

Letizia's intervention on participation changing the network
Participation Seminar 7-8 May 2010

TO verify the impact of a new action in our lives, in our jobs, in anything we do we must have a clear picture of where we were and what we were before the action started and how we managed to include it in our lives, jobs etcetera. This is true for every new challenge we decide to pick up and is even more true for a network such as ours.

The Italian network is very old – we were in Athens when the network was started, 20 year ago – and has gone through many changes and many ordeals, with many ups and downs: moments of strength, moments of weakness, moments for very high visibility, moments where we were forced by the political situation or our internal being to play it low. Low and difficult times always matched periods of financial hardship, although we always managed to be present and to be an active voice in the Italian panorama.

We know that each network within EAPN has its own peculiarities and is organized in a different way: some are grass-root organizations working in direct contact with the poor, some are umbrella organizations encompassing big organizations and so forth.

Our choice, from the beginning, was twofold: on the one hand to become a “second level” organization, networking the many associations, organizations, social cooperatives, voluntary associations – in short the third sector - and the local authorities in order to create partnerships able to contribute to the fight against poverty and social exclusion. On the other hand we wanted to become experts in European policies, enhancing the discussion on Europe and its policies in Italy, a country that was a founding member of the European Community back in 1956 but whose “European feelings” slackened in the last years for reasons we do not need to go into right now.

So, we are engaged in information work, training, networking, the national Action Plans and the various regional working groups that are supposed to elaborate the regional social plans, etc.

The European Meetings of People experiencing poverty represented therefore a real challenge for us and, as a start, we had to count on our member organizations to help us out. Not an easy task seen that the idea of participation was then very new in our country. As a matter of fact, Italy has always counted on its political parties for ensuring people's participation, a participation that is gone together with the old parties and has not been fostered by the new ones. And organizations even neo tend to work for the poor or the needy and no with them. So, we started uphill, definitely. But we realized how important the challenge was and little by little we started

working, with the educators and the community workers, to begin with, convincing them to start small working groups, with our support, of “their” people.

In 2005 we felt the time had come for engaging in a bigger movement and together with other organizations (CILAP’s members and not, but near us) we organized a first National Meeting of People experiencing Poverty, in Naples, a symbolic place for Italian poverty, joblessness, illegal behaviours, corruption, mafia. In short a symbolic place for all that is wrong in the South of my country, but not only. More than 100 people attended, an unexpected success!

From that moment everything became somehow easier, if not with the institutions, certainly with the associations and the third sector. A permanent working group on “poverty and participation” was established in EAPN ITALY, we are able to organize many meetings of people in poverty throughout the country, from Trieste to Avellino and down to Bari. The meetings are organized according to a shared agenda and a very specific method that helps people who are not used to speak in public to express themselves. We never had many resources mostly depending on local institutions (which have very little money or interest) , but we managed. Last year the Ministry of Social Affairs finally decided to support us in this work. We received a small amount of money and the process went even further, engaging many associations, many people in poverty, many local institutions.

The other organizations, the ones we are in contact with but for many reasons cannot (or do not want) become our members, such as the councils for voluntary services, CARITAS, etc. recognize today our work and our engagement and we have become “the experts in participation of people in poverty” .

Our successes: we are the “experts” as I said before, which means that we are constantly asked to talk and train. But it is not me – or only me plus some other member – that speaks and trains. The people experiencing poverty themselves have become experts. Mirko, who said that he would never have been able to become so talkative and so clear without the meetings in Bruxelles and throughout the country. Rosa who was given the chance, as she said “to become stronger”. Tonino, who says, “I now understand better where I stand and what I can do”.

The Meetings in Bruxelles have become one of the many dates in our agenda and although extremely important is not all that there is to it. The chance to talk, to be heard, to express oneself is a process that goes on throughout the year and, at the end of the day, the “delegates” to the European meetings are representatives of a much wider group of people.

Wherever we decide to organize a meeting, more and more people attend: the last one, in Trieste, had 150 participants, almost a conference!

Our weaknesses: participation of people experiencing poverty is still at the beginning stages in Italy and there is a lot of road to be made still.

All this had to influence the network. People experiencing poverty had to be involved in the network daily work if we wanted to be consistent with what we said, i.e. “Help the poor to walk ahead, do not go ahead using the poor” (Don Milani). It is not easy, especially because without a minimum income scheme or structured support by the state, the Italian poor are mainly left alone to fend for him/herself. But we managed and one person in poverty is represented in our executive committee. We opened up to persons experiencing poverty the participation to EAPN annual assembly. The working group on “poverty and participation” is coordinated by a member of EAPN Italy’s staff but nothing is done without a shared consensus of the whole group (about 15 steady members and many rotating ones).

But we also changed our vision of the network. Or, better, we enlarged our vision. We are still a network connecting associations, fostering the knowledge and the debate on European policies, working with Universities, research centres, local authorities. But we engaged ourselves on the ground, starting a difficult battle in support of the Roma Communities in Rome for a better standard of living, for decent housing, jobs, training, education. We are not doing this alone, of course, but with other organizations that have a long experience in fighting for the human rights of the Roma communities. We are supporting today the fight against stereotyping of the Roma people through cultural projects and initiatives.

Thanks to these participation, to the working group, to the many people that little by little started and continue to support us, today we are a stronger network, better recognized, more “in tune” with the people experiencing poverty. We are also more overworked and exhausted but this is something we feel we share with most of EAPN.