

**Speech of Sonja Leemkuil, Activist with direct experience of poverty in EAPN's
EU Inclusion Strategies Group. EAPN conference, 14 July 2020**

Good afternoon, I am Sonja Leemkuil from EAPN Netherlands

Actually I feel like I am rich too, since my husband and I have healthy children and grandchildren, a roof over our heads, water from the tap, central heating in the house. But at the same time I'm financially poor in the Netherlands and I often feel social excluded. Poverty and social exclusion belong together. And it is paramount to be aware of the fact that you are poor in the country in which you live!

Poverty means not to be able to pay all fixed costs every month and, after that, to have a little bit left for your groceries, clothes, shoes, uninsured medicines. On July 9, the Dutch Authority Financial Markets (AFM) admitted that one-parent families, low-income households, flex workers and the working poor spend two-thirds up to three-quarters of their income on their fixed costs. You have to live on what remains, for the month that is left.

Poverty is to start looking at the price tag for everything you buy. Living with little money is always making choices. Every now and then healthy food or visiting your children / grandchildren or doing something fun is really a gift.

You cannot afford healthy food, fresh fruit and fresh vegetables that are good for your health. You are aware of this every day, week, month. Most of the time you cannot participate because participating costs a lot of money and not being able to participate is feeling socially excluded.

Poverty hinders active participation in society. Especially for children poverty is the reason that they cannot participating in school and with sports, music and dance. Not participating has a negative effect on behavior, health and (school) performance and increases the risk of poverty in the future. Stress and anxiety have major negative consequences for the development of children and for the well-being of adults. Not being able to participate has also another consequence: you start to become invisible. For your environment, for your friends as well as for policy makers!

Living in a village is in principle living in a participation society. Because I know what it's like not be able to participate in everything, I started a citizens' initiative, Meeting Our DREAM with, by, for and from the poor and excluded citizens themselves.

A place with a living room where we can be together, sharing joys and sorrows, being creative, arranging flowers, paint, etc. Next to this we created a Repair Café where electrical appliances and clothes can be repaired and we created also a second hand clothes bank.

Our DREAM is a place where everyone can participate because we keep the costs as low as possible. Because we do everything voluntarily and none of us get paid, it is possible to pay the cost for housing. If people are short on cash, they can still participate and they are asked to contribute at the moment they have something more to spend. The great thing is that people actually do this! The respect to each other is enormous!

There was already poverty, even before the Corona! But Corona has made poverty even more visible.

Many people are at home, because of the corona crisis. Not because they want it so badly, but because there is no other way. Around me I also hear people say “now others can feel what we feel, what it is and how it feels not to go out, not to be able to participate in anything and to have to stay at home all day long and live in uncertainty, day in, day out. Only go outside to collect groceries. We are experiencing this feeling for months, years because we cannot participate in anything, because we have no money for it”.

Much is uncertain and people who are physically limited or sensitive to anxiety and stress react very differently. There is a need for support, meeting each other etc. Due to the Corona measures, we had to close Our DREAM from March 15 to June 1. I had to stay at home for 2 months due to medical complaints and I am still recovering. The lock down of the corona has consequences, the lock down of poverty also has major consequences and is lasting for years now and will for the years to come. We kept in touch with the visitors every week to avoid even more loneliness and let them know that we are thinking of them, by sending them cards, calling and sent telephone messengers, giving an attention to the Easter days and May 15 at my 65th birthday I brought all of them a piece of apple pie. We also noticed that the Corona measures have a huge impact on their lives. Visitors who live in a nursing home and indicate that they were not allowed to go outside, that they felt it as something that even during the war they did not experience. The lock down made people feel that there was no more freedom. We hear that a number of visitors have had a very difficult time, have started drinking alcohol again or because of the Corona measures have become so self-contained, because they did not see anyone and for fear of getting Corona they now find it very difficult to get back in touch and go outside to meet other people again. From the first of June we meet again, be it from one and a half meters distance. It is nice to see how well that visitors are feeling since we meet each other again. Board, volunteers and visitors together form a social and livable community where everyone can participate because we respect each other and where we are equal to each other. We stimulate each other and because there is enough trust that we meet again. Fortunately visitors step by step think more positively and stand well in life again. What we continue to find very difficult is the lack of human contact, just touching each other, a palpable pat on the back or a real natural hug.

With amazement, I heard Prime Minister Mark Rutte repeatedly say on TV “people stay at home”. I immediately felt the grief for all people who live on the street and have no home! In our region are quite a lot younger homeless people. Living in poverty in Corona time is difficult, The Corona measures are very drastic for society. And certainly also for economy, with all its consequences. Fortunately, as a child I still learned not to be in debt : First save then buy.

How difficult is it for many who have lost their jobs and are used to a good life and now have to live on benefits. How do they take a step back with the offer and temptation to borrow or buy on credit, when it is actually not possible? All too often I see the consequences of spending more money than is possible around me, the consequences of first small and then large debts, with the enormous interest and fine amounts in the event of late repayment.

Politicians, policymakers, professionals in the social domain don't forget that you are human! And that living in poverty and getting in to debts can happen to anyone. Living in poverty before and after the Corona period is persistently difficult for many who experience poverty and social exclusion, many people experience their stress and

anxiety on daily, weekly, monthly, annually basis. Living in poverty always remains difficult.

You cannot change the Covid 19 virus, but you can change the way you deal with it. By being social together, listening to each other and taking care of each other. The Poverty virus can be changed! by making different political choices and by different policies, based on trust in the people in poverty, by removing the fear and stress from people every day / week / month and by treating people with confidence and by treating each other equally and with respect, which returns people's resilience, allows children to develop equally and improves people's well-being.

Nobody chooses to be poor or have no opportunities in education or on the labor market or to let their children grow up in poverty.

We need measures to reduce the costs of healthy living and public transport and to improve the residual income for living.

You will understand that I am very happy with EAPN's lobby for a decent minimum income and that I am pleased to see how positively the European Commission is working on this. One of the reasons for a decent minimum income and available quality health care is to end the fact that people in poverty have more health problems, are very often 15 years of their lives sick and die 6 years earlier than people with enough money to spend.

The tax on healthy vegetables and fresh fruit has increased. Why? People, including People Experiencing Poverty, need more fresh fruit and vegetables to stay healthy and everyone deserves a decent life.

Social participation, especially for children, is incredibly important now and in the future. Investing in children and in the family in which they grow up means to invest in a healthy society and is an investment in economy.

This Corona period made poor, handicapped, excluded visible. I urge you all to stick with us so that we can stay visible! It is time now for equal rights and equal opportunities for everyone in Europe.

Europe needs a loving social heart.