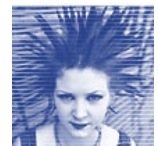




Italy 2005

Preventing the Risks of Exclusion of Families with Difficulties

Comment Paper,
ATD Fourth World



on behalf of



European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities





Introduction

In urban and rural areas of 10 countries across Europe, ATD Fourth World projects bring parents and children living in poverty and exclusion together with families of all walks of life and carries out programmes aimed at:

- Enabling people living in extreme poverty to gain access to their fundamental rights
- have a voice in society
- have opportunities to contribute to the decision-making process on issues that directly affect them as well as on wider issues for society.

Since the beginning of its involvement with the poorest, ATD Fourth World has been engaged from the beginning with the problem of child poverty. Too often children are being taken away from their family for reasons linked with poverty and exclusion. Too often also, parents living in severe poverty are only seen as part of the problem and not being considered as part of the solution. They want the best for their children and involve the best of their energy to give a better future to their children. Yet, at the same time, they fear that they will not be allowed to be fully involved in their children's future.

A week before the Peer Review Meeting in Rome, ATD Fourth World organises on 18 and 19 February 2005 a European Seminar "Exploring avenues of family support", to advance the dialogue between all stakeholders (parents, professionals, activists, political leaders, etc.) on the issue of support for families suffering extreme poverty and exclusion. This seminar will look at ways of best reinforcing the efforts of parents to provide their children with a happy and harmonious childhood. The dialogue between stakeholders from 10 European countries at this seminar has been ongoing for the past two years, with financial assistance from the European Commission, and resulted in the publication in November 2003 of a working document in French "Précieux enfants, précieux parents", and an English version in July 2004 entitled "Valuing Children, Valuing Parents".

The two key questions underlying this dialogue:

- What kinds of intervention provide families with real support in achieving their goals?
- How can families experiencing the greatest difficulties contribute to a definition of the support they need?



Apart from this reaction on the discussion paper written by Yuri Kazepov, ATD Fourth World hopes to bring at the Peer Review meeting also the results of the exchanges from this seminar.

Relevance

As ATD Fourth World is not in a position to assess the possible relevance of the policies and measures presented in the discussion paper to a particular country or countries, we will instead **focus on elements in the paper that would appear to be in line with what we think is needed** in fighting poverty and supporting families who experience many difficulties.

The overall context in which the projects being discussed are placed is that of the Italian **Law (285/97)** which was developed in order to put into practice the principles included in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. ATD FW also believes that it is essential to situate the fight against extreme poverty in a **human rights context** or have a “rights-based approach”. The vision of the law is to **empower children and young people** to become full and effective citizens, taking a **preventive approach** rather than simply tackling the problems that are symptoms of poverty. An approach such as this, depending of course on how it is implemented, is more likely to result in **global solutions** which take into account all aspects of the lives of children and young people living in poverty and that of their families. Looking at the situation of a child in isolation from that of the family can result in policies which attempt to “save” children by removing them from their families. This has been the experience of countless poor families across Europe throughout history and remains a source of suffering today for many of the families that are part of the ATD FW Movement. Just because parents are poor this does not mean that they do not love their children and taking children away from their families and their roots can have serious consequences for their identity in later life.

Another important aspect of the Law (285/97) is that it promotes a **participative approach** and encourages networking between all the different parties concerned. ATD Fourth World is founded on the experience and knowledge of people living in poverty about their own situation and when encouraging participative approaches, the **active involvement of people in poverty** themselves is essential if effective policy solutions are to be developed. In addition, there are specific conditions for their involvement which must be respected. Whilst the Law seems



to have engendered a more participatory approach than was previously the case in Italy, the ambition to involve people in poverty themselves is not explicitly mentioned.

The primary goal of the **Mowgli project** is to prevent children from having to leave their families and be placed in institutions or adopted. ATD FW fully supports this goal for the reasons already mentioned. Another objective of the project is to **create links between families and with the wider community**. This is important not only to combat the isolation and exclusion experienced by very poor families but also to influence the way in which these families are seen and treated within their community. The **way in which people living in poverty are treated and looked upon by others** is often a greater source of humiliation and suffering than material deprivation and this is felt particularly strongly by children and young people.

The concept of “educational community” is mentioned in the discussion paper to illustrate that the community can both teach and learn something by becoming part of the “networks of solidarity” built up around the poorest members of the community. This reflects a **recognition of the need for mutual learning** that needs to take place between all those concerned before effective support that **respects the projects and aspirations of the families** themselves can be given. Ongoing **evaluation** of the project is another positive aspect providing that this evaluation also involves the “beneficiary” families themselves.

Finally, the **Italian adoption Law (149/01)**, mentioned in relation to the Pollicino project, states that children have a right to grow up in their kin family or if this is not possible, in another family. This would seem to be another positive item of legislation from our point of view depending, once again, on how it is implemented in reality and providing that all possible means are explored which would allow children to grow up within their own families.

Transferability and Conditions

As one of the goals of the Peer Review seminar is to look at the potential transferability of the policies presented, then in looking at the discussion paper, ATD FW has highlighted some of the conditions that would need to be applied for such policies to reach those families experiencing many difficulties. It should be noted that this list is by no means exhaustive.



In all projects, the means must be put in place to reach those families with the most difficulties who do not ask for help because they are afraid that their children will be taken into care as a consequence. Overcoming this fear is often the first condition to be met in seeking their participation.

In all dealings with families, parents need to feel that they are respected, listened to and that their opinions are taken into account and acted upon.

Whenever possible, **the strengths of children and parents must be focused on** rather than placing the emphasis on their problems. The “beneficiaries” of projects should not just be seen as needing help but also as people who have something to give.

It should not be an objective to have quick results as this would result in only the families who are the easiest to help being reached by a particular project. The longer that families have lived with many difficulties and insecurity, the more worn out they become and the longer it takes for them to take steps to improve their situation.

In cases where children are taken away from their family and placed either with a foster family or in an institution, support for the child’s family must continue in order to facilitate the return of the child as soon as is possible. During any kind of separation, links must be maintained between the child and their family.

Attention must be paid to ensure that the support (material or other) given to children when they are in foster families is also provided when they return to their own family and that it does not become a factor in preventing the return to their family. For example, if a child receives many new clothes, takes part in trips and leisure activities that their own family cannot afford to offer them, then the loss of this can cause additional problems when the child returns home.

Projects should aim to offer support to parents and children as early as possible as it has been proven that the earlier the intervention, the greater the impact.

Parents and children that are “beneficiaries” of a project must also be involved in the project planning and evaluation.



If parents are to be asked to reassume responsibilities then other parties need to accept that they must also give them responsibilities and their needs to be clear definition and sharing of these responsibilities.

Questions and Comments

There is lots of variation in concrete implementation of the Law (285/97) depending on the region, the local authority, the community etc. What are the guarantees that the projects and aspirations of the families and children concerned are always taken into account?

How can it be ensured that the families with the most difficulties and that are the hardest to reach benefit from these projects?

How does what is learnt from these small projects affect afterwards the fight against poverty in wider sense (at regional, national level)?

Participation in the Mowgli project is voluntary but what about those families that would benefit from the support given but are afraid to ask for this support?

The Law (149/01) that states children's right to grow up in their kin family is positive but how is it decided whether or not this is in fact possible and whether or not the children should be placed with another family?

Is it considered to be essential for children to maintain links with their families with the objective that whenever possible, children will return to their families? Does this happen in practice, as this is not necessarily the case in other European countries that have this objective?