

The Crisis of Democracy Anti-poverty organisations respond

People = Power

Interview with Izabella Marton
on community organising
with Vocal NY

Sweden: **people**
become politicians

Italy: civil society joins
forces to **rescue** the
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The resilience of anti-poverty NGOs

BY FINTAN FARRELL

This issue of the EAPN Magazine looks at how anti-poverty NGOs are responding to the challenge posed by a political context dominated by 'austerity measures' that impact heavily on people 'living in or at risk of poverty' and undermine agreed strategies to fight poverty. The civil dialogue supposed to support the implementation of these strategies, with active involvement of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and of the NGOs representing them is also jeopardised. This magazine particularly looks at how anti-poverty NGOs are adjusting in order to fulfill their advocacy role in the current context.

Contributors highlight that, depending on their national context, their history and the quality of the dialogue they have built with public authorities, NGOs have developed differently. In the current political setting, the contributors recognize the need to go beyond their traditional social policy roles and to engage as NGOs in influencing the broader questions of democracy and economic and political

priorities, including the need to build public awareness and debate on these questions. Many articles also highlight the need for stronger and broader alliances to have their voice heard and provide examples of how these alliances are emerging.

EAPN members want meaningful structured civil dialogue and believe that, with real political commitment, this can lead to creative answers and to progress in the fight against poverty. In the absence of dialogue that would result in a real improvement of people's lives, as is underlined in the article from Hungary, NGOs might consider using their limited resources in finding and empowering motivated people, *"instead of trying to motivate those who do not care"*.

What emerges from the contributions to this magazine is that we are in real crisis for our democracies. However, what also emerges is the resilience of anti-poverty NGOs in the face of the enormous challenges and their determination to adapt, in order to continue to play a role in shaping a future that can ensure a better life for all.

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Editor: Fintan Farrell

Responsible for publication: Nellie Epinat

Contributors: Tanya Basarab, Leticia Gomez and Rebecca Lee

Square de Meeûs 18, 1050 Brussels

Tel: +32 2 226 58 50, Fax: +32 2 226 58 69

Email: team@eapn.eu, Website: www.eapn.eu



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Fighting poverty today

Anti-poverty NGOs redefine advocacy, build alliances and call for meaningful civil dialogue

TANYA BASARAB, EAPN DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

The European Union has, over time, increased its commitment to engage civil society organisations in shaping a positive Europe for all. However, in the last years, civil dialogue mechanisms have been weakened both at EU and national levels. Numerous articles in this issue of the magazine testify to this reality and to the effort of anti-poverty NGOs to reshape their work to ensure that they continue to play an effective advocacy role. It provides an input to help us see the larger picture emerging from the individual efforts of many different NGOs working in different national realities and at European level.

The Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion (Social OMC) under the Lisbon Strategy (2000–2010) provided a multilevel governance model that allowed for dynamic policy engagement of different stakeholders, including NGOs and people experiencing poverty. This resulted in building a common understanding and ownership of the causes, consequences and solutions to poverty. It also developed consensus on key priority areas to be addressed, within multi-dimensional integrated strategies to fight poverty, such as Active Inclusion, child poverty and child well-being, homelessness, inclusion of Roma and migrants. While the results were limited, many of the NGOs involved could see a return from their investment in this form of civil dialogue.

The Europe 2020 Strategy promotes “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” and includes a poverty reduction target among its key targets. This Strategy is implemented based on a partnership principle, common guidelines and seven EU flagship initiatives and delivered through Structural Funds as well as national financing. While this represents a step forward in terms of integrating social concerns into the overarching EU strategy, in the first round of developing the National Reform Programmes only two EAPN National Networks spoke of having any meaningful engagement¹. The flagship initiative ‘European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion’ (EPAP) has provided limited engagement at EU level and no opportunities at national level. EAPN with others will continue to insist that the European Institutions respect their commitment on active stakeholder engagement. So far, the Europe 2020 strategy has signalled a loss in civil dialogue.

In reality the Europe 2020 strategy is overtaken by the ‘austerity measures’ at Member State level driven by decision’s at the EU level in response to the crisis. These austerity measures are driving more people into poverty and driving the people who were already in poverty into deeper poverty. The reality of the measures

taken, without any real efforts to counteract the growing levels of inequality, increases the difficulties for NGOs to engage in civil dialogue, without becoming alienated from their membership base unless this engagement results in a real shift in priorities. More directly the austerity measures are impacting on Anti-Poverty NGOs with cuts in funding particularly for advocacy and community building NGOs, forcing people out of jobs and forcing others to shut down.

As a more general trend, even prior to the crisis, financial support for mobilizing, training and empowering people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to engage with policies that affect their lives has been on the decrease in many countries and was never available in others. Funding is conditional to the delivery of direct services and it can be difficult to combine service and advocacy roles.

A way forward for a more democratic and poverty-free Europe

What emerges from the reflections in this issue of the Magazine on the role to be played by anti-poverty NGOs is the need, 1) to challenge the current dominant economic policies, 2) to generate stronger alliances and 3) to insist on meaningful civil dialogue.

Challenging the current dominant economic policies

EAPN knows poverty cannot be fought only with social policies. This has led EAPN to call for policies and actions that tackle inequalities and to have a clear focus on what is happening to wealth in our societies. The crisis has reinforced the need for social NGOs to go beyond their comfort zone and to challenging the dominant economic policies that create more poverty and inequality. EAPN’s Conference² in September of last year was an illustration of this approach. Key messages emerging from the Conference included: the call for fairer taxation and tax justice, the need for effective financial regulation, the need for Eurobonds and the need to go beyond GDP to have an effective measure of real progress.

However, fighting poverty also demands good social policies. EAPN rejects the trend in the last decade to portray social protection as a burden rather than an investment. We see this trend as part of a systematic attack on the welfare state. Part of this attack has been to reduce poverty to individual responsibility and blame. People living in or at risk of poverty have been increasingly stigmatized and responsibility is often seen as lying with the individual rather than a structural problem. EAPN calls for cooperation at EU level to build and protect social standards. The adoption of a directive on ‘Adequate Minimum Income Schemes’ would be an important step in this regard.

Generating stronger alliances

In the general context of austerity and its resulting impact on poverty and democracy, people are mobilizing and taking actions for more equal and democratic societies. Anti-poverty NGOs are active in the current reality, redefining their advocacy role and many of the articles in this magazine speak of the rebirth of a civil society with a broader and more diverse base, demanding a voice and the re-launch of meaningful civil dialogue. EAPN is actively participating in several alliances with different types of actors challenging the closing doors and proposing more social and sustainable ways out of the crisis. It has been doing so, mobilising activists with direct experience of poverty and social exclusion in this process and reaching out to as many people living in poverty and social exclusion.³

The articles also outline new initiatives in several countries where new types of alliances and campaigns are initiated to defend social rights. New forms of mobilization of people all over the world speak of the immense creativity and power that lies with people when they organise for the defence of the public good.

Insisting on a meaningful civil dialogue

Anti-poverty organisations are open and ready to participate in meaningful civil dialogue that results in a real improvement in people’s lives and empowers people experiencing poverty. However, in the current context, decision-makers have been hiding behind bureaucratic arguments that dialogue slows down the much needed reform. EAPN argues that getting the right reforms requires having all the actors engaged and EAPN believes that the necessary dialogue could be built around structured engagement in the National Reform Programmes and the National Social Reports, building on the experience of the Social OMC. Without such a dialogue, the Institutional commitments on the importance of civil dialogue ring hollow and only contribute to a growing feeling of loss of democratic control.

Adapting to the realities and despite the difficulties, anti-poverty NGOs will embrace their mission and continue to mobilize activists, advocating for policies and actions that will support the move towards a more progressive society built on a new social and sustainable development model.

1) EAPN (2011) Delivering Inclusive Growth – EAPN assessment of the 2011 NRPs.

2) EAPN (2012) Re-engaging Hope and Expectations: Getting out the Crisis Together – Alternative approaches for an inclusive recovery.

3) EAPN (2012) Breaking Barriers – Driving Change, case studies of building participation of people experiencing poverty.

Germany: civil society must unite to influence policies

BY CAROLA SCHMIDT, EAPN GERMANY



While governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) surely do talk to one another, NGOs often come away disappointed or frustrated. NGOs, unions and other civil-society stakeholders now need to come together in a common front if they are to get their voice heard.

The German Anti-Poverty Network is made up of charities, mutual self-help and personal support groups and the German Trade Union Confederation working in concert nationwide against poverty and social exclusion. Since being founded in 1991, its agenda has been to get people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to participate in the political processes that affect them. So it is keeping very close watch to see that the civil-society participation goals of the EU's Europe 2020 Strategy are properly delivered in national policies.

The long-awaited implementation in Germany of the partnership approach as defined by the Commission still falls far short of what NGOs want in many respects. Civil society generally gets to participate only after the policy negotiations are done and dusted and the objectives set as recently happened again in 2011 when drawing up the *National Reform Agenda*.

A dialogue going nowhere...

In most cases, NGOs participate through advisory boards. When the official four-year National Report on poverty and wealth¹ was being drawn up last year, an advisory board of NGO representatives and scientists was convened to discuss the approach and data collection. Oral comments were taken in a two-hour meeting, and written contributions were also allowed. But, it was made clear that any remarks and changes had to be sent in within a fortnight and that the concept would essentially be that of the proposed version. So it is reasonable

to consider that the participation allowed to NGOs was basically a tick-box exercise that did not inform the contents of the report.

A similar procedure was in evidence for the revision of the *National Reform Programme* (NRP) in November 2011. The Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs emphasised that the NRP was a government document showcasing the best labour market inclusion practices, and said there would be limited written participation by NGOs. But NGOs' criticisms of the choice of poverty measurement indicators and unambitious objectives went unheeded in government circles.

...or still too lacking in balance

Such practices are giving rise to deep dissatisfaction and especially huge frustration with politics both among people affected by poverty and representatives of civil-society organisations.

However, German policy-watching is not a job that can be generalized because it differs widely by region. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany provides for the 16 German regions to participate in the federal legislative process and in European affairs, which gives state governments² a degree of clout in political negotiations and makes them a partner not to be overlooked by civil society.

So there is a *structured dialogue* between civil-society organisations and state governments which although by and large constructive still lacks balance. But it is a process that cannot

work properly without partnership, and especially the equal standing (between people living in poverty and civil-society stakeholders on the one hand, and the political establishment on the other) that is intrinsic to it. EAPN Germany is therefore committed to making the partnership principle a condition for dialogue. But like most civil-society stakeholders, EAPN Germany believes in the need to keep up the pressure on governments at national and European level and support national policy.

Build public awareness, starting with the media

To do that, the network puts a lot of work into public relations and running awareness campaigns to get a public focus on the desperate situation of people experiencing poverty in Germany and respectful, objective and properly informed media reporting.

This was a specific aim of the "I want out of poverty" operation run in 2010 as part of the themed week for the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion³.

There is formal NGO participation in political processes, but that pure formality is precisely where the problem lies. NGOs must strive to work more closely with trade unions, scientists and other civil-society stakeholders in their political lobbying to bring a unified effort to bear on getting the focus on essential alternative and preventive measures, and raising public awareness. Forging alliances is the way for organisations working against poverty and social exclusion to get their voice heard.



Iceland: anti-poverty organisations – Voices on the rise

BY THORBERA FJÖLNISSDÓTTIR, EAPN ICELAND

EAPN Iceland was born in the middle of the crisis, in the turmoil of mobilisations and reflection upon the society people want to live in. Anti-poverty NGOs' role and recognition have considerably grown, in the eyes of the general public, but also of the media and public authorities. The dialogue with the latter has evolved, though challenges still remain. Different types of organisations, including those delivering services and those carrying out advocacy work, having different roles and natures, share their perspectives on doing advocacy in Iceland.

The crisis, which broke out in 2008, has really shaken up the Icelandic society, making people rethink what kind of values they want to uphold together, what kind of country they want to leave for the future generations and what changes could avoid that future economic downturns impact so severely on people.

People gathered massively in public places and protested, for a long time and in growing numbers in front of the Altingi (National Parliament) and the National Bank against unfair austerity measures imposed on the people primarily by external creditors. The "Pots and Pans" revolution gave way to a change of government, a special investigation commission and a national mobilisation and consultation processes on rewriting the Icelandic Constitution. During this period, the role of anti-poverty NGOs has grown considerably. People from all walks of life expressed their will to live and share solidarity, and did so not only by going into the streets but also by turning to and mobilising around NGOs.

EAPN Iceland was created during this period. The EAPN Network in Iceland consists of nine NGOs, service-delivery organisations such as the Icelandic Church Aid (ICA), as well as advocacy organisations, such as the Organisation of Disabled in Iceland (ODI).

The Icelandic Church Aid: a service-delivery organisation's perspective

The Icelandic Church Aid (ICA) initiates and coordinates relief work and provides social service support, both domestically and abroad. The ICA has built up a database around its work to be able to give first-hand reliable information on the groups and individuals asking for and getting support, and getting referred to public services by the ICA, and to measure changes over time. This data has proven to be a useful tool in obtaining public funding, backing up the arguments and demands with real data.

The ICA has regular meetings and active dialogue with the Reykjavik Council's Welfare Department. The government's attitude towards the ICA changed after the crisis; it is no longer regarded solely as a service-providing organization, but rather as an important party in helping individuals, whom the system has failed to support. Being part of EAPN has helped ICA develop a more rights-based and empowerment approach to their work.

The Organisation of the Disabled in Iceland: a self-advocacy organisation's perspective

The Organisation of the Disabled in Iceland (ODI) devotes itself to safeguarding the interests of the disabled, working towards social justice and providing consultation and support for the 33 member associations.



OUR CHILDREN INHERIT LAND

Many of the disabled in Iceland, who have no income other than the disability pension, struggle with poverty, especially families with children, single parents and people living on their own.

Since the crisis, ODI, whose motto is "Nothing about us without us", has been invited to comment on increasing numbers of legislative proposals related to the interests of the disabled. While ODI's comments are taken seriously, the Organisation feels that the government sometimes deliberately makes proposals that ODI finds too difficult to accept, thus ending with compromise solutions rather than adequate solutions. There is some progress in terms of dialogue: ODI's representatives being sometimes invited to the Ministry of Welfare to discuss its comments.

However, ODI feels that the people whose interests it represents have lost trust in the government because promises have been betrayed, and some of the government's proposals aimed at improving the situation of the disabled have not yet delivered. This drive for a compromise approach also forces ODI to put its resources into reacting to different types of initiatives rather than being proactive.

As part of raising awareness about the situation of the disabled, their legal rights and reducing prejudice and stigma, ODI regularly publishes full-page advertisements in newspapers. For this same purpose, ODI has travelled around the country, holding meetings and introducing people to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. ODI has also made efforts to improve its website as a better communication tool and interface with the persons it represents. On the collaboration side, ODI is now cooperating more actively with institutions such as the Human Rights Office and with other member NGOs of EAPN Iceland and acknowledges that this cooperation strengthens the fight for a better life. ODI is convinced that it can increase its advocacy power. It will soon begin to publish an electronic magazine targeting specific groups, including members of Parliament.

The lessons learnt, for both organisations

Since the crisis, both the ICA and the ODI have increasingly been asked to participate in committees in the public sector. They are already both members of the Ministry of Welfare's *Welfare Watch*, established by authorities in March 2009 to monitor the effects of economic crisis on households, to conduct independent analysis and propose measures to support those most affected by the crisis. The Welfare Watch consists of representatives from NGOs, the labour market, ministries, government agencies and communities.

Both organisations have, for years, worked to highlight information about poverty in Iceland in the media. Since the crisis, the media have shown a greater interest in hearing ICA's opinion on various poverty-related issues and on the consequences of living in poverty. ODI has also sensed this but it is hard to get people to come forward and speak to the media, as they feel ashamed of their own situation.

Since the crisis, the value of anti-poverty NGOs is more recognised in Iceland and this has helped strengthen dialogue with public authorities, the media and through it, with society at large. EAPN Iceland is aware that this dialogue is not perfect however and it needs continuous effort to help get a better life for all.

Advocacy work in Serbia:

modest impact, lack of tradition and resources, but striving

BY MARIJA BABOVIC, EAPN SERBIA

Anti-poverty civil-society organisations in Serbia have grown rapidly in the past 20 years. Civil-society organisations, as autonomous interest groups, did not exist in communist times. During the harsh period of the 90s, marked by the post-socialist transformation from authoritarian regime, wars, economic sanctions and isolation from the international community, civil-society organisations (CSOs) started to emerge as citizens' associations, promoting democratic institutions, human rights and peace-building. In 2000, these organisations contributed to the fall of Milosevic's regime and to the start of a new era of intensive reforms and transformation, within the context of massive and severe poverty and social exclusion. Economic growth and the fight against poverty were at the heart of the first reforms that Serbia undertook.

It is also in 2000 that CSOs' advocacy work in the field of anti poverty and social inclusion developed itself significantly. At the beginning of the decade, a structured dialogue emerged between authorities and CSOs, for the development and adoption of the first Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS). This process unfolded within the framework of the World Bank's anti-poverty methodology and policies, through a broad consultative process, and with the significant participation of CSOs on an advisory board. During the development and the implementation of the PRS, CSOs developed significant advocacy skills to defend the most vulnerable groups, and this participation was in fact made possible by the government itself, which had formally set up Civil Society Focal Points.¹

In 2008, poverty reduction policies changed significantly, due to changes in both the social and institutional contexts. The impact of the global economic crisis brought back old social issues and introduced new ones. At the same time, as Serbia made steps towards its accession to the EU, the framework for poverty reduction policies, based on the World Bank's methodology for monitoring poverty and the PRS as the key strategic policy document, shifted to a new model, the EU social inclusion framework.

Up to this point, civil society dealing with anti poverty and social inclusion issues has represented mainly the interests of several marginalized groups: refugees and internally displaced persons, Roma, the elderly, persons with disabilities, youth and children with problems, etc.

Although the advocacy CSOs lobbying for new laws or for amendments in law proposals have exerted a significant impact², key influence remains in the hand of interna-

tional agencies, government and experts.

Budget monitoring is the second advocacy area of anti-poverty CSOs. This is, however, a new topic for CSOs, which only a minority have the capacity to lobby on, both at national and local levels. Most advocacy activities are occasional, project driven, directed towards local or central government, politicians and/or society at large, depending on the issue, measure and/or specific target group represented. The overall impact of civil society is rather modest, characterized by fragmented and discontinuous actions.



Three preconditions are needed for a more structured dialogue between the government and civil society in the fields of poverty and social exclusion: a better coordinated government, a better organised civil society and established channels for dialogue in a more systematic way (on a regular basis and around key anti-poverty policies and measures).

All three preconditions are only partly developed now. The Serbian government is made of heterogeneous political interests, in a context traditionally marked by high political instability and strong opposition from nationalist-populist political views. Cooperation between ministries is underdeveloped, undermining cross-cutting policies, such as policies to combat poverty. The most beneficial circumstance is the existence of the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction team within the Prime Minister's office which has continuously cooperated with CSOs.

As to weaknesses of CSOs, apart from lacking a strategic approach, with work being fragmented and project driven, **a majority of CSOs lack resources and capacities, due to the uncertainty and irregularity of financing.** Associations of people experiencing poverty

are particularly weak and they lack the capacity to efficiently convey voices of poor people. The fragmented and modest advocacy role of most CSOs is also due to the absence of a long tradition of autonomous CSOs and to their dependence on governmental bodies and international agencies (such as the World Bank, DFID, UN agencies and other inter-governmental and non-governmental international organisations).

The establishment of the Serbian anti-poverty network one year ago has served as a platform for CSOs that can enable them to overcome (at least partly) these weaknesses. The network has provided opportunities for CSOs to find resources, expand their focus of advocacy action and engage in a dialogue with the Government in a more regular and systematic way. However, the lack of funding and of resources still makes it hard for members to overcome their weaknesses.

Finally, there are significant weaknesses in dialogue between CSOs and the government marking the context of advocacy. The role of anti-poverty CSOs in policy making is not sufficiently coordinated, systematic and efficient. Despite well-developed cooperation with SIPRU, there is no structured dialogue with the government and the Parliament on social policy. Civil-society organisations have always limited their actions to the social policy sphere. They have never engaged in other policy areas such as employment and economic policies. This remains one of the key limitations to effective advocacy on poverty in Serbia.

It is hard to estimate the prospects for future advocacy work. The run up to the elections has started, along with already strong political fights. The deterioration of social conditions marked by the rise in unemployment and poverty rates is pushing for stronger action of CSOs. On the other hand, the danger of seeing their action misused in the forthcoming elections by populist/nationalist parties is probably preventing many anti-poverty CSOs from advocating more strongly. The political scene after the elections will set a new stage for anti-poverty action which is hard to anticipate.

- 1\ Implementation of the poverty-reduction strategy (PRS) was supported by the creation of the Deputy Prime Ministers' PRS Implementation Focal Point in 2004. From the start, this unit was open to cooperation with Civil Society and, in 2008, the Civil Society Focal Points (CSFP) were created for the implementation of the PRS Civil Society. In 2008, this cooperation took a new form when seven organisations of different profiles became focal points for communication between Civil Society and the Government, with the aim of integrating and monitoring PRS measures into the regular system of planning, budgeting and implementation by the government. Each of these organisations represented broader networks of organisations of the same profile (women's organisations, associations of persons with disabilities, elderly, Roma, etc.).
- 2\ e.g. Law on social protection, law on gender equality, anti-discrimination law, law on cooperatives, etc.

Italy: civil society joins forces to rescue the Welfare State

BY NICOLETTA TEODOSI, EAPN ITALY

The crisis has hit every home in Italy, particularly as the response to the crisis, based on drastic cuts in social expenditure, has thrown many more people into poverty. In parallel, the dialogue with public authorities at all levels has stopped. Against this background, a large group of civil-society organisations, including social cooperatives, have joined forces with the biggest Italian trade union (CGIL) to demand re-opening the dialogue with public authorities and rescue the fundamentals of an inclusive and cohesive society.

In Italy, as in most Member States, the welfare state is the main victim of the crisis, with non-profit and advocacy organisations paying a very high toll in terms of reductions in staff and services. The highest toll, however, is paid by the poor and excluded, the number of whom has been rising sharply. Although we do not have official data yet, everyone can see poverty and social exclusion just walking in the streets of our cities or from directly experiencing it. Service-providing NGOs also report an enormous growth in the cues for food, clothes, emergency support.

The crisis has touched everyone, employed and unemployed, disabled, families... Social expenditure has dwindled sharply: since 2010, the national fund for social policies has gone from €929,3 million down to €273,9 million; the fund for families has gone from €185,3 million down to €51,5 million and the fund for non-autonomous people, which was €400 million has been scrapped.

In recent years, the dialogue between Institutions and advocacy networks such as EAPN Italy and NGOs representing the Roma community, homeless people, people experiencing poverty, etc, has been broken off.

For all these reasons, **a wide group of social cooperatives, voluntary and civil-society associations and networks joined forces with the trade union CGIL.** We organised in Rome, on 1-2 March, an important national conference on the future of the welfare state in Italy and on the role we can and should play in getting out of the current crisis.

The organising committee of this conference has become an open laboratory pushing for joint action and the conference, which was to be the end result became the start of a long-term engagement towards new alliances, to which EAPN Italy is committed.

Many things have happened in Italy in recent months. The financial and economic crises have driven many people and families into a state of

uncertainty and into risk of social exclusion and long-term poverty, thereby undermining the foundations on which our country and Europe were built: solidarity, equality, rights.

Some observers claim that the European Social Model is dead. We disagree! The European Social Model is still a work in progress, still based on national models. Many times we discussed the "Europe we want", many times we said that we would like to live in a Europe where, for example, salaries and working conditions are adequate throughout all Member States. We would also like, as citizens, to be given more space for participating in the decision-making process. With political commitment from our public institutions and policy-makers, this would not be hard to achieve.

What is happening right now in Europe, and in Italy, shows the fragility of the European system, which is far from dead. Many leading scholars – from Rifkin to Baumann – see a "possible utopia" drawing its strength from its diversities and, we add, from the access to citizenship rights that all Europeans are entitled to.

Years will have to go by before we may say that the crisis is over. Many medicines will be administered to the European citizens and not all of them will be the right ones for recovery. Meanwhile, millions of people already live in poverty, uncertain of what the future will bring for them.

The many European Charters, revised treaties, national rules and strategies against poverty and social exclusion have not delivered on their promises. Conditions for the groups targeted by these tools and strategies have worsened. The gap between who is in and who is out has widened. Inequalities between those who have opportunities and those who don't, between those born in the right or wrong family, in the right or wrong country, have risen

sharply. And our Government is telling these people to wait.

We must change our ways of thinking: social policies are not an expense with no return. They are an investment in the future of our country, guaranteeing quality jobs, access to quality and affordable social and health services, access to education and training and to universal public services – the best tool against poverty and social exclusion. In short, they are the basis for a healthier and cohesive society.

The European Commission is now calling on Italy, once again, to use its Structural Funds in the right way. The European Social Fund should be made more accessible to NGOs and local authorities and should finance actions other than just training, such as the much needed services for social inclusion. Investments in social infrastructure should also be guaranteed through the correct use of the European Fund for Regional Development (ERDF). Extra resources must be found. The introduction of a financial transactions tax which could be spent on social policies, for example, would guarantee a high level of revenue against a small sum to be paid by those who move huge sums of money on the international financial markets.

The conference was a first opportunity for Italian NGOs and civil-society organisations to openly express the difficult conditions they work in and the many hardships people in poverty have to face. It was also a strong call on our institutions at every level to finally open up a dialogue that has been denied for too long and which is much needed if the aim is a renewed welfare system that includes everyone living in Italy.

Contact: CILAP EAPN Italia – info@cilap.eu – www.cilap.eu



EAPN Sweden: people become politicians

Supporting user delegations to engage in policy-making processes

BY SONJA WALLBOM, EAPN SWEDEN

Swedish society has a long tradition of people setting up groups and organisations, which dates back at least 150 years. "Organisations of users" emerged more than 50 years ago around specific issues such as alcohol and drug addiction, mental health, age or disability. Most of them have focused on the needs of their own public, analysing their specific reality but without looking at the overarching structural issues defining this social reality, and they have not had the chance (often due to a lack of resources) to take coordinated lobbying actions with other organisations. EAPN Sweden was set up by these and other grassroots organisations, in which people suffering poverty or social exclusion are the main decision-makers and actors.

EAPN Sweden has been very active for a long time in calling for an open dialogue between people living in poverty and social exclusion and public decision-makers, trying to link national and EU policies impacting on poverty, without any financial support for this work. The Swedish Government trained its public administration at different levels to consult user delegations¹, but has not put resources in supporting the preparation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, nor in building a genuine dialogue with them.

In 2010 however, EAPN Sweden began a project together with ABF – the Swedish Adult Liberal Education Organisation empowering people with direct experience of poverty to engage in policy making. The project, using adult education methods, focused on identifying and training people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to create and guide local groups of peers on a dialogue around the Social Open Method of Coordination (Social OMC) throughout Sweden. This dialogue took place in 10 Regional Dialogue Conferences, whose messages were brought into a National Dialogue Conference, held around four topics: Exclusion, Housing Policy, Social Rights and Minimum Income/Social Security Systems. Apart from the positive impact the Dialogue Meetings had on the people involved in the project, it even improved the communication between the two

government levels themselves on the policies discussed.

This work with grassroots groups has helped create and strengthen the basis of the regional networks of EAPN Sweden as well as the participation of user delegations in different government consultation processes.

The Swedish Government had committed to live up to the expectations of the Social OMC and act on them by supporting user involvement. EAPN Sweden's experience within the European network and its knowledge of the Social OMC and of the European agenda helped in its relationship with the Government and also in empowering the users. The Government started to train municipality and regional administration officials and politicians to meet and involve the users in a better way and EAPN Sweden was responsible for organising and empowering users to engage in the dialogue with the different levels of public authorities.

The personal and human goal of this empowerment process is a better integration and participation in society, which brings more insight into the problems of others and stronger involvement in the user organisation, helping people evolve from dealing strictly with personal concerns to engaging in social development and representing others.

People from the grassroots membership of ABF and EAPN Sweden were trained on social policy, on soft skills such as leading groups and meetings and public speaking as well as on understanding the policy-making cycle, and being the process drivers changing the policies in their own communities. Representing a group instead of only themselves, people were helped to "turn into politicians" and to reach out to more people with direct experience of poverty and social exclusion and lead them through this education and dialogue process.

For a person experiencing poverty and social exclusion to become an actor of change, it is important to go through a democratic study and debate process, transforming the personal shame into a new form of energy - an opportunity to act on behalf of others.

Understanding the difference between being poor and without money and having an idea of minimum income and social security policies is the essence of this project.

As to the impact of this project on the organisation itself, EAPN Sweden now has two new regional networks, many new activists and a better cooperation with policy makers on the EU policy making processes in our communities.

The political impact

Swedish politicians are not different from others - they listen, they nod their heads and not very much happens. But I am convinced that

in the long run things are going to change. There are things, small but important, that have changed locally or at regional level as a result of these dialogues. And as they are going to continue, I hope and I think that we can find ways to increase the significance of the dialogue. If the same questions are asked three years in a row and no answer is given, it gets embarrassing and I think these meetings will maintain the pressure for change.

There has been significant media coverage of the dialogue meetings, which is another public lever on the decision makers.

Wonderful things happen when people meet. Meeting and sharing is a value in itself, especially for excluded people, and I think that will keep the dialogue going for some time. A growing desire to take part and act and the growing anger about the undermining of the welfare system are important mechanisms to keep the pressure going. In the long run, changes are unavoidable.

As to the Swedish politicians - knowing that they are not all the same - I think many are quite dazed and do not really know how to handle the fact that civil society wants to have a say and take part in the public debate. Their speeches are filled with how much they value civil society's opinion and voice, but that will

not be enough if they don't act. To say it is important and to make room for real impact are two quite different things.

Finally, despite the complexity of genuine democratic dialogue processes, shaping policies together is crucial. We all share the same vision and mission as EAPN as a

whole and think that this is a method to make real stakeholder engagement happen and to force decision-makers to take part in a dialogue process where we get to set the agenda.

¹ In Sweden, user delegations are groups of people experiencing a form of exclusion or poverty and social exclusion who are part of the civil dialogue process on services and laws affecting their lives, working through a rights-based approach and avoiding any form of subordination or negative connotation in the process. The term has changed from the original "clients" which grew to have a negative connotation.

People = Power

INTERVIEW WITH IZABELLA MARTON, EAPN HUNGARY

Izabella Marton, Director of EAPN Hungary, had the opportunity to spend four months in the United States where she was hosted by Vocal NY and she learned and experienced Community Organising.¹ Coming from a country where the current government leaves no room for dialogue with civil-society organisations representing people in poverty and other vulnerable groups, she shares her learning about alternative ways of putting pressure on public authorities, based on grassroots motivation, empowerment, and solidarity... of the many.

Can you describe what community organising mean?

One of the most famous community organisers in the US in the last half century, Saul Alinsky wrote "The power of Have-Nots rests only with their numbers"². This power comes from the feeling that we are together and act together to push our targets to take a positive decision or an important step regarding our concerns. If I want to make it simple, community organising is one approach to making change besides doing advocacy work, providing services or doing community development. It aims at building trustful relationships with people, improving their participation, empowering them, building community leaders among them in order to make sustainable community organisations. All these achievements are to be done through implementing campaigns around jointly identified issues. There are lots of principles for identifying these issues – the three most important ones are: they have to 1) result in a real improvement of people's lives; 2) make people aware of their own organisational power and 3) alter power relations.

Did you feel this power during your stay with VOCAL NY?

Definitely, and these experiences were extremely liberating for me, coming from a post-socialist country where, after 40 years of being obliged to be "organised communities", people have become terribly individualistic, suspicious about membership in organisations and difficult to mobilize when it comes to standing up for their rights.

Can you give examples of actions you took part in?

One of the campaigns I got involved in is the "30% rent cap campaign"³. It's been running for over a year with a wide variety of actions, from attending meetings with decision makers to civil disobedience actions, actually blocking

Broadway with people chained to each other on World AIDS Day.

Another campaign, run by a state-wide coalition of community organisations ND4NY (New Deal for New York), aimed at keeping the extra tax on millionaires that was introduced when the global economic crisis began. While the main target person of the campaign was Governor Cuomo of NY State, a millionaire himself, several actions targeted the millionaires and billionaires of NY. One of my favourite moments was during the second week of my stay with VOCAL: we simply stepped into the private club where some billionaires were having a gathering. I still get delighted when I remember the astonished faces of people having their cocktails, while we were spreading leaflets, stretching out our banners, chanting "Hey, you billionaires, pay your fare share!"



What keywords come up when you think about this experience?

Motivation, power and empowerment. These are the most important lessons I learnt and try to consider when it comes to changing our practices in the Hungarian Anti-Poverty Network.

What do you consider civil-society organisations should do in the current setting?

Power is very directly linked to numbers of people organised, according to Alinsky. It is, in fact, a relevant question: what kind of power can civil society have in times when civil dialogue is weakening and organisations all over Europe are struggling with the growing demand of people in



need, as well as for their own survival? Hungary witnesses the very explicit and intense destruction of its democratic institutions, at the same time as an increase in poverty rates. In many countries, civil-society organisations are tired of and disappointed with trying to get to the consultation table, sending comments on official documents without having any real influence. We should consider if our expertise and legitimacy is still enough power or whether we have to mobilize thousands of people to support our issue.

What do you see specifically for the Hungarian civil society?

It is very clear that our government understands only the language of power equals money - which we don't have and the people in the streets don't have. A couple of promising movements and initiatives have already started in our country, so our responsibility is to ensure that poor people have the chance and support to get involved and heard. Through organising - first in Budapest and later in the whole country - we will mobilize and empower poor people around issues such as unemployment, housing, right to a dignified life and social assistance. We keep in mind that empowering people and building leaders is a long process and cannot be done simply through some training sessions. It is done through giving tasks and roles to people, such as doing outreach and phone banking, taking part in campaign strategic meetings, organising actions, speaking publicly or meeting politicians, and getting arrested as part of an action, if it is really needed.

What practical steps does the Hungarian anti-poverty network need to take to reach out to people?

Our limited resources have to be used in finding motivated people instead of trying to motivate those who don't care. This is a very important step. It usually happens in the very beginning of building a relationship with somebody. There are very different levels of participation, depending on motivation and commitment. Out of 400 contacted people, you will have 100 showing interest, 30 who attend a meeting or come to an action, 10 who come back and continue, 1-5 who engage in a leadership development activity and 1-2 who continue to develop actively as leaders. This means that we have to do a lot of outreach, while focusing on our capacity-building activities with those 10 active people. So, accordingly, we plan to reach out to at least 500 people in poverty in Budapest in the pilot phase of our organising programme by the end of this year.

What last message would you like to convey?

Let's try it! Let's do it! This kind of participation requires that we leave our comfort zones and do something we have never done before. It needs courage and it gives an incredible feeling of power.

1) Izabella's stay in the US was funded through the Community Solutions Programme of the US State Department. VOCAL NY, her host organisation, organises drug users, people living with HIV and people formerly incarcerated (more info on www.vocal-ny.org).

2) Saul D. Alinsky (1971): *Rules for radicals*, NY, Vintage Books.

3) The "30% rent cap campaign" is around the housing rights and housing conditions of people living with HIV. It calls for the equal treatment of people involved in the HASA programme (a special social programme for people living with HIV) as participants of other housing programmes, through a guarantee that their rent does not exceed 30% of the amount of their social assistance (and the rest should be covered by social provisions). In reality, many people have to spend 60-70% of their social assistance on rent and live from the remaining 30-40%.

Bringing a children's perspective to the fight against poverty

BY JANA HAINSWORTH, EUROCHILD



More than 1 out of 4 children face poverty in the EU. Families with children rank high on the list of victims of the financial crisis and of the consequent austerity measures. Advocating for tackling child poverty at EU level hasn't been difficult, explains Jana Hainsworth, Director of Eurochild; the big challenge is to see the policies adopted by Member States, which focus on cutting public expenditure. There are ways to raise awareness and these include giving a voice to children.

There are ways to influence policy change

In the current context, how can Eurochild and its members influence change and bring the children's perspective to the policy debate? We recognize that systematic civil-society dialogue is weakening and it is more and more difficult to have our voices heard in the current economic and political climate. Nonetheless, we believe the demand for evidence-based policy and practice is stronger than ever and our role must also be to demonstrate, through our membership, what works and what doesn't work with respect to lifting children out of poverty. Of course this requires some sophistication in members' use of monitoring, evaluation and communication tools. Some are very good at this already and have a strong impact on policies at regional or national level. But many don't have this expertise and part of our work through our networking activities is to support this collection of expertise and evidence and to strengthen our advocacy and impact both at EU and national levels.

Give children a voice

Another key aspect of our advocacy is to facilitate and promote the participation of children and young people themselves. Empowerment and participation of people experiencing poverty is one of the most powerful agents of change. Children's participation in particular has a dual function. Firstly, it is an affirmation of children's right to be heard. It is crucial that children are not only seen as members of a family or as passive recipients of support, but active citizens in their own right. Secondly, personal testimonies are extremely important in sensitizing policy makers and the public to the reality behind poverty and social exclusion. One of our greatest challenges in the anti-poverty movement is to overcome the growing 'us and them' mentality in society that prefers to see poverty and social exclusion as individual, personal failure. Poverty has to be a shared responsibility & challenge for society as a whole. We believe that ensuring children have a voice and examining the effects of poverty from a child's perspective can contribute to this.

Eurochild is a European organisation and NGO network promoting the welfare and rights of children and young people in Europe. Eurochild is also a member of EAPN.

Children are among the population groups that are most at risk of poverty. According to the latest figures, 27% of children in the European Union face poverty and social exclusion, according to the 3 indicators used to monitor the poverty reduction target under Europe 2020. This fact says a lot about where Europe is headed. A child growing up in poverty is much more likely to experience poverty as an adult. And poverty in childhood is associated with many other poor outcomes – low educational achievement, poor mental health, low civic engagement. What is more, families with children are among those hardest hit by the current crisis, in particular lone parent families, migrant families, large families – those who were already struggling to make ends meet during times of plenty.

In many respects, fighting child poverty has been easier to push to the top of the EU political agenda. Repeated European Council Conclusions have identified child poverty as a political priority. It was the first thematic priority to be addressed within the Social Open Method of Coordination. And now, in 2012, we will see the adoption of a Recommendation on tackling child poverty and promoting child well-being – something that Eurochild has called for since

2009. The attention given to child poverty is very welcome and the Eurochild network is broadly supportive of the policy principles and monitoring framework which the Recommendation is expected to contain. Nonetheless, we, as many others in the anti-poverty movement, are facing real challenges in how we can make what is said at EU level impact on policy decisions in Member States. We face the dilemma that whilst fighting child poverty is a relatively easy cause to support, it is much harder to implement in practice¹.

In our analysis of the impact of the crisis², Eurochild members across Europe reported very worrying trends in spending cuts that are directly affecting low-income families. So, whilst many of our policy messages may find their way into the EC Recommendation, Member States appear to be doing the opposite. For example, we argue strongly for high-quality universal services for families – such as early years' education and care and low-threshold parent support – but few countries are extending such services. Indeed there is a trend towards more targeted, stigmatizing and punitive approaches, with an overriding shift to employment activating measures rather than efforts to promote broader social inclusion.

1\ Read Eurochild news, "EU Governments agree to fight child poverty", 17 June 2011, on www.eurochild.org

2\ Read Eurochild Report: *How the economic and financial crisis is affecting children & young people in Europe*, January 2011, www.eurochild.org

The new challenges we face – fighting to restore rationality and moral values

BY DUHOMIR MINEV, EAPN BULGARIA



We are in trouble and the trouble we are in is bigger than the so-called financial and economic crisis. We have landed in a crisis of the rationality of societies.

That is to say, the ability of self-reflection has declined, as has the capacity to see themselves as they are and make adequate social choices from the various alternatives. This crisis promises much more danger than financial and economic perturbations. Risk researchers have noted the decline of rationality and have defined it as a reason for the appearance and rapid growth of new and unknown risks that societies cannot cope with. Remarkable minds like Stephen Hawking and Immanuel Wallerstein have explicitly warned humankind against these dangers, huge social conflicts and historically unprecedented forms of oppression.

The crisis of rationality is caused by the substitution of the rationality of societies with the rationality of groups whose own rationality is also in decline. "The world elite has freaked out", said a prominent Bulgarian scientist recently and there is no doubt that all the readers of the newspaper which published his statement agree.

In particular, the influence of those groups is a result of the following:

1. **The democratic political institutions do not provide sufficient doses of democracy in formulating "social effects", such as laws and policies.** As Amartya Sen has noted, in "*developed democracies*", public debates as an important component of the decision making process are deformed and have a very weak impact.
2. **Obviously, the political process of decision-making is rather based on lack of knowledge than the existence thereof.** Moreover, partial and distorted knowledge is deliberately used to justify and implement policies that lead to negative effects for the larger part of societies. The crisis of expertise is apparent. President Sarkozy of France has also reiterated it, urging us to leave the *civilization of experts*, i.e. of government experts.
3. **The actual production of knowledge, especially of social knowledge (knowledge about societies) is managed and controlled by inadequate scientific frameworks.** This, according to risk researchers, has resulted in a huge lag behind and crisis of social sciences, producing lack of knowledge instead of knowledge. Large segments of the social reality remain *in the dark* because they are not subject to adequate research.

4. **Despite the widely popular opinion, fundamental moral values have rarely been a significant driver of policies.**

However, during the last three to four decades, the gap between basic moral values and policies has become too large and too obvious. Erosion of moral values crosses the border beyond which the severe illness of societies begins.

New forms of advocacy – in the public space

In such a context, it is not possible to achieve effectively structured participation of NGOs in policy-making. In general, the direct involvement in the struggle against poverty and inequalities can hardly be successful. Such struggle is a struggle against consequences (symptoms) and not against causes. Such a struggle is on behalf of one group (regardless of its size) while societies are collectively threatened with unknown risks. What is needed, to avoid an outdated and inefficient projection, is another struggle with other means.

We believe that NGOs should attempt to engage in the fight to restore rationality of societies - this is a matter for all individuals and groups, not just for a single group. If any success is achieved, it will necessarily include mitigating poverty and inequality.

Should NGOs try to play confrontational roles? 'Confrontation' in its best known and easy to implement forms is probably not a good idea. There is a risk of slipping back into what is known as ostentatious dissent, protests or even breaking up previous interactions because they are ineffective. We think that this would be a mistake. If confrontation presupposes the search for and use of new and effective forms of influence – obviously the answer is yes. Unfortunately, such forms are not known or accepted enough, and it is doubtful that we have sufficient capacity to implement them.

Advocating differently

We need to identify the inadequacy of knowledge used in the political decision-making process. We should actively participate in public debates, publically critique the inadequate cognitive and moral basis of policies; conduct systematic social impact assessments of policies.

We need to develop and launch in the public space (debate) adequate knowledge as a basis for policy formation, working systematically and intensively with all types of media. Electronic media is a great tool to avoid many restrictions that the current system imposes on us.

We should, together with other actors, take interest and actively participate in scientific policy formation, and in particular in removing political constraints to the development of social sciences and social analysis. We need to develop intensive relations with relevant research centers and scientists; engage more actively in conducting adequate social research. **Generally speaking, we need a large scale action to build a science with broad civil participation (a more democratic 'post-academic' social science). Involvement of people experiencing poverty in these processes should be an intrinsic condition.**

We need to pilot and actively launch effective approaches for local participative democracy, together with people living in poverty, in areas such as public finance management and, overall on matters of budgeting and income distribution.

We should build alliances with other social actors very important in this quest. Perhaps it is possible, and even necessary, to work closer with religious institutions to address the widespread and deep moral decline.

Finally, resource reallocation is required for such visions to have an impact. Governments must understand that they are not *giving the money*; they are only allocating/redistributing somebody else's money; and they should allocate it in the way the taxpayers want them. This allocation should also be democratic and participatory.



EU MONEY for POVERTY REDUCTION



Nearly 1 in 4 persons is in or at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion in the EU.

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All together
for poverty reduction and social inclusion.

This campaign is being run by EAPN with its members the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), Caritas Europa, the European Network Against Racism (ENAR), Eurochild, Eurodiaconia, AGE Platform, Salvation Army, as well as the Platform of European Social NGOs (Social Platform), Solidar, the European Women's Lobby, the European Disability Forum (EDF), the European association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) Europe, Workability Europe and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Europe.

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