of every meeting and sometimes prepare their joint or individual input in the European meetings. This preparatory process allows for more people experiencing poverty to be involved in the European meetings – although they might not travel to meet those from other countries, they have a chance to contribute in national preparatory meetings.



In addition, for many participants, involvement in the European meetings is a great experience, and some need support in grasping all the new information and dealing with the lack of direct impact in the lives they lead back home.

Testing and improving the working methodology

Is it possible to make a successful meeting, where more than 250 people speak over 20 different languages? The last years prove that it is, but with a lot of energy put into the development of an inclusive and participative working methodology, and careful planning of workshops, plenary, and dialogue between people experiencing poverty and officials. Every year brought a new element to this methodology, based on careful evaluation of the results and the way the people experiencing poverty felt in the meetings.

Identifying topics of most relevance to people experiencing poverty

One cannot expect to have an academic approach to poverty and social exclusion when those who suffer lack of basic needs are invited to join in. Throughout the seven years, the meetings explored topics that have relevance to the daily reality of people experiencing poverty.

"I would like to highlight the relevance of this year's theme "the image of poverty". It is very difficult to fight against poverty and promote involvement by all the actors when a large part of European society continues to have a negative image of poverty and the poor. It is very difficult to get people who are experiencing poverty to believe that their condition can change, when they are constantly made to feel guilty: it is their fault that they are poor, and they are to blame for their situation."

Bruno GONCALVEZ, 2005

The seven meetings held so far had the following topics:

- * 1. Housing, health, training and incomes 2001
- * 2. Good participation practices 2003
- * 3. Participation is a two way street 2004
- * 4. Images and perceptions of poverty 2005
- * 5. How do we cope with everyday life? 2006
- * 6. Strengthening progress, drafting next steps 2007
- * 7. Four Pillars in the Fight against Poverty: social services, services of general interest, housing and minimum income 2008.

It took time for the people experiencing poverty to take ownership of the whole process around the European Meetings with the support of National Coordinators. Direct participation in the preparatory process came gradually, learning from meeting to meeting and strengthening the point that not only do people experiencing poverty need to have a space to share their own realities, but they also should be given a chance to dialogue with policy makers about the effectiveness of anti-poverty policies and possibilities to improve them.

Challenging language and introducing non-verbal communication elements

Interpretation in all the languages of the participants is not enough to facilitate participation of people experiencing poverty in the meeting. The meetings call for less technical and more everyday language use, but do not underestimate the need for empowering people experiencing poverty through the use of language. As one Dutch participant put it:

"I do feel the need to communicate in simple terms and not use all that jargon, but if I will not know all that vocabulary used by the decision-makers and politicians, I will not be capable to stand for myself. This is why I prefer to know both ways of communicating and to be able to decide myself which one to use in what situation".

In addition, important improvement came with the introduction of non-verbal communication dimensions to the European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty. It gave way to the expression of creativity and feelings of the national delegations. From tri-dimensional representation of poverty to a touring multimedia exhibition, visual communication touched decision-makers not with statistics but with daily realities through the power of images presented.

A mobile multimedia exhibition developed by participants in the 4th European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty "Do You See What I See?" travelled through several EU member states, raising awareness of the different faces and realities of poverty in Europe, and the struggles people experiencing poverty carry on a daily basis. Videos of the last meetings have also been presented in forums bringing together decision-makers and anti-poverty activists.



Creating national processes that advance participation of people experiencing poverty

The third European meeting raised important questions about participation at national level. National Network members of EAPN took the questions to their governments and have, in time, been successful in securing that similar meetings of people experiencing poverty take place at the national (and sometimes regional or local) level in some Member States of the European Union. In some countries these processes have become processes in their own right with policy makers' commitment to make a decisive impact on poverty. Other countries have not yet put such systems in place, but EAPN National Networks continue to lobby for involvement of people experiencing poverty in policy development, implementation and evaluation.

The European meetings are not intended to substitute the work of the many organisations and networks that work for the interests of people experiencing poverty and exclusion. They aim to recognize the voice of people experiencing poverty at the European level, as well as their engagement with the organizations that work to improve their lives and to further the cause for a socially just Europe. Most importantly, these meetings are a chance to check how policies to reduce poverty and exclusion make an impact on the daily lives of people experiencing poverty.

Clearly the journey of the seven meetings has been adventurous and educational. People experiencing poverty have challenged policy makers on their knowledge of the poverty reality and the impact of the policies they draft. They have challenged activists and NGOs who speak on their behalf to create the space for real participation in their own debates. Finally, they have challenged the way the European Union sees poverty in its own front and backyard at all levels. The meetings continue and each will bring more lessons of making participation of people experiencing poverty reality everywhere!



Tanya Basarab, EAPN

And something more...

On the national impact of the European Meetings of People Experiencing Poverty

The choice of topics is not only crucial to people experiencing poverty who participate in the meetings, but also to the NGOs that are active in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. And so it is the case, that after the meeting, many National Networks have challenged governments on the lack of national forums for people experiencing poverty to express their concerns, needs and opinions. This led in the past years to the development of similar meetings at national and regional levels in Austria, Luxembourg, United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain, Italy, Germany, Portugal and Czech Republic and even at a trans-border level between Belgium and France.

Governments and NGOs have learned about the added value of engaging people experiencing poverty in policy and decision-making, and have turned these meetings into regular national, and in some countries even regional processes.

Trans-border meetings are organized yearly between EAPN Networks of Belgium and France, using the European meetings' methodology. These serve to compare the situation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in the two countries and exchange on the good practices in social policy.

Detailed information about each of the European Meeting's discussions and conclusion can be found on www.eapn.eu/content/view/600/14/lang,en



A woman with dark hair and a red patterned top is seated at a conference table, speaking and gesturing with her hands. In the background, a man wearing a headset and holding a boom microphone is visible. The setting appears to be a formal meeting or conference room with a blue flag on the left and a light-colored wall in the background.

Participation
Is Possible!

Participation Is Possible!

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

At the core of EAPN's existence lies the strong commitment to foster participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. As experiences of EAPN National Networks gathered in this publication show, participation is a principle, a working method and an objective in many organizations throughout Europe. Despite that, making it reality everywhere in Europe is an important long-term objective for all the actors involved in social policy.

The case studies presented here identify elements that determine successful participation. These include conditions that must be respected with regards to the individual persons experiencing poverty who decide to get involved, to the organizations that develop such mechanisms internally and to decision makers who must give a chance to policy beneficiaries to reflect on their contributions.⁵

Participation has no fixed formula or method. It takes a variety of forms, depending on the level and circumstances in which it takes place, which makes it all the more challenging. Yet, as these case studies show, participation of people experiencing poverty is a learning process for the individuals, the organizations and the policy makers who engage and it is most important to *take the first steps*.

No matter what the circumstances, the experiences of EAPN National Networks highlight that *time, political commitment and financial resources are key to giving life to participation*.

Supporting individuals' engagement in *self-advocacy or organisations fighting poverty* helps *build their confidence, skills and gives empowering opportunities* to persons experiencing poverty and exclusion to overcome the difficult living conditions which they face, to find new motivation for their struggles, get jobs and participate in society.

Participation *transforms organizations* into expressions of citizens' needs and concerns. They are not only lobby platforms, but fora where *people meet to learn from each other and put experiences and ideas together* to solve common problems. Therefore, it is crucial for anti-poverty organisations to give the space and floor to the people experiencing poverty and exclusion, which brings a *more conscious and determined attitude* in the fight against poverty and exclusion. By doing this, organisations gain *legitimacy and credibility in front of their constituencies and partners*.

5. Barriers and conditions to participation have been subject of a chapter in the EAPN publication EU We Want and the Report of the 3rd European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty. Both of these can be found on the EAPN website: www.eapn.eu

Participation of people experiencing poverty in policy making enriches policies and builds ownership among beneficiaries. It is clear that policy made without active input from those to whom it is addressed will remain good in theory but not in practice. Engaging people experiencing poverty from the drafting stages helps root policies in reality and improves governance at all levels. Participative policy making will ensure that European policies answer the needs of people experiencing poverty in their communities and neighbourhoods. Participation of people experiencing poverty in policy monitoring and evaluation will ensure that policies continue to be relevant to the purpose they serve. It should be recognized that effective policies to address poverty are good for the whole of society. Social policies alone cannot effectively address poverty and thus the participation of people experiencing poverty should be fostered across all relevant policies.

While the experiences gathered here support these benefits, they also share the struggles and frustrations that come along with making participation reality. It is crucial to address the impact of participation on the lives of the individuals who get involved. People experiencing poverty often struggle through their daily realities, being so used to coping with obstacles and negative circumstances, that they can find it difficult to manage positive experiences. Likewise, when decision-makers are not ready to listen and enter into real dialogue, but rather attend meetings in order to tick the right boxes, participation can turn into a burden for people experiencing poverty.

The examples in this book show that there are solutions to problems and that - contrary to prejudice – people experiencing poverty want to be involved, and that ultimately the benefits of participation on all levels outweigh the costs. Therefore the focus should not be on blaming the ‘poor’ for their own poverty, but rather on *understanding the real causes and tackling them together.*

In the coming years, EAPN will increase its efforts to gather participative practices and policies and will continue advocating for full integration and participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in European societies. It is our firm belief that *participation HELPS people move out of poverty and CHALLENGES systems that create it*, and we will continue to mobilize the necessary resources and public support to make a Europe free of poverty a reality.

Tanya Basarab, EAPN

Drawing on all our experiences, for us in EAPN, participation means:

1. Respect for individuals and overcoming stereotypes
2. Building confidence and breaking prejudice
3. Developing pathways out of poverty
4. Sharing and solidarity
5. Active citizenship
6. Inclusive, diverse and strong organizations
7. Transformation, legitimacy and ownership
8. Time and financial resources
9. Challenging systems
10. Enriched policies with a positive impact
11. Political commitment to poverty eradication
12. Understanding the real causes of poverty

Participation Is Possible!



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For more information see:

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/progress/index_en.html

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This publication will highlight the diversity of approaches among members of EAPN to participation of people experiencing poverty and exclusion in community work, in our own organisations and in policy and decision-making. 20 years of EAPN members' experiences have been largely passed and multiplied via projects, structures and exchanges. This publication seeks to make these experiences of building participation more visible.

In describing the case studies, each National Network tried to reflect on the following questions:

What is our definition or understanding of participation? What was the context in which the experience emerged? What have been the achievements? What were the challenges and what impact has it had on the National Network?

Since 1990, the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN) has been an independent network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and groups involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the Member States of the European Union. Together the membership of EAPN aims to put the fight against poverty high on the agenda of the EU and to ensure cooperation at EU level aimed at the eradication of poverty and social exclusion.

For more information: www.eapn.eu

