



EUROPEAN ANTI POVERTY NETWORK

ANNUAL PEP MEETING REPORT 2025

PARTICIPATION IN ACTION

#PEPMEETING

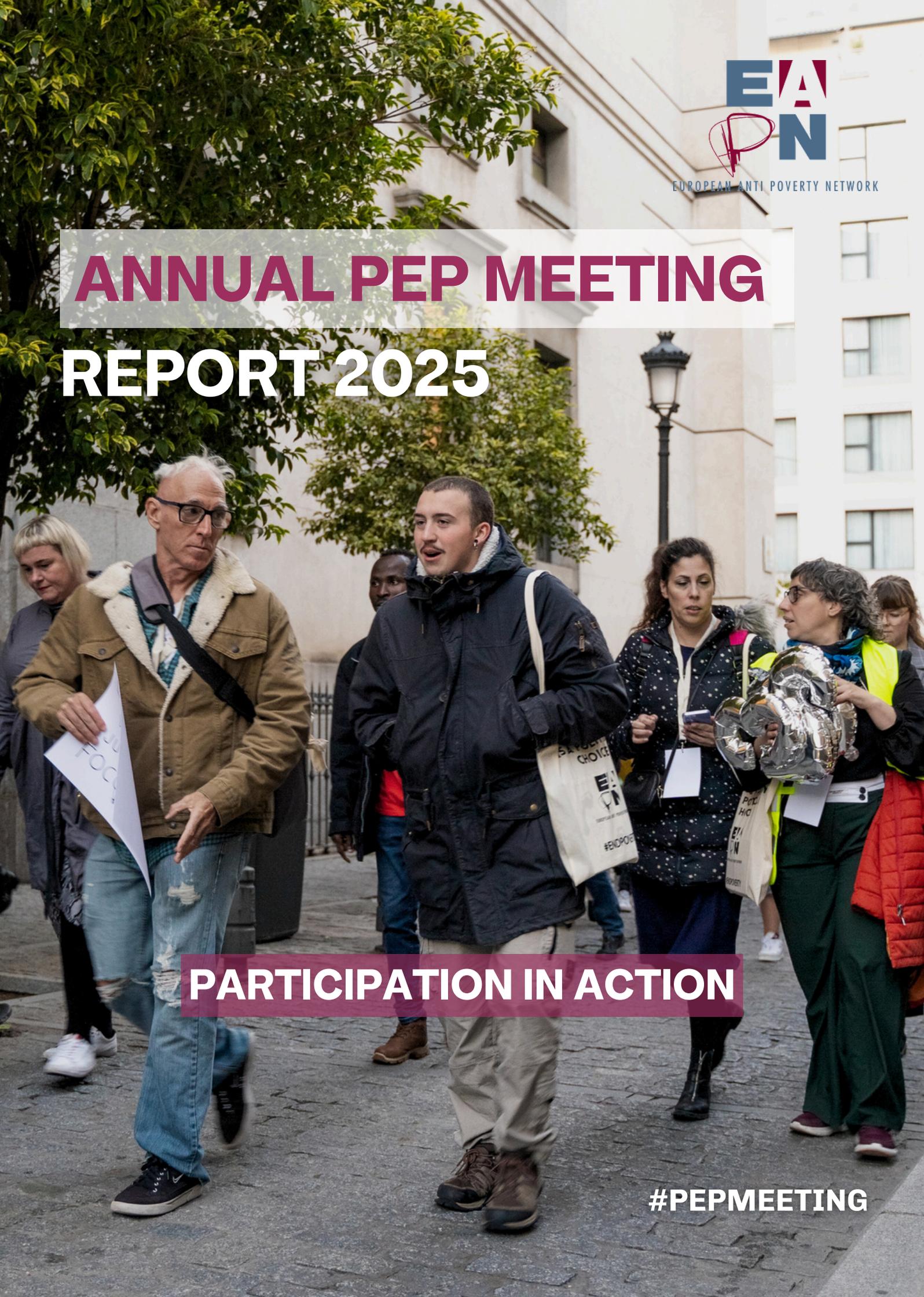


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EUROPEAN ANTI POVERTY NETWORK

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – PARTICIPATION IN ACTION

The 23rd European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty (PEP), held in Brussels on 11–12 December 2025, took place at a decisive moment for Europe’s social future. As the European Union moves towards its first-ever European Anti-Poverty Strategy (APS), with the stated objective of eradicating poverty by 2050¹, the question facing European institutions, Member States, and civil society is no longer whether people experiencing poverty should be involved in policymaking, but **how participation is understood, resourced, and embedded in a meaningful and lasting way across all levels of governance.**

In this context, the 23rd PEP Meeting was conceived as more than a policy dialogue or consultation exercise. It was designed as a **space of collective empowerment, capacity-building, political and strategic reflection**, recognising that meaningful participation does not occur automatically through invitation alone. Instead, it requires **deliberate investment in people’s confidence, skills, safety, and collective power, as well as institutional willingness to recognise lived experience as a form of expertise.**

Bringing together 52 People Experiencing Poverty (PEP) delegates from national networks across Europe, the meeting marked a central pillar of EAPN’s broader participation work throughout 2025.



¹ von der Leyen, Ursula. “State of the Union September 11, 2025.” https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/state-union/state-union-2025_en

It built on a year-long process that combined preparatory work with the active engagement of PEP National Coordinators (PEPCo)², as well as the participation and collective mobilisation of PEP delegates. This process included continuous work within the PEPCo, engagement in the European Commission Consultation on Poverty in Porto in September, participation in the People's Summit in March in Portugal, and joint action around the first Anti-Poverty Day at the European Parliament in November 2025. Seen in this light, **the 23rd PEP Meeting represented the culmination of ongoing participation processes rather than an isolated event.**

The 23rd PEP Meeting focused towards **“Participation in Action”**: participation understood as power, agency, skill, safety, and influence. Across plenary exchanges, workshops, and collective reflections, delegates articulated a shared understanding of participation. This approach recognised that meaningful participation does not happen automatically when people are invited into institutional spaces, but requires **time, trust, resources, inclusive formats, and political willingness to share power.**

Throughout the two days, PEP delegates consistently emphasised that participation must go beyond being “seen” or “heard” and instead be **recognised as expertise grounded in lived experience, capable of directly informing and shaping policy decisions.** Many highlighted a persistent recognition gap, whereby lived

experience is welcomed symbolically but remains sidelined politically, acknowledged rhetorically but marginal, if not disconnected from decision-making processes. Participation, in this sense, was described as too often **under-resourced, time-bound, and disconnected from tangible outcomes**, leading to frustration and disengagement. Delegates stressed that **participation must be grounded as a right linked to dignity, democracy, social justice, safety, transparency, and feedback if it is to be credible and transformative.**

In response to these realities, the design of the 23rd PEP Meeting marked a strategic shift. The programme prioritised capacity-building workshops and network exchanges over policy discussions aimed at strengthening delegates' confidence, skills, and collective power as a form of political action. Through a series of *Reclaiming Power workshops*, participants explored how personal experiences of poverty can inform collective narratives, advocacy strategies, and sustained engagement. Sessions on storytelling, public speaking, advocacy, inclusive networking, digital civic space, and participation within EAPN itself enabled delegates to reflect on **how change happens, who holds power within that process**, while also strengthening their ability to act within their communities and national networks. Delegates widely recognised this space as a unique opportunity to speak openly, reflect collectively, and connect

personal experiences with broader political structures. The emphasis on mutual recognition and peer learning revealed shared patterns of exclusion across countries and welfare systems, while also highlighting resilience, solidarity, and good practices.

The opening political dialogue with representatives of the European Commission reflected both progress and remained expectations. On the one hand, EU officials acknowledged that current trajectories are insufficient to meet poverty reduction targets and recognised the importance of dignity, empowerment, and trust in shaping the APS. On the other hand, delegates voiced frustration with the gap between high-level commitments and lived realities on the ground - particularly in relation to child poverty, discrimination, stigma, unaccompanied minors, and access to social protection. Several interventions underscored that poverty is not only about income, but about **deep impact of invisibility, exclusion, and the daily struggle to claim rights and participate fully in systems that are often hostile**. Delegates also stressed that without addressing discrimination - based on gender, race, disability, migration status, or family situation - anti-poverty strategies will remain incomplete. These exchanges reaffirmed that participation must be understood as a continuous relationship, requiring accountability, follow-up, and structural change.

Throughout the meeting, a key outcome was a collective reflection on the conditions necessary for meaningful

participation across local, national, and EU levels. Delegates highlighted that while proximity and trust can enable meaningful engagement locally, these spaces are often under-resourced and fragile. At national level, participation is frequently dependent on political goodwill rather than institutional guarantees. At EU level, access exists, but power often remains concentrated, with limited feedback loops and unclear pathways for influence. At the same time, across all levels, they articulated a clear vision of participation grounded in power-sharing, recognition of lived experience as expertise, financial and logistical support (including interpretation and accessibility), clear information, and long-term commitment from institutions.

This report documents the reflections, debates, and collective insights that emerged during the 23rd European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty. It presents participation not as a finished model, but as an ongoing political process that must be continuously negotiated and strengthened. As the EU moves closer to adopting its Anti-Poverty Strategy, the experiences and perspectives shared during this meeting underline a central message: **policies aimed at eradicating poverty will only be credible and effective if people experiencing poverty are recognised as active agents of change, with the power, resources, and space to shape the decisions that affect their lives.**

2. PARTICIPATION AS A PROCESS: EAPN'S PEP WORK IN 2025

Participation is a foundational value and strategic pillar of EAPN's mission.

It reflects the conviction that people experiencing poverty are not only rights-holders, but also political actors whose lived experience constitutes essential knowledge for shaping effective and just policies. In practice, this means moving beyond ad hoc consultations and ensuring that participation is embedded across EAPN's governance, policy, advocacy, and communication work.

Meaningful participation of people experiencing poverty is the result of sustained processes of trust-building, preparation, collective learning, and political engagement across time and governance levels. In 2025, EAPN's participation work was deliberately structured as a continuous cycle, within which the 23rd European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty represented a key milestone and point of convergence.

In 2025, EAPN continued to strengthen this approach by investing in structured participation spaces at the European level, while supporting national networks in developing and sustaining their own participation processes. This dual focus recognises that meaningful European participation is inseparable from strong local and national engagement, and that PEP

delegates' ability to contribute at EU level is closely linked to the support, preparation, and recognition they receive within their own contexts. A central component of this process was the work of the PEP National Coordinators (PEPCo), which played a key role in shaping priorities, reflecting on ongoing participation challenges, and preparing collective contributions to European-level processes. Through regular exchanges, PEPCo provided a space for PEP representatives to reflect on experiences from their national contexts, identify common concerns, and articulate shared messages. This preparatory work fed directly into EAPN's engagement in the European Commission Consultation of People with Lived Experience of Poverty, held in Porto in September 2025. The consultation represented a significant opportunity for people experiencing poverty to engage directly with the process for the development of the future European Anti-Poverty Strategy. For many PEP delegates, participation in Porto was both empowering and challenging: empowering in terms of visibility and recognition, yet also exposing persistent gaps in influence, feedback, and clarity around how lived experience is translated into policy outcomes.

In March 2025, EAPN's European-level participation work was further reinforced through the People's Summit

held in Porto under the title “*The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy: From Intention to Action.*” Embedded within EAPN’s broader efforts to create inclusive participation spaces, the Summit provided a forum for people experiencing poverty, grassroots organisations, and institutional actors to engage in dialogue on the future direction of the European Anti-Poverty Strategy, while highlighting the need to move from political commitments to concrete and accountable action on social rights.

The first Anti-Poverty Day at the European Parliament, organised in November 2025 in collaboration with the Intergroup on Fighting against Poverty, represented another key moment in the participation cycle. This event provided a highly visible political space to bring poverty and social exclusion into parliamentary debate, while also testing the extent to which institutional spaces are prepared to engage with people experiencing poverty on equal footing. Insights and reflections from this event further informed the design and focus of the 23rd PEP Meeting. Within this broader trajectory, the 23rd European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty was conceived as a moment of collective convergence.

A recurring theme throughout the 2025 participation work was the interdependence between European-level engagement and national participation structures. **PEP delegates repeatedly stressed that their ability to engage meaningfully at EU level**

depends on the strength of participation spaces within their national networks. Where national processes are under-resourced, irregular, or overly dependent on political goodwill, European participation risks becoming disconnected from lived realities on the ground.

EAPN’s approach in 2025 therefore sought to reinforce the idea of participation as a multi-level ecosystem. European meetings, consultations, and dialogues were framed not as endpoints, but as resources that delegates could bring back to their national contexts - supporting advocacy, dialogue with authorities, and peer mobilisation. Conversely, national experiences and struggles were recognised as the foundation of legitimate European participation. In this context, the 23rd PEP Meeting marked a moment of consolidation and reorientation, laying the groundwork for continued engagement in the development, implementation, and monitoring of the European Anti-Poverty Strategy and related national policies.

3. SOCIAL & POLITICAL CONTEXT IN EUROPE

The 23rd European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty took place against a backdrop of **deepening social, political, and institutional tensions across Europe**. These tensions are rooted in concrete policy choices, shifting political priorities, and accumulated social crises that increasingly shape the everyday realities of people experiencing poverty. While the European Union continues to affirm its commitment to social inclusion and poverty reduction, lived realities on the ground reveal widening gaps between commitment and everyday experience. Understanding this broader context is essential to grasp why the focus on meaningful participation, power-sharing, and recognition of lived experience is not only relevant, but urgent.

Over the past years, Europe has faced a succession of overlapping crises, including the cost-of-living crisis, persistent inflationary pressures, energy insecurity, the long-term social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and ongoing geopolitical conflicts. While these crises have had differentiated impacts across Member States, their cumulative effect has been a significant deterioration in living conditions for people already experiencing poverty or at risk of social exclusion. At the same time, the political framing of European priorities has increasingly shifted.

In the context of geopolitical instability and global competition, EU political discourse and policy framing has placed growing emphasis on **competitiveness, economic resilience, industrial policy, and defence**. This reorientation is reflected in ongoing debates around the future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), where concerns have emerged about the potential reallocation of resources away from social investment toward defence, security, and competitiveness objectives.

For people experiencing poverty, these shifts raise critical questions. **When social policies are framed as secondary to economic or security priorities, there is a real risk that poverty reduction, social protection, and inclusion measures are treated as adjustable variables rather than core commitments.** Delegates' concerns during the PEP Meeting must be understood within this broader political climate, where social objectives compete for attention, legitimacy, and funding. Despite Europe's overall wealth, poverty and social exclusion remain widespread and deeply entrenched. Millions of people across the EU continue to face material deprivation, insecure housing, low-quality or precarious employment, and inadequate access to essential services. Child poverty remains particularly alarming, with long-term consequences for life chances, health, and social mobility.

For people experiencing poverty, these conditions are rarely isolated. Delegates repeatedly stressed that poverty is not simply a lack of income, but **a structural condition shaped by policy choices, labour market dynamics, welfare systems, and social attitudes**. These conditions intersect with discrimination based on gender, race, disability, migration status, age, or family situation, compounding vulnerability and limiting access to rights. In this sense, poverty reflects systemic failures rather than individual shortcomings. The European Commission's commitment to develop the first-ever European Anti-Poverty Strategy, including the objective of eradicating poverty by 2050, represents a significant political milestone. For many people experiencing poverty and civil society actors, it signals long-awaited recognition that existing approaches have been insufficient.

At the same time, this commitment is met with caution and scepticism. Many delegates have lived through successive strategies, targets, and declarations that failed to translate into tangible improvements in their lives. As a result, trust in institutions is fragile. Within this context, the APS is perceived not only as a policy framework, but as a **test of political credibility: a measure of whether European institutions are prepared to align ambitions, resources, and decision-making power with the realities faced by people experiencing poverty**.

Across Europe, there is growing concern about shrinking civic space and the increasing use of restrictive or punitive approaches toward people experiencing poverty and those who support them. In some contexts, poverty is addressed through control and sanction rather than protection and empowerment, through measures that penalise homelessness, restrict access to social assistance, or impose burdensome conditionalities. These trends have direct consequences for participation. **Fear of stigma, judgement, or negative repercussions discourages people from speaking out and reinforces invisibility**. The criminalisation of survival strategies and the stigmatisation of poverty undermine people's confidence to engage in public debate and erode trust in institutions that are perceived as punitive rather than protective. Civil society organisations working with people experiencing poverty are also affected. Increasing administrative burdens, funding constraints, and hostile political narratives limit their capacity to sustain safe participation spaces and long-term engagement. In such an environment, participation risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

Within this broader political and social context, participation takes on a deeper democratic significance. Meaningful participation of people experiencing poverty is more than improving policy outcomes; **it is also about restoring trust, strengthening social cohesion, and countering feelings of abandonment and exclusion**.

Delegates repeatedly linked their experiences of poverty with being unheard or unseen in political processes. Many described how repeated crises are accompanied by narratives that frame hardship as inevitable or as individual failure. Participation, in this sense, becomes a way to reclaim dignity, assert agency, and challenge dominant narratives that normalise inequality.

It is within this context of political reprioritisation, structural inequality, and constrained civic space that the focus on “*Participation in Action*” must be understood. The 23rd PEP Meeting emerged as a response to growing frustration and the recognition that access alone is insufficient.

What is required is participation that is safe, resourced, continuous, representative of different communities across the EU, and connected to real influence. By placing lived experience at the centre of discussions on poverty, governance, and democracy, the meeting sought to address the symptoms of exclusion, but also the conditions that reproduce it. The social and political context of 2025 provided both the urgency and the justification for rethinking participation as a transformative and democratic practice.

4. THE 23RD PEP MEETING: PURPOSE, DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

Through a deliberate strategic choice, EAPN designed the 23rd European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty to go beyond a formal conference or policy dialogue to collective power-building. It was envisioned as a political and participatory space, responding to the current social and political context and to lessons learned from years of participation work within EAPN. The meeting's purpose, design, and methodology reflect a conscious shift towards participation understood as an active, collective, and transformative process. The primary purpose of the 23rd PEP Meeting was to **strengthen the capacity, confidence, and collective power of people experiencing poverty to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes** at local, national, and European levels. The meeting aimed to create conditions in which delegates could reflect on their experiences, build skills, and develop shared understanding of power, participation, and influence.

This approach was grounded in the recognition that people experiencing poverty are often invited into political spaces without adequate preparation, support, or follow-up. **As a result, participation often risks becoming extractive or symbolic.** The 23rd PEP Meeting therefore sought to rebalance this dynamic by prioritising collective power-building, peer learning, and political literacy as essential components of meaningful participation. The theme “*Participation*

in Action” was chosen to signal a clear **understanding of participation as something that must be practiced, built, and sustained over time.** For EAPN, participation is not limited to speaking in meetings, but encompasses the ability to analyse power relations, articulate collective narratives, engage strategically with institutions, and act within one's own community and network. By framing the meeting around participation as action, EAPN aimed to emphasise the agency of people experiencing poverty and to **challenge assumptions that position them primarily as beneficiaries of policy rather than as actors of change.** This framing also created space for delegates to critically examine their own experiences of participation, including moments of frustration, exclusion, and success.

The meeting brought together 52 People Experiencing Poverty from EAPN national networks across Europe. Participants reflected a wide diversity of experiences, backgrounds, and national contexts, including people affected by long-term poverty, in-work poverty, homelessness, discrimination, disability, migration, and caring responsibilities. This diversity was a central strength of the meeting. The design sought to create conditions in which different experiences could be shared safely and recognised as legitimate sources of knowledge. Attention was paid to accessibility in order to reduce barriers

participation and to support delegates in engaging on equal footing.

The structure of the 23rd PEP Meeting reflected political considerations about power, safety, and inclusion. In light of shrinking civic space, stigma, and the emotional cost of participation for people experiencing poverty, the meeting prioritised formats that encouraged trust, dialogue, and mutual recognition. Capacity-building workshops formed the core of the programme on the first day. These sessions were designed to be interactive and reflective, recognising that delegates bring their own expertise and insights. The topics were selected based on recurring needs identified through the PEPCo and previous participation processes.

The programme also combined internal reflection with external engagement. The meeting included political dialogue with European institutions and encounters with external civil society actors. This balance was intended to avoid isolating capacity-building from real political contexts, while ensuring that engagement with institutions did not overshadow the needs of delegates to reflect, prepare, and consolidate their positions.

To support meaningful participation, a set of participation principles guided the meeting's methodology. These included respect, active listening, speaking from lived experience, and creating space for all voices. Particular attention was given to emotional safety, recognising that sharing experiences

of poverty, exclusion, and discrimination can be demanding and, at times, re-traumatising. Trusted persons and facilitators were identified to support delegates throughout the meeting. Clear information was provided in advance regarding the programme, objectives, and participation expectations, helping to reduce uncertainty and anxiety. These safeguards were integral to the meeting's methodology, reflecting the understanding that safety and trust are prerequisites for genuine participation. The emphasis on capacity-building, collective reflection, and peer learning laid the foundation for deeper political dialogue and for the articulation of shared visions and conditions for participation in later sessions. Skills, insights, and relationships developed during the meeting are intended to support ongoing PEP engagement with the European Anti-Poverty Strategy and related national processes, reinforcing the role of people experiencing poverty as active participants in shaping Europe's social future.

5. OPENING & KEYNOTE SPEECH EXCHANGES

The opening and the keynote speech and dialogue brought together PEP delegates and representatives of the European Commission in a shared space of exchange, framed explicitly as a dialogue rather than a formal consultation. The meeting was formally opened by **Juliana Wahlgren**, EAPN Director and **Anna Kechagia**, PEP delegate from Greece who welcomed participants and underlined the importance of spaces such as the PEP Meeting for connection, alignment, and collective reflection. Juliana emphasised that participation is intrinsically linked to inclusion, and that meetings like this allow both people experiencing poverty and organisations to step back, reflect, and strengthen the effectiveness of their work. In her intervention, Juliana also acknowledged the progress made in recent years, while recognising the challenges that remain in ensuring that PEP voices are genuinely heard and valued. Delegates were invited to honour the memory of **Nikos Kaoudis Malamas**, a colleague from the Greek national network who had passed away shortly before the meeting and whose commitment to participation and solidarity had left a strong mark on the network.

The welcoming was followed by **Fernando Chirona**, EAPN Senior Participation and Network Development Officer, who expressed his appreciation to PEP delegates for coming from across Europe and for bringing their

lived experiences, personal stories, and aspirations into the shared space. He emphasised that the PEP Meeting as a human space where participation is actively lived and embodied. Linking this to the meeting's theme, he noted that "*Participation in Action*" takes shape when people experiencing poverty are at the centre, engaging openly with one another through dialogue, mutual listening, and collective imagination. He also introduced the designated trusted persons, **Marie-Amah Kouadio** and **Jessica Machacova**, who were available throughout the meeting to support participants, underlining that emotional safety, care, and trust are essential foundations for meaningful participation.

European Commission Input

The political dialogue continued with an address from the European Commission, represented by **Jiří Švarc**, Head of Unit at DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. He recalled the EU's commitment to reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030, while openly acknowledging that current progress remains insufficient to meet this objective. He identified **child poverty** as a growing and pressing concern across the Union and stressed the need to further strengthen the **European Child Guarantee** as a key policy instrument. While recognising that the European Commission has limited competence to prescribe

national social policies, he highlighted its role in fostering coordination among Member States, providing analysis and data, and issuing policy guidance and recommendations.

Jiří Švarc emphasised that **policy-making risks becoming ineffective when it is disconnected from the lived realities of people experiencing poverty**. He noted that the Commission is working towards the adoption of a European Anti-Poverty Strategy in 2026, and that public consultations conducted so far **have consistently underlined the importance of dignity, empowerment, and the human dimension of poverty**. He concluded by inviting PEP delegates to share their experiences of participation at national level, including both obstacles and good practices in engaging with anti-poverty policies.

Exchange with PEP delegates

The floor was then opened to PEP delegates, whose interventions grounded the political discussion in concrete lived realities. Across contributions, delegates highlighted that **child poverty cannot be effectively addressed without tackling parental poverty, ensuring adequate income, robust social protection, and access to quality public services**. Several stressed that children growing up in poverty face a significantly higher risk of remaining trapped in poverty as adults, reinforcing intergenerational cycles of exclusion. A delegate from **EAPN Portugal** described living and working in a highly precarious area

marked by overlapping social challenges, including poverty within migrant communities. She drew attention to the situation of unaccompanied minors, who frequently lack adequate protection and resources at local and national level, and questioned how European commitments translate into concrete improvements in their daily lives.

A delegate from **EAPN Belgium** shared her experience of discrimination as a single mother, a woman, and a racialised person. She described how systemic discrimination limits access to employment, housing, and opportunities, and how her children have grown up witnessing her continuous struggle to claim rights and dignity. She stressed that stigma and discrimination are not peripheral issues, but central mechanisms through which poverty and exclusion are maintained.

A delegate from **EAPN Sweden** reflected on the structural and multifaceted nature of poverty, noting that even in countries often perceived as socially inclusive, policies can have harmful effects. He highlighted the role of shame and stigma in discouraging people from claiming their rights, particularly in relation to social assistance, and emphasised the need for stronger redistribution and more just social policies.

Across these interventions, a shared message emerged: **poverty is not solely about income deprivation, but is deeply intertwined with experiences**

of shame, invisibility, discrimination, and daily struggles to access rights within systems that are often complex, inaccessible, or perceived as punitive.

While the exchange allowed for recognition and mutual understanding, it also surfaced significant frustrations. Delegates expressed concern that participation too often leads to visibility without real influence and questioned how their contributions are followed up once meetings conclude. Several pointed to the absence of clear feedback mechanisms and the difficulty of understanding how lived experience meaningfully informs policy decisions. At the same time, there was a strong shared understanding that **meaningful participation cannot be reduced to isolated moments of dialogue.**

Delegates emphasised that participation must be continuous, adequately resourced, and grounded in trust, transparency, and long-term commitment. Institutional engagement, they stressed, should be embedded in clear structures and accountability mechanisms.

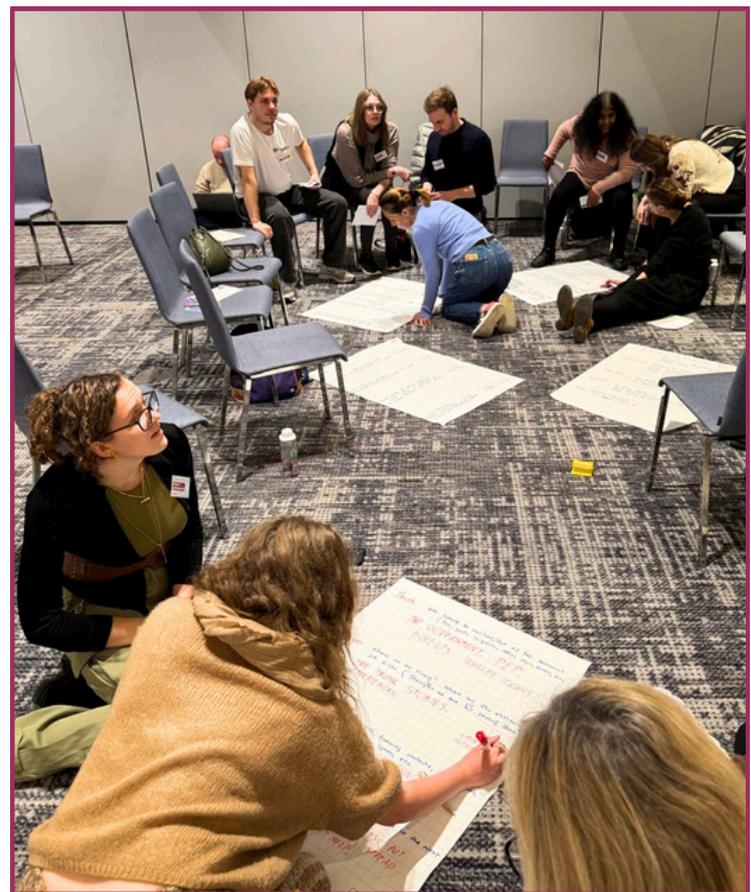
The opening political dialogue did not seek to resolve these tensions, but rather to make them visible and to situate the rest of the meeting within a realistic political context. The exchange reinforced the need to move beyond consultation towards **shared responsibility and accountability.** This dialogue provided a crucial reference point for the capacity-building workshops and collective reflections that followed. It clarified why strengthening the confidence, skills, and collective power of people experiencing poverty is a **necessary condition for meaningful participation in shaping Europe's social and anti-poverty agenda.** The following section presents a thematic overview, including the key challenges, solutions, and messages identified during the workshops.

6. RECLAIMING POWER: CAPACITY-BUILDING WORKSHOPS

The *Reclaiming Power* workshops formed one of the core methodological and political components of the 23rd European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty. In total, **8 thematic capacity-building workshops** were delivered over the two days, each addressing a key dimension of participation and advocacy identified as critical by people experiencing poverty themselves. The selection of workshop themes was informed by a **prioritisation process carried out with PEP delegates during the preparatory phase**, including a survey and discussions with the PEP National Coordinators. Through this process, delegates identified the areas where they felt the strongest need for skills, confidence, and collective tools in order to participate meaningfully at local, national, and EU levels. This participatory approach ensured that the programme responded directly to lived needs of the delegates.

Alongside the workshops, delegates were also invited to choose among a series of **institutional exchanges and study visits**, including meetings with the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Marius Jacob Foundation, and the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA). These encounters were designed to complement the internal capacity-building work by providing concrete exposure to EU decision-making spaces

and to enable delegates to reflect on how participation unfolds in different institutional contexts. Taken together, the workshops and study visits formed a coherent learning pathway: strengthening internal capacities, creating shared analytical language, and then testing these insights in real political environments. The workshops focused on six interconnected thematic priorities affecting people experiencing poverty: from storytelling and public speaking to advocacy, inclusion, digital civic space, and participation within EAPN.



Across all workshops, a common thread emerged: people experiencing poverty are too often expected to.

contribute to policy debates without having been given the time, tools, or safety needed to do so on equal footing. The workshops therefore aimed to rebalance this dynamic by creating peer-led, participatory spaces where delegates could reflect on power, voice, representation, and influence, while strengthening their capacity to engage across local, national, and European contexts.

6.1. FROM STORIES TO POWER: BUILDING MOVEMENTS THAT LAST

The session, delivered by **Fernando Chironda**, Senior Participation & Network Development Officer at EAPN, explored how personal experiences of poverty can be transformed into collective narratives capable of driving social and political change. The workshop framed stories as a form of political power when they are shared, connected, and mobilised collectively. The session sought to help delegates move from individual experiences to a shared understanding of structural injustice, and to reflect on how stories can contribute to building sustained movements rather than isolated moments of visibility.

Participants reflected on the central role that personal stories play in participation processes, while also acknowledging their limits. Several delegates noted that they are often invited to share their stories in institutional settings, yet rarely see these stories translated into concrete policy changes. This led to a shared recognition that stories, when taken

in isolation, can risk reinforcing vulnerability rather than empowerment. Delegates from **EAPN Spain** and **EAPN Belgium** highlighted how repeated requests to recount personal hardship can be emotionally exhausting and, at times, re-traumatising. Others, including delegates from **EAPN Portugal**, stressed that storytelling becomes empowering only when individuals feel safe, respected, and confident that their experiences will be used responsibly.

A recurring reflection was that stories gain power when they are connected to one another and situated within a broader political analysis. Delegates recognised that while individual stories are unique, the patterns they reveal - precarious work, inadequate social protection, discrimination, stigma, and bureaucratic barriers - are shared across countries and contexts. Participants also discussed the risk of stories being instrumentalised by institutions or media, where emotional impact is valued over political substance. **Delegates expressed discomfort with being perceived primarily as “voices of suffering”, rather than as individuals with analysis, proposals, and agency.**

Another issue raised was the balance between visibility and protection. While visibility can amplify issues and attract attention, it can also expose people experiencing poverty to judgement, stigma, or backlash. Delegates noted that movements must respect the individual's choice in regard to levels of exposure and risk. These discussions highlighted a contradiction at the heart of participation: **storytelling is often demanded as proof of legitimacy, yet without collective framing and power-sharing, it can reinforce unequal relationships rather than challenge them.**

By the end of the session, delegates identified several concrete learning outcomes:

- A clearer understanding of the difference between individual testimony and collective narrative;
- Increased awareness of how to connect personal experiences to structural causes and political choices;
- Recognition of the importance of consent, safety, and boundaries in sharing stories;
- Greater confidence in using storytelling as a strategic tool rather than a personal obligation.

Delegates emphasised that building movements that last requires shifting the focus from isolated stories to shared demands, from visibility alone to influence, and from participation as exposure to participation as power.

Key takeaways:

- Stories are powerful when they are collective, not extractive;
- Sustainable movements require shared narratives, shared analysis, and shared leadership.
- Lived experience must be recognised as political knowledge, not emotional evidence;
- Safety and consent are essential conditions for storytelling and movement building.

6.2 PUBLIC SPEAKING: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION & STORYTELLING

The workshop, facilitated by **Susana Anastácio**, Senior Communications Officer at **EAPN**, focused on strengthening participants' ability to speak publicly with confidence, clarity, and purpose in political, institutional, and public spaces. This workshop addressed the personal and emotional dimensions of speaking out, particularly in contexts where people experiencing poverty often feel judged, delegitimised, or unheard. The session aimed to support delegates in recognising their own voice as legitimate, to demystify public speaking by showing it is a skill that can be learned and practiced, and to reflect on how confidence, structure, and intention can enhance the impact of participation.

Delegates shared that speaking in public or institutional settings often involves fear, self-doubt, and a sense

of not being “qualified enough” to speak. Several participants reflected on past experiences where they felt intimidated by technical language, formal settings, or the presence of perceived experts, which led them to question the value of their own contributions. Delegates from **EAPN France, EAPN Italy, and EAPN Ireland** described how these feelings are closely linked to experiences of stigma and internalised shame associated with poverty. For some, public speaking was not only about communicating a message, but about overcoming deeply rooted feelings of inadequacy and fear of being judged. At the same time, participants recognised moments in which speaking out had been empowering. Delegates shared experiences of addressing local authorities, community meetings, or national events, and reflected on how being listened to, even once, can shift self-perception and build confidence to engage again. A recurring reflection was that confidence does not come from eliminating fear, but from learning how to speak despite it. Participants highlighted the importance of preparation, structure, and peer support in building confidence over time.

Delegates noted that people experiencing poverty are often expected to be both emotionally compelling and politically coherent, while not being afforded the same tolerance for mistakes as institutional actors. This double standard contributes to anxiety and reinforces power imbalances within participation spaces. These discussions highlighted

that public speaking is deeply shaped by **power relations, norms of legitimacy, and social hierarchies.**

Through practical exercises and collective reflection, delegates explored several learning outcomes:

- Greater awareness of their own communication strengths and styles;
- Increased confidence in structuring a message with a clear purpose and key points;
- Practical strategies for managing nerves and speaking under pressure;
- Recognition that lived experience itself confers legitimacy and authority.

Participants emphasised that confidence grows through practice and collective support, and that safe spaces such as the PEP Meeting are essential for experimenting, learning, and building trust.

Key takeaways:

- Speaking with confidence is a skill that can be learned, not an innate talent;
- Lived experience is a legitimate source of authority in public and political spaces;
- Authenticity and preparation are complementary, not contradictory;
- Safe and supportive environments are essential for building confident participation.

6.3 ADVOCACY IN ACTION: HOW TO ENGAGE & INFLUENCE DECISION-MAKERS

This workshop was facilitated by **Jessica Machacova**, Senior Policy & Advocacy Officer at **EAPN**. It focused on strengthening delegates' understanding of advocacy as a collective, strategic, and political process aimed at achieving concrete change. The session sought to clarify what advocacy is – and what it is not – and provide practical tools to help people experiencing poverty engage more effectively with decision-makers at local, national, and European levels. Rather than presenting advocacy as a technical or professionalised activity reserved for experts, the workshop emphasised that advocacy is rooted in lived experience and collective action. It aimed to equip delegates with a shared framework and language to plan, structure, and carry out advocacy initiatives connected to their realities and priorities. Participants began by collectively reflecting on the meaning of advocacy. Delegates agreed that advocacy involves speaking up for rights, influencing laws or policies, and raising awareness with the explicit objective of seeking change. At the same time, they stressed that advocacy is often misunderstood or diluted, particularly when reduced to visibility without impact.

Delegates highlighted that people experiencing poverty are frequently involved in awareness-raising activities, yet are rarely supported to move beyond testimony towards

influence. Several participants noted that they are often asked to share their stories without being given the tools or opportunities to engage in decision-making processes where change can be negotiated.

Through discussion and practical exercises, participants reflected on the multiple levels at which advocacy can take place. Delegates recognised that advocacy is not limited to national or European institutions, but also includes action at community and individual levels. Experiences shared by delegates illustrated how local advocacy – such as engaging with municipalities, schools, or social services – can be a powerful entry point, particularly when connected to broader collective strategies. A key reflection emerging from the session was the importance of clarity and intention. Delegates emphasised that advocacy efforts are most effective when the problem is clearly defined, the objective is specific and achievable, and the target audience is well identified. Participants reflected that without this clarity, advocacy risks becoming diffuse, exhausting, and ultimately ineffective. Delegates discussed the difficulty of engaging decision-makers who may be inaccessible, unresponsive, or unwilling to listen to people experiencing poverty.

One of the key issues raised during the session was the balance between individual and collective advocacy. While individual cases can highlight injustice and trigger action, delegates cautioned against advocacy approaches that focus exclusively

on individual solutions without addressing structural causes. Participants stressed that systemic change requires collective advocacy, shared objectives, and sustained mobilisation. There was also discussion about the risk of advocacy fatigue. Delegates noted that repeated engagement without visible outcomes can lead to discouragement and disengagement, particularly when advocacy is carried out alongside daily struggles linked to poverty and exclusion. This highlighted the importance of realistic objectives, shared responsibility, and mutual support.

By the end of the session, delegates identified several concrete learning outcomes:

- A shared understanding of advocacy as a process aimed at change, not visibility alone;
- Increased clarity on the different levels of advocacy (micro, middle and macro) and how they complement each other;
- Practical tools to define advocacy problems, objectives, targets, allies, and opponents;
- Greater awareness of the importance of planning, prioritisation, and timelines in advocacy work.

Participants also gained familiarity with a six-step framework for planning advocacy strategies, including defining the problem, identifying objectives, power mapping and stakeholders, selecting appropriate tools, and setting priorities over time.

Key takeaways:

- Advocacy is about seeking change, not only raising awareness;
- People experiencing poverty are legitimate advocates for their own rights;
- Effective advocacy requires clarity of objectives, targets, and strategies;
- Systemic change depends on collective, not individual, advocacy efforts.

6.4 THE “MISSING VOICES”: WHO’S LEFT OUT & HOW TO BUILD MORE INCLUSIVE, DIVERSE NETWORKS

This session, facilitated by EAPN’s Senior Policy & Advocacy Officer, Marie-Amah Kouadio, in collaboration with Florian Sanden, from the European Network for Independent Living (ENIL) and Laetitia Van der Vennet, from the Platform for International Cooperation for Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), focused on critically examining who is absent from participation spaces, why these absences persist, and what this reveals about power, accessibility, and representation within participation processes. The session invited delegates to reflect on their own presence at the PEP Meeting, as well as on those who are systematically excluded or underrepresented in advocacy and decision-making spaces. The workshop framed inclusion as a political question linked to power relations, structural barriers, and the design of participation spaces themselves.

Participants were encouraged to reflect on how networks function, who they amplify, and whose voices remain unheard. Delegates identified multiple groups whose voices are often missing from participation processes, including people experiencing homelessness, undocumented migrants, people living in institutions, those deprived of liberty, people with disabilities, individuals facing severe mental health challenges, and those living in extreme poverty or social isolation. Participants noted that these absences are produced by structural barriers such as lack of information, inaccessible formats, financial constraints, fear of sanctions, language barriers, and stigma.

Delegates from **EAPN Germany** and **EAPN Greece** reflected on how participation opportunities often reach those who are already somewhat connected to organisations or networks, while those in the most precarious situations remain excluded. Others highlighted that participation spaces can unintentionally reproduce inequalities when they rely on written communication, digital tools, or formal meeting formats that are not accessible to everyone. Several delegates emphasised the role trust plays in inclusion. They noted that people who have experienced repeated exclusion or punitive treatment by institutions may be reluctant to engage in participation processes, particularly when these are perceived as extractive or disconnected from tangible outcomes. Participants argued that building trust requires time,

consistency, and the involvement of trusted intermediaries at community level.

Delegates also questioned to what extent those present in participation spaces can legitimately speak on behalf of others whose experiences may be more extreme or different from their own. While recognising the importance of collective representation, participants warned against assuming that presence automatically equates to representativeness. Delegates acknowledged that networks have boundaries and may struggle to reach people who are disconnected, distrustful, or facing acute crises. This raised questions about how networks can remain open, reflexive, and accountable to those they do not easily reach. Participants also reflected on the risk of inclusion becoming symbolic. Inviting diverse voices into spaces that are not designed to accommodate their needs, or that do not allow for real influence, can reinforce exclusion rather than counter it. Delegates stressed that inclusion must be accompanied by structural change, resources, and power-sharing.

Key takeaways:

- Missing voices are the result of structural barriers, not lack of interest;
- Inclusion must address power, accessibility, and trust, not only representation;

- Networks have a responsibility to reflect on who they reach and who they exclude;
- Participation spaces must be designed with, not for, those most at risk of exclusion.

6.5 PARTICIPATION IN ACTION: EMBEDDING PEP VOICES ACROSS EAPN'S WORK

The workshop *Participation in Action* within EAPN focused on examining how meaningful participation of people experiencing poverty is organised, supported, and sustained within EAPN itself. The session invited delegates to reflect on EAPN as a participatory structure with responsibilities, limits, and internal power dynamics. Delegates reflected on the importance of EAPN as a space that enables people experiencing poverty to access European-level advocacy and decision-making processes. Many highlighted that without the support of EAPN and its national networks, participation at EU level would be inaccessible for most people experiencing poverty. At the same time, participants acknowledged that participation within EAPN is uneven across countries and contexts. Delegates from **EAPN Italy**, **EAPN Latvia**, and **EAPN Cyprus** noted differences in how national networks organise participation, the resources available, and the level of institutional recognition afforded to PEP delegates. These disparities affect who can participate, how prepared they feel, and how consistently they are supported over time.

Reflecting on EAPN internal structure, several delegates emphasised the keyrole of the **PEP National Coordinators (PEPCo) as a structure to centre participatory approaches, promoting continuity, preparation, and collective reflection.** The PEPCo was described as a key mechanism for strengthening confidence, exchanging experiences across countries, and developing shared positions. Participants stressed that the role of PEP Coordinators should be further strengthened and clearly recognised through its meaningful engagement within EAPN's governance and decision-making processes.

Delegates also reflected on the relationship between PEP delegates, EAPN staff, and national coordinators, as well as on how they see their active participation on EAPN policy, campaigns, communications work, governance and structures. While many described this relationship as supportive and respectful, some noted ambiguities around roles, expectations, and decision-making power. Participants highlighted the need for clearer communication regarding how PEP input feeds into advocacy positions, campaigns, and policy work. Delegates noted that while EAPN strongly affirms participation as a core principle, translating this commitment into consistent practice across a diverse network remains challenging. One recurring issue concern representation and accountability. Delegates reflected on how PEP representatives are selected, supported, and accountable both

to their national networks and to people experiencing poverty more broadly. While recognising the difficulty of representing diverse realities, participants stressed the importance of transparency and feedback mechanisms to avoid isolation or tokenisation.

There were several learning outcomes from this session:

- Increased awareness of the need for consistency and equity in participation support across national networks;
- Recognition of the PEPCo as a central pillar for continuity and collective empowerment;
- Greater recognition on the importance of feedback loops between PEP delegates, national networks, and EAPN secretariat.

Key takeaways:

- Participation must be structurally embedded within EAPN, not dependent on individuals;
- The PEP Committee plays a critical role in ensuring continuity, preparation, and collective voice;
- Clear roles, resources, and feedback mechanisms are essential for credible participation;
- Shared responsibility is necessary to prevent burnout and tokenisation.

6.6 DIGITAL CIVIC SPACE: ESSENTIALS FOR AN ENGAGED ONLINE VOICE

This workshop was facilitated by **Donal Brady**, Communications and Membership Engagement Officer at **Eurodiaconia**, and focused on the growing role of digital tools and online spaces in participation, advocacy, and civic engagement, while critically examining the risks and power dynamics associated with digitalisation. The session invited delegates to reflect on how digital spaces can both enable and undermine participation for people experiencing poverty, depending on how they are designed, governed, and supported. The objective of the workshop was to strengthen delegates' understanding of digital participation as a political issue, not merely a technical one, and to explore the conditions under which digital civic space can be safe, inclusive, and empowering.

Participants reflected on the increasing expectation that participation takes place online, through video meetings, digital consultations, social media, and online campaigns. While recognising the potential of digital tools to overcome geographical barriers and facilitate cross-border exchanges, delegates stressed that digital participation is far from neutral or universally accessible. Delegates from **EAPN Romania**, **EAPN Bulgaria**, and **EAPN Ireland** highlighted persistent digital divides linked to poverty, including lack of access to devices, unstable internet connections, limited

digital skills, and dependence on shared or public access points. For some participants, digital participation was described as fragile and conditional, easily disrupted by financial constraints or unstable living conditions. Participants discussed the emotional and psychological dimensions of digital participation. Several delegates shared concerns about exposure, surveillance, and online harassment, particularly when speaking publicly about poverty, migration, or discrimination. For people experiencing poverty, visibility in digital spaces can carry significant risks, including stigma, backlash, and misuse of personal narratives.

A recurring reflection was that digital spaces often amplify power imbalances. Participants noted that those with higher digital literacy, institutional backing, or professional communication skills are more likely to be heard and taken seriously online, while others remain invisible or silenced. It was identified that digital formats are often promoted as cost-effective and efficient alternatives to in-person participation. However, this efficiency can come at the expense of trust-building, emotional safety, and meaningful exchange, particularly for people who rely on informal interaction and peer support.

Key takeaways:

- Digital participation can both enable and exclude, depending on access and design;

- Safety, consent, and protection are essential in digital civic spaces;
- Digital tools should complement, not replace, in-person participation;
- Bridging digital divides is a prerequisite for meaningful digital participation.

6.7 FUNDRAISING FOR CHANGE: MOBILISING RESOURCES FOR PEOPLE-LED WORK

Led by **EAPN's** Director **Juliana Wahlgren**, this workshop aimed to shed light on fundraising and resource mobilisation for people-led initiatives and organisations working with and led by people experiencing poverty. It responded to a recurring concern raised across national networks: the growing difficulty of accessing sustainable funding, particularly in a context of funding cuts, and shifting political priorities. The session sought to equip participants with a clearer understanding of different funding landscapes (EU funds, foundations, private donors), while also grounding discussions in the political realities affecting anti-poverty work.

Juliana opened the session acknowledging the current funding environment marked by budget cuts and the redirection of public resources toward defence and security. Participants reflected on the structural imbalance whereby funding is available for areas such as strategic litigation,

climate, security, or innovation, while poverty-related work remains underfunded despite its scale and urgency. Delegates discussed the importance of interpersonal relationships in fundraising, particularly with foundations, where trust, long-term engagement, and clarity of purpose were repeatedly highlighted as decisive factors. Several participants noted that fundraising is often perceived as inaccessible or overly technical, especially for grassroots or volunteer-led initiatives. The discussion also surfaced the emotional and political dimensions of fundraising. Participants expressed discomfort with having to constantly justify the legitimacy of poverty-related work, while recognising the need to articulate change in ways that resonate with funders' expectations.

Participants left the session with several practical learnings, including:

- A clearer understanding of the differences between EU funding and private foundation funding;
- Awareness of key requirements for EU-level projects (EU dimension, financial capacity, co-financing);
- Recognition of the importance of defining a Theory of Change and being explicit about intended systemic impact;
- Increased confidence in approaching foundations through relationship-building rather than one-off applications.

Key takeaways:

- Funding for poverty work is political, not neutral;
- People-led organisations must be supported to access resources, not obstructed by complexity;
- Sustainable funding requires trust, time, and clarity of purpose;
- Resource mobilisation should support systemic change, not short-term fixes.

6.8 DEFENDING CIVIC SPACE: HOW PEP CAN PLAY A ROLE IN RESISTING ATTACKS AGAINST CIVIL SOCIETY

This workshop, led by **Eve Geddie** from **Amnesty International's** EU Office, explored the erosion of civic space across Europe and examined how people experiencing poverty (PEP) can actively contribute to defending democratic freedoms, civil society, and participation rights. The session sat within a broader European context marked by increasing restrictions on civil society organisations, shrinking funding opportunities, and the normalisation of stigmatising and punitive narratives against marginalised groups. It sought to bridge lived experiences of exclusion, repression, and discrimination with wider human rights and democratic trends at EU level. It aimed to highlight that attacks on civic space are not abstract or distant phenomena, but directly affect the ability of people experiencing poverty to organise,

speak out, and participate in decision-making processes. The facilitator introduced civic space as the enabling environment that allows individuals and communities to organise, express opinions, participate in public life, and access resources and funding. Eve stressed that Europe can no longer be considered immune to threats against civic freedoms, pointing to growing restrictions on protests, increased surveillance, barriers to funding, and targeted measures against specific groups.

Participants shared concrete experiences of **political hostility, stigmatising narratives, and discriminatory practices**, particularly affecting migrants, racialised communities, LGBTIQ+ people, and people living in poverty. Delegates from **Sweden, the Czech Republic, and North Macedonia** described how political shifts, shrinking democratic accountability, and corruption have undermined trust in institutions, weakened follow-up on participation processes, and reduced opportunities for meaningful engagement. Several participants highlighted how civic space is often constrained indirectly, through administrative burdens, lack of transparency, or the delegitimisation of civil society actors rather than through explicit bans. Across interventions, delegates emphasised that people experiencing poverty are often among the first to be affected when civic space shrinks, as they rely heavily on civil society organisations and collective action to access rights, protection, and voice.

Breakout group discussions highlighted fragmentation and division as major barriers to collective resistance. Participants noted that strategies that pit groups against each other - for example, along nationality, migration status, or identity lines - weaken solidarity and reduce the capacity to respond effectively to attacks on civic space.

At the same time, delegates underlined the importance of alliances and cross-movement solidarity, stressing that defending civic space requires cooperation between anti-poverty organisations, human rights actors, and other social movements. Lived experience was repeatedly identified as a powerful resource for raising awareness, mobilising communities, and challenging dominant narratives that normalise repression or exclusion.

In terms of concrete learning outcomes, participants identified:

- A clearer understanding of civic space as a precondition for participation and democracy, not a separate issue;
- Increased awareness that attacks on civil society disproportionately affect people experiencing poverty;
- Recognition of the importance of alliances and collective action in resisting repression;
- Greater confidence in using lived experience as a tool for solidarity, mobilisation, and democratic resistance.

Key takeaways:

- Civic space is essential for participation and democracy;
- Defending civic space is part of anti-poverty work;
- Solidarity and alliances are key to resisting repression;
- Lived experience can strengthen democratic resistance.

7. SPACES OF INFLUENCE: CONNECTING VOICES TO EU CHANGEMAKERS

The study visits and institutional encounters formed a central component of the 23rd European Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty. In total, **five distinct spaces of influence** were offered to PEP delegates, each representing a different dimension of European decision-making, advocacy, or resource allocation. These sessions were designed to move participation beyond internal reflection and capacity-building, by placing PEP delegates directly in dialogue with EU institutions, advocacy organisations, and philanthropic actors. The objective was

to familiarise PEP delegates with European decision-making spaces, and to critically explore power dynamic power operates within them: what access is granted or restricted, and how lived experience can meaningfully influence change.

These encounters were framed as learning and accountability spaces. Delegates were encouraged to engage critically, put questions, and reflect on how institutional commitments translate - or fail - to translate into lived realities.



7.1. EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The visit to the **European Parliament** aimed to familiarise PEP delegates with the legislative and political dynamics shaping EU-level anti-poverty debates, with a particular focus on the Parliament's role in advancing the European Anti-Poverty Strategy (APS). The visit sought to highlight both the Parliament's potential as a space for political influence and alliance-building, and the constraints linked to political opposition and the division of competences between EU institutions and Member States.

Delegates met with **João Oliveira**, Member of the European Parliament and of the Parliament's Intergroup on Fighting against Poverty. Oliveira is also the rapporteur for the European Parliament's Own-Initiative (INI) report³ developing a new EU anti-poverty strategy, shaping the Parliament's position in the development of upcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy (APS). He highlighted that **participation is one of the core elements of the Parliament's report**, acknowledging the longstanding work of EAPN in this field. The discussion focused on the Parliament's report on the European Anti-Poverty Strategy and the political challenges surrounding its adoption.

The MEP explained that the European Parliament decided to produce a report on the APS to establish **political guidelines and expectations for the European Commission**. The drafting process involved extensive

negotiations, resulting in strong support within the competent committee, with **42 votes in favour and 12 against**, the opposition primarily from far-right groups. Oliveira acknowledged concerns that some elements could still be weakened or removed ahead of the final vote. Despite these risks, he described the report as a political achievement, particularly because it frames **poverty as a violation of fundamental human rights**. He stressed that the report deliberately avoids a narrow or purely economic definition of poverty, instead adopting a comprehensive approach that includes social, cultural, and political dimensions, as well as issues of dignity, discrimination, and access to rights. He highlighted the importance of the Parliament as a space where political narratives can be challenged and alliances built, but also acknowledged the growing resistance from far-right groups opposing social and redistributive policies.

PEP delegates actively engaged in the discussion, raising questions about participation, political will, and implementation. Several highlighted the **challenges people experiencing poverty face in engaging politically while simultaneously struggling to meet basic needs**, questioning how participation can be made genuinely accessible and empowering. Delegates also asked about the strengths and vulnerabilities of the report, the seriousness of parliamentary commitment to advancing the APS,

and the realistic expectations given the Parliament's limited competences in social policy. Others raised broader questions about whether poverty can truly be eradicated, stressing that poverty is not only material but also moral and relational, linked to respect, recognition, and dignity. PEP delegates raised concerns about the gap between political declarations and lived realities, particularly regarding child poverty, discrimination, and access to social protection. Several participants questioned how parliamentary debates and reports can lead to concrete change when implementation remains largely dependent on Member States. One delegate reflected that

“being in the Parliament makes you realise both the potential and the limits of politics. There are allies, but also strong forces working against social justice.”

In response, Oliveira reiterated that **eradicating poverty is a political choice, not a technical impossibility**. He argued that today's level of productivity and wealth make poverty eradication possible, and that failure to achieve it reflects political choices rather than economic constraints. He contrasted the long-term ambition of eradicating poverty with EU commitments to military investment, questioning why social goals should be treated as less urgent. This reasoning underpinned the report's call for a 2035 horizon for eradicating poverty and homelessness, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals and the European Pillar of Social Rights. **He also**

emphasised that the APS alone cannot deliver change without strong national and local anti-poverty strategies, adequate funding, accountability mechanisms, and participation at all levels. Drawing on his own experience leading the INI report, he described how it was informed by consultations with people experiencing poverty, Roma communities, and people with disabilities, and how these voices were directly reflected in parliamentary debates.

Further exchanges addressed issues of wealth inequality, fiscal policy, and the uneven distribution of resources across the EU. Oliveira noted that while proposals such as progressive taxation could not be fully secured in the report, fiscal justice and inequality were clearly addressed. He highlighted the support received from bodies such as the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, which helped strengthen the report's comprehensive approach.

Delegates raised concerns about implementation gaps at national level, citing examples such as uneven engagement with the European Child Guarantee and labour law reforms that undermine job quality despite EU-level commitments. Questions were also raised about how Member States can be compelled to act, with João Oliveira stressing that adequate funding is a key lever for ensuring implementation. Delegates stressed that representation and direct participation should be seen as complementary, not competing, and warned that shrinking civic space

and attacks on civil society - often driven by far-right narratives - directly undermine democratic participation and social justice.

Outcomes:

- A clearer understanding of the European Parliament's role as a political and agenda-setting institution in shaping anti-poverty debates;
- Increased awareness of how political dynamics, opposition, and power relations influence social policy outcomes;
- Recognition that effective parliamentary engagement requires sustained advocacy, alliance-building, and long-term mobilisation, particularly in the face of growing resistance to social and redistributive policies.

7.2 EUROPEAN COMMISSION (DG EMPL)

The visit to the European Commission's **Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL)** was designed to deepen PEP delegates' understanding of the Commission's role in shaping, coordinating, and monitoring EU social policy across Member States. The exchange was closely connected to ongoing work on the APS, as well as related frameworks such as the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Child Guarantee, situating delegates' lived experiences within current EU policy processes and institutional responsibilities.

Delegates engaged in an open exchange with several Commission officials on poverty reduction targets, policy coordination mechanisms, and the structural limits of EU competences in the social field. Commission representatives reaffirmed their commitment to reducing poverty, while acknowledging that progress to date remains insufficient to meet defined targets. Officials underlined that **the European Anti-Poverty Strategy represents the first time the Commission has placed the fight against poverty so prominently on the political agenda, with the intention of providing a comprehensive and meaningful framework capable of shaping future policy priorities and funding negotiations.** Commission officials recalled the European Pillar of Social Rights, adopted in 2017, structured around 20 principles grouped under three chapters covering equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. They also referred to the 2021 Action Plan on the Pillar, which committed the Commission to advancing 75 initiatives and set three headline EU targets for 2030:

- an employment rate of 78% among people aged 20-64 (currently around 73%);
- annual participation of 60% of adults in training (currently below 40%);
- a reduction of at least 15 million people at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Commission representatives **acknowledged that progress on poverty reduction has so far been insufficient, with only around 1.5–2 million people lifted out of poverty since 2021.** However, they stressed that all Member States have set their own national targets, and that meeting these collectively would allow the EU to reach its overall objectives. In response to questions raised by PEP delegates about the feasibility of these targets, Commission officials noted that they were set before successive crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which have since significantly altered the social and economic context. The discussion also highlighted the scale and complexity of poverty across Europe, with Commission officials recalling that over 93.3 million people are currently at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and that poverty affects multiple groups, including workers, older people, and children. Particular attention was given to in-work poverty, precarious employment, and the situation of people who fall below the poverty line upon retirement.

The discussion also addressed the European Child Guarantee, presented as a key instrument to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty, by supporting Member States in ensuring access to essential services for children most in need. Commission officials explained that the Commission's role includes supporting implementation through evidence-gathering, exchange of good practices, and coordination with national Child Guarantee coordinators in each

Member State. Delegates emphasised that tackling child poverty requires addressing parental poverty and broader structural inequalities, not only service provision.

Participants raised critical questions about how lived experience is integrated into policy design, implementation, and evaluation, and how feedback from participatory processes - such as the European Commission Consultation of People Experiencing Poverty in September 2025 - is translated into tangible policy outcomes. Several delegates voiced frustration over the lack of transparency and visibility regarding how contributions are taken forward and how accountability is ensured within EU processes. Commission officials acknowledged these concerns and stressed that effective implementation of EU strategies ultimately depends on Member States, regions, and local authorities, noting that the Commission alone cannot deliver change without strong national and subnational engagement. They highlighted that future progress will also be shaped by upcoming funding cycles, with the next major financial framework expected from 2028 onwards.

The discussion brought to light a **recurring gap between policy ambition and implementation**, with delegates emphasising that coordination, data, and recommendations alone are not sufficient without stronger political commitment and adequate resources at national level.

Outcomes:

- A clearer understanding of the Commission's coordinating and monitoring role within shared social competences;
- Increased awareness of the structural limits of EU social competences and the central role of Member States;
- Recognition of the need for clearer feedback loops, transparency, and accountability mechanisms to ensure that participation leads to concrete policy impact.

7.3 EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE (EESC)

The visit to the **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** aimed to build PEP delegates' insight into its advisory role within the EU institutional architecture and explore its potential as a meaningful platform for civil society engagement, including the direct participation of people experiencing poverty. The exchange highlighted the EESC's function as a bridge between EU institutions and organised civil society, providing opinions and recommendations that contribute to the EU's policy-making process.

Delegates were introduced to the EESC's mandate, composition, and working methods, with particular attention to how civil society organisations, social partners, and grassroots actors can contribute to

shaping EU policies through this forum. **Susanna Baizou**, Deputy Head of the Cabinet of EESC President Séamus Boland, explained that the Committee brings together over 300 members from three main groups - employers, trade unions, and civil society organisations - and acts as a consultative body issuing opinions on draft EU legislation before its adoption. EESC representatives presented the Committee's advisory mandate and its role in providing opinions to the European Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament. **They highlighted the Committee's recent work on poverty-related issues, including own-initiative opinions contributing to the European Anti-Poverty Strategy** and the European Child Guarantee, positioning the EESC as an institutional ally in keeping poverty, housing, and homelessness on the EU agenda.

Participants discussed both the opportunities and limits of advisory influence, particularly in relation to social and anti-poverty policies. Delegates reflected on the accessibility of the EESC as an institutional space and its potential to amplify civil society voices. Several exchanges focused on the indirect nature of influence, with participants noting that **while the EESC can bring societal concerns to EU level, tracing how advisory opinions translate into final policy decisions remains challenging**. Discussions also highlighted internal dynamics within the Committee, including the need to navigate differing positions between

employers, trade unions, and civil society groups. While compromises are often necessary, participants noted that this can sometimes lead to diluted outcomes, especially when resistance to social change persists within certain groups. Delegates raised practical questions about how civil society networks, including EAPN members, can engage more effectively with the EESC. EESC representatives explained that national members of the Committee can serve as important entry points or “gateways” **for bringing national concerns to EU level, encouraging networks to identify and connect with relevant members from their countries.** The role of the EESC as a space for dialogue on emerging issues - such as access to water, housing affordability, homelessness, and poverty prevention - was also addressed. The political context was also discussed, with EESC representatives acknowledging shifts in EU priorities towards competitiveness, security, and defence. In this context, **participants noted the renewed relevance of the EESC’s efforts to keep poverty, housing, and homelessness visible on the EU agenda.**

Outcomes:

- Greater clarity on the EESC’s advisory role within EU governance and its consultative function;
- Increased awareness of its potential as an entry point for civil society engagement and agenda-setting at EU level;

- Recognition of the importance of national-level connections to EESC members as a strategy for amplifying lived experience and civil society concerns;
- Recognition of the need to strengthen links between advisory input and concrete policy outcomes.

7.4 EUROPEAN FEDERATION OF NATIONAL ORGANISATIONS WORKING WITH THE HOMELESS (FEANTSA)

Visiting **FEANTSA** aimed to equip delegates with a deeper understanding of EU-level advocacy on homelessness and housing exclusion, and to explore how lived experience is integrated into policy advocacy and research. The exchange also sought to **situate homelessness within broader social, housing, and migration dynamics, and to examine how rights-based approaches can challenge punitive and control-oriented responses.**

Delegates met with **FEANTSA’s** Director **Freek Spinnewijn** and Project Officer **Silvia Busi**, who presented the organisation’s work on homelessness, housing rights, and social inclusion. FEANTSA explained its role as a European network of over 150 member organisations across the EU, ranging from grassroots groups to national NGOs and service providers, many of which work directly with people experiencing homelessness through

housing, shelter, health, and social support services. **Homelessness was discussed as a multidimensional reality**, encompassing not only rough sleeping and emergency shelters, but also people living in insecure accommodation, staying with family or friends due to lack of alternatives, and women fleeing domestic violence. While people living in inadequate housing are not formally included in FEANTSA's core definition, they were recognised as part of a broader continuum of housing exclusion. Discussions addressed the **increasing criminalisation of homelessness and the dominance of control-oriented responses over rights-based approaches**. Participants noted that punitive measures often target visibility rather than root causes, reinforcing stigma and exclusion instead of providing sustainable solutions. **FEANTSA representatives emphasised the need to shift public narratives away from blame and towards structural responsibility, including access to housing, social protection, and support services.**

Participants reflected on the importance of combining research, policy expertise, and lived experience to challenge dominant narratives and influence policy debates. FEANTSA highlighted the role of its European Observatory on Homelessness, which coordinates research and produces evidence -including the only academic journal dedicated to homelessness - to inform advocacy and institutional dialogue. Delegates underlined that evidence alone is insufficient without the voices of those directly affected.

Several delegates emphasised the value of alliances between thematic organisations and people experiencing poverty. One delegate remarked that *“seeing how research and lived experience are brought together here shows that our voices can strengthen arguments, not weaken them.* Specific attention was given to groups disproportionately affected by homelessness, including migrants - who represent a significant share of homeless populations in several countries - as well as young people, particularly those leaving institutional care, LGBTIQ+ youth forced to leave family homes, and young people affected by the housing crisis. Participants noted that **these groups are often less visible in public spaces and therefore harder to reach and support.**

On participation, FEANTSA representatives stressed the importance of co-designing activities with people with lived experience, including within European platforms such as the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH). They acknowledged ongoing challenges in ensuring that participation is meaningful rather than tokenistic, and **highlighted the need to balance inclusion with care, particularly to avoid re-traumatisation.** They emphasised that respecting lived experience should not prevent critical dialogue or disagreement in advocacy.

Outcomes:

- Increased understanding of EU-level homelessness advocacy and FEANTSA's role within it;
- Greater awareness of homelessness as a multidimensional and structural issue, closely linked to housing markets, migration, and social exclusion;
- Recognition of the importance of combining research, policy expertise, and lived experience in advocacy;
- Awareness of the risks of punitive and criminalising approaches to poverty and homelessness, and the need for rights-based alternatives.

7.5 MARIUS JACOB FOUNDATION

The encounter with the Marius Jacob Foundation aimed to **explore alternative funding models that prioritise trust, participation, and power redistribution, particularly in supporting grassroots and people-led initiatives**. The exchange also sought to challenge dominant philanthropic and institutional funding logics by examining how funding practices themselves shape power relations, access, and autonomy.

Delegates met with representatives of the Marius Jacob Foundation, who presented their grant-making approach **based on long-term relationships, flexibility, and shared decision-making**.

The Foundation explained its origins as a grassroots-led initiative created by activists in Brussels in response

to structural gaps in traditional funding, particularly for underfunded social causes. It was presented as a mechanism to redistribute resources horizontally, prioritising accessibility over bureaucratic compliance. Participants contrasted this model with more rigid funding mechanisms that often exclude grassroots actors due to complex application procedures, reporting requirements, or the need for professionalised administrative capacity. Delegates highlighted how such barriers disproportionately affect people-led initiatives and informal collectives, especially those working at the intersection of poverty, discrimination, and social exclusion. The exchange prompted reflection on funding not only as a resource, but as a site of power. Delegates highlighted **how trust-based funding can strengthen autonomy, dignity, and sustainability for people-led initiatives**. The Foundation described its use of participatory grant-making processes, including rotating and randomly selected juries, self-assessment of needs, and minimal reporting requirements, as deliberate choices to shift decision-making power towards those closest to the issues.

As one participant noted,

“this is the first time funding was discussed as something that can empower us, not control us.”

Discussions also addressed the practical and political limits of trust-based models, including questions about scale, safeguarding, and sustainability, noting that maintaining trust-based principles becomes more challenging as organisations grow, but stressed the importance of preserving core values even when adapting procedures. Participants reflected on **how trust, transparency, and ongoing relationships - rather than performance metrics alone - can provide meaningful accountability.** Several delegates raised questions about access to funding across different national contexts, particularly in countries where legal, banking, or regulatory frameworks create additional barriers for grassroots initiatives. The Foundation explained its role in easing access to banking and fiscal hosting for informal collectives, while recognising that its current grant-making scope remains geographically limited. The discussion also touched on the broader political context, including **increasing pressure on civil society organisations, shrinking public funding, and the risk of state repression or reputational attacks against grassroots movements.** Participants reflected on how alternative funding models can contribute to resilience, while recognising that they cannot replace the need for structural public investment and supportive policy environments.

Outcomes:

- Exposure to alternative, trust-based and participatory funding models;
- Recognition of funding as a space where power can be shared or withheld;
- Increased awareness of how funding practices can either reproduce exclusion or actively support autonomy, dignity, and collective agency;
- Increased awareness of the need to align funding practices with participation values.

8. EXCHANGE & FEEDBACK FROM THE WORKSHOPS AND STUDY VISITS

Day 2 opened with a collective recap of Day 1, creating a dedicated space for participants to reflect together on the workshops and study visits and to connect insights, emotions, and learning across experiences.

Introduced by the EAPN Secretariat staff, the focus of the day shifted deliberately inward, **placing emphasis on peer exchange, shared reflection, and collective sense-making.**

Working in small groups, participants were invited to reflect on the moments they found most meaningful and transformative, and on how these experiences could inform their future engagement at national and European level. Reflections highlighted the value of being heard by institutional actors, particularly during exchanges with Members of the European Parliament and EU institutions, as well as the importance of direct, human interaction in demystifying how EU decision-making works. Many participants described the study visits and workshops as “rich in learning”, noting how they helped translate abstract policy discussions into concrete realities and practical ideas. The exchanges with organisations such as FEANTSA and the Marius Jacob Foundation were frequently cited as transformative, particularly in relation to housing, homelessness, and alternative funding

models, as they offered **replicable practices and new ways of thinking about power, participation, and action at local level.**

Beyond content, participants consistently underlined the importance of connection and community-building: **getting to know each other, exchanging lived experiences across countries, and having informal spaces to talk and reflect** were seen as essential outcomes of the meeting. Hospitality, logistics, and shared social moments were recognised as enabling conditions for trust, openness, and meaningful participation. The recap also generated forward-looking reflections on how future PEP Meetings could be strengthened. **Participants called for more time for exchange, deeper capacity-building formats, stronger participation during institutional visits, clearer preparation and follow-up, and better tools to connect European-level discussions with national networks.**

9. VISIONS, ROADMAP & MILESTONES FOR PEP WITHIN EAPN

This was a moment focused on shaping a shared vision for the future of People Experiencing Poverty (PEP) participation within EAPN, while situating this discussion within the wider political and financial context in which the network currently operates. Two interconnected dimensions framed the exchange: **how to strengthen PEP participation internally within EAPN**, and **how to navigate an increasingly restrictive external environment for civil society and anti-poverty advocacy at EU level**.

Shrinking civic space and political constraints

Participants were informed about significant political and financial shifts affecting EAPN's operating environment. Discussions highlighted how, over the past decade, EU budgetary priorities have increasingly shifted away from social inclusion and poverty reduction toward defence and security, with direct implications for civil society funding. Delegates were briefed on the evolving political composition of the European Parliament, where the growing influence of right-wing and far-right groups **has translated into increased scrutiny of civil society organisations**. Concerns were raised about new oversight mechanisms within the European Parliament's Budget Committee, including scrutiny groups explicitly monitoring how

the European Commission engages with CSOs. These developments **have already resulted in reduced funding ceilings, stricter eligibility rules, and limitations on how EAPN can frame and carry out its work**. Participants noted the democratic implications of these constraints, questioning how genuine participation and advocacy for poverty eradication can be sustained in such a context.

While acknowledging these challenges, the Secretariat underlined that EAPN's existence is not under immediate threat and that alternative ways of working are already being explored. At the same time, delegates recognised the need for vigilance and long-term strategic planning, particularly in view of future funding cycles.

Internal reflections: strengthening PEP participation and collective strategy

The discussion then shifted to the internal dimension: how to consolidate and deepen PEP participation as a core pillar of EAPN's work. Participants reflected on the current PEP Meeting format, **noting that this edition marked a deliberate shift toward capacity-building and peer exchange, informed by surveys and consultations with PEPs, the EXCO, and PEP Coordinators**.

Breakout group discussions generated a wide range of reflections and proposals, including:

- the value of study visits combined with fewer but longer workshops;
- the need for clearer preparation, shared materials, and contextual briefings in advance;
- stronger links between European discussions and national contexts, including regular online exchanges hosted by national networks;
- more time and space for peer-to-peer exchange, relationship-building, and reflection, particularly for first-time participants;
- improved feedback loops to ensure that learning and conclusions are shared back with national networks.

Delegates also explored longer-term formats, such as alternating PEP Meetings with more extended capacity-building initiatives (e.g. summer programmes), and creating ongoing spaces for experimentation and learning, such as a “PEP Lab”.

Towards a PEP Committee: governance, mandate, and representation

A key part of the session focused on the **proposal to establish a Committee of People with Lived Experience of Poverty within EAPN**, to monitor, influence, and evaluate social policies, particularly in light of the upcoming European Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Building on long-standing advocacy for structured and continuous participation of PEPs, participants discussed possible criteria for composition, including geographical balance, representation of different groups experiencing poverty, inclusivity, and voluntary engagement.

Different perspectives emerged regarding the role of external experts versus investing in training and supporting PEPs to develop their own expertise.

While no final model was agreed, there was broad consensus on the importance of:

- clarity on mandate, responsibilities, and decision-making power;
- appropriate recognition, compensation, and support;
- regular meetings and clear links with national networks and EAPN governance structures.

10. KEY MESSAGES & STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS FROM THE 23RD PEP MEETING

The meeting concluded with a collective reflection and endorsement of the PEP conclusions, offering participants space to articulate what the meeting meant for them, what they were taking forward, and how they envisaged their continued engagement at national and European levels. Across interventions, delegates consistently highlighted the **sense of community built throughout the meeting** as one of its most meaningful outcomes. Participants emphasised the value of having time and space to get to know one another, share personal stories, and recognise common struggles across countries. Many described this as **a rare opportunity to feel connected, heard, and valued within a broader European community of people experiencing poverty**.

The dialogue with EU institutions was also identified as a significant and empowering element. Study visits to the European Parliament and the European Commission were described as moments where participants felt listened to and taken seriously, particularly noting the openness and availability of MEPs and Commission representatives. These exchanges strengthened delegates' confidence and motivation to engage with political institutions at national level, recognising that poverty is a shared challenge across EU and national contexts.

When reflecting on what they were taking home from the meeting, delegates pointed to:

- **concrete knowledge and good practices** from workshops and study visits;
- **increased confidence and motivation** to engage with national authorities, political parties, and institutions;
- **a clearer understanding of what meaningful PEP engagement looks like**, grounded in respect, dialogue, and recognition of lived experience as expertise.

Participants also identified key elements they felt should be replicated or strengthened in future PEP Meetings, including:

- Maintaining and deepening spaces for **peer exchange, community-building, and mutual learning**;
- Reinforcing the idea that people experiencing poverty are experts, with **less reliance on external speakers**;
- Combining formats that **balance study visits, capacity-building, and policy-oriented discussions**;
- Strengthening follow-up at national level and **supporting PEPs to translate European-level engagement into local and national advocacy**.

Looking ahead, delegates expressed clear expectations for EAPN's priorities regarding PEP participation. These included ensuring that lived experience is clearly advocated for in the upcoming APS, supporting narrative shifts to challenge stigma and resist far-right discourse, and prioritising issues such as housing, income adequacy, and social protection. Several participants also stressed the importance of continued strategic reflection in a challenging political context, combining theory, practical tools, and real-life case studies.

Four interconnected pillars emerged as the shared foundation for future work: **community, connection, dialogue, and empowerment**. These were identified as the **building blocks for strengthening participation, adapting future PEP meetings formats, and shaping EAPN's strategic approach**. Delegates reaffirmed a collective commitment to participation rooted in dignity, rights, and power-sharing, underscoring that people experiencing poverty are not passive recipients of policy but active agents of change whose knowledge is essential to building just, inclusive, and democratic societies.

11. A COLLECTIVE COMMITMENT BEYOND THE MEETING

The closing plenary brought the meeting to an end by centring the human dimension of the days spent together and reaffirming a shared commitment to continue the work beyond the meeting space. This moment offered a pause to recognise what had been built collectively: **trust, strength, learning, and a renewed sense of political purpose and belonging**. PEP delegates representatives reflected on the meeting as a safe and empowering space, where experiences of hardship were met with respect and solidarity. Several highlighted how hearing one another's stories develops a deeper understanding that poverty is lived differently across contexts, while being shaped by common structural forces, fostering connection. This exchange of experiences was described **as a source of strength and inspiration to continue acting within national realities**. The closing also underscored the importance of learning as a form of resistance and continuity. Delegates emphasised that the most valuable outcome of the meeting, beyond increased knowledge about institutions or policies, was **the confidence built through collective reflection**. This confidence was framed as something participants would carry back to their communities, and in their work fighting poverty at national level.

During the closing remarks, Juliana Wahlgren, EAPN's Director, acknowledged that **the presence and engagement of PEP delegates remains a vital source of motivation and legitimacy for EAPN's work**. The meeting was framed as part of an ongoing collective journey grounded in mutual support and shared responsibility. Emphasis was placed on the need for institutions to guarantee inclusive participatory spaces – both within and beyond formal settings – and to treat language justice and accessibility as non-negotiable conditions for meaningful participation. The closing plenary reaffirmed a collective commitment: **to continue working together across countries and roles, to protect spaces for participation, and to carry forward the shared conviction that people experiencing poverty are not only participants in dialogue, but protagonists of change**.

