



Portugal 2005

## Support for social and community development

Comment Paper,  
ATD Fourth World



on behalf of



**European Commission**  
**DG Employment, Social Affairs**  
**and Equal Opportunities**





## Introduction

In 29 countries worldwide, the **International Movement ATD Fourth World** brings people in poverty together with others from many different walks of life to learn from each other, build mutual support and take action together. It is in this way that we move forward towards our goal of **eradicating extreme poverty and building an inclusive society** where everybody can enjoy effective access to all of their fundamental human rights and have their dignity respected.

ATD Fourth World has been actively pursuing this objective at European Union level for 30 years and has closely followed the development and implementation of the **EU Social Inclusion Strategy**. Our primary concern is whether or not this strategy is reaching and supporting **individuals and families living in extreme and chronic poverty** in Europe who have been continually excluded from the benefits brought by economic progress and development on our continent. People who generation after generation have suffered **multiple disadvantages**, broken to the point that they are **no longer able to exercise their rights and take up their responsibilities**; people whose courage to continue to **fight for a better future** for themselves and for their children has largely gone unrecognised, and whose **knowledge and expertise** on how to build this future is rarely asked for.

One major innovation of the Social Inclusion Strategy has been the common objective *“To mobilise all relevant bodies”* in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. It is this objective that recognises the **extent of engagement necessary across society**, in both horizontal and vertical directions, in order to make a real impact on the goal of eradicating poverty, and which the policy under review in Portugal is seeking to address.

For ATD Fourth World, a vital element of this mobilisation is that which calls for the promotion of *“the participation and self-expression of people suffering exclusion, in particular in regard to their situation and the policies and measures affecting them”*. This objective is recognition *of the need for knowledge that people living in poverty and exclusion possess* with regard to their own situation and is a first step towards including them in the process of developing policies to fight against it.



However, simply wanting the participation of people experiencing of poverty is not enough to make it happen. The ways and means of achieving this participation need to be thought out and put in place in order to bring people from different worlds, and often with different logic, together to work for a common purpose. ATD Fourth World has some expertise in this area, which we hope to bring to the Peer Review discussion in Portugal.

## Relevance

A major strength of the “Support to Social and Community Development” measure under review is that it is part of the global Operational Programme for Employment, Training and Social Development (OPETDS), which includes the creation of a network of facilities to support socially disadvantaged groups as the main aim of one of its axes. It is important to know that the **measure is one aspect of an overall concerted effort to promote social inclusion and development** in Portugal, supported by the European Social Fund. It is also significant that people in Portugal have been given better access to information about their **social rights** in recent years and that the **fight against poverty and social exclusion be situated in the context of guaranteeing fundamental rights to all**.

The main goal of the measure under review is to **enhance a participative approach to fighting poverty and social exclusion at local level**. This is to be achieved through community and local development; building a “culture of participation” through the increased involvement of NGOs, people experiencing poverty and other relevant stakeholders. This approach demonstrates a desire to **involve and empower people experiencing poverty and social exclusion** to play an active role. **Partnerships with people experiencing poverty and the organisations that represent them are essential** in the development and implementation of all policies designed to combat poverty and social exclusion if these policies are to have any lasting impact.

Crucial to this approach is the fact that it is based on the **principle of social development as a pre-requisite for economic development**. This is thankfully in contradiction to the approach currently favoured by many EU Member States, which has seen the recent re-focusing of the Lisbon Strategy on jobs and growth to the detriment of social inclusion objectives. History has shown us that **concentrating on economic growth and employment does not magi-**



**cally result in social cohesion and the eradication of poverty.** An approach of this nature has the potential for a much greater impact in the fight against extreme and chronic poverty in particular.

In addition, the policy under review **does not seek to empower people experiencing poverty and social exclusion solely to improve their employability prospects** but rather has an initial focus on social integration. Even though there are links with other measures more specifically focused on integration into the labour market, it is significant that under this measure, integration and participation in social and community life are considered to have their **own intrinsic value** for people experiencing poverty and exclusion and society as a whole.

Provided that **awareness be raised about the root causes of poverty and exclusion** and the positive actions being taken by communities themselves to fight against it, measure such as this could also result in a **challenge to the majority perception in Portugal of poverty as a “personal” rather than a “social” issue.**

The **Social Networks for Development (5.1.1)** sub-measure facilitates the setting up of **forums to promote awareness and co-operation** which are essential in order to build up a clearer picture of the situation facing communities and mobilise all the relevant stakeholders into finding solutions together. Another positive aspect of this measure are the **key principles of having an integrated approach** (that considers social and economic dimensions, individuals, groups and society) and the **participation of the most disadvantaged groups** in social interventions. This said, it is not clear whether or not people experiencing poverty from the communities are themselves part of the Social Networks or whether it is NGOs and associations representing them or working with them that are more likely to take part.

The **Social and Community Development (5.1.2)** sub-measure provides funding for concrete projects offering **skills enhancement, empowerment, and training to people experiencing poverty** living in the communities. Projects thus far have involved a diverse range of partners across different sectors at local level (e.g. health, education, employment) and have had a positive impact on participants according to evaluations.



The two sub-measures are **complementary** and together provide the opportunity to understand better the situation in communities; mobilise local level stakeholders; and fund concrete actions, services, training and capacity building for people living in the communities. This **combination of knowledge accumulation and action** could result in the better targeting of resources adapted to meet each community's needs. However, the long-term impact on poverty and social exclusion will depend on to what extent **people experiencing poverty and exclusion are considered as partners at all levels of decision-making** and whether or not efforts are made to **include those experiencing the most difficulties** who are often the hardest to reach.

### Transferability & Conditions

In considering the future development of this measure and its potential transferability to other Member States, certain points need to be considered and certain conditions met if it is to also benefit those people living in extreme and chronic poverty that are often left behind.

For example, a major weak point of the Social and Community Development sub-measure is that the **maximum duration of projects is 2 years**. Despite the fact that one of conditions for funding under 5.1.2 is sustainability of the intervention, 69% of projects looked at in the evaluation exercise ran for only 1-2 years. Problems with sustainability were identified as being a major difficulty and as a result, the maximum duration for projects increased to 2-3 years in some cases. However, the longer that people 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. Bearing this in mind, duration of 2-3 years could still be **insufficient if people experiencing extreme and chronic poverty are to benefit from the projects on offer and contribute their knowledge to the process**.

The participation, empowerment and capacity building of people experiencing the most difficulties in communities is only possible via a **long-term commitment**. Questions of insecurity regarding the future funding of projects could be a potential obstacle to the **continuity and sustainability necessary to build up trust with these individuals and families and encourage their involvement**. Pressure for quick results and focusing on the short-term impact of projects would also result in the exclusion of those hardest to reach.



We would agree with expert writing the discussion paper that not all the projects funded under 5.1.2 have the objective of empowering people in the same way and so would have a very diverse impact. There are **very different types of participation** in different types of projects with different aims and these differences need to be better clarified.

True participation and empowerment of people experiencing poverty can only be achieved if certain **conditions are met that seek to redress the power imbalances that exist between the different stakeholders** in a project or process: power coming from a position or role, in means of expression or in terms of decision-making. For example, the participation of people experiencing poverty could be restricted to **giving them a voice without really understanding what they are saying, or giving them a place without actually enabling them to have an influence on decisions** or orientations that would directly affect them.

It would also appear that whilst the participation of people experiencing poverty as “beneficiaries” of a majority of the actions proposed is accepted as an objective, it is **not necessarily an ambition to enter into partnership with them in the design and implementation of projects**. Similarly, **evaluation tools** to measure the impact of projects should be **developed in partnership with the people in the communities who participated in them**. This is the only way to ensure that the true level of impact on people’s lives and prospects can be understood and measured.

People from the communities should also have an **input into the training** of social and development workers and regional and local administrative staff, in order to improve understanding of the situations being faced by people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Their involvement in the training could result in **better support for people in communities to access the opportunities being made available by this measure**.

Finally, the **administrative burden on applicant organisations**, under 5.1.2 in particular, must be lightened if funding is to be open to any **small, grassroots groups set up by members of disadvantaged communities by themselves and for themselves**. The criteria of involvement in previous projects and management experience could end up acting as a barrier to the participation of these groups in wider community development efforts. **It is within such small groups that people experiencing many difficulties often find the support and encouragement they need; have the courage to speak up and give their input**



**in an atmosphere of trust and understanding.** Where these kinds of groups exist within communities, efforts must be made to enter into partnership with them and build on the support that they already offer.

### **Potential contribution to National Action Plans for Social Inclusion (NAPs/incl)**

As one of the main objectives of the policy under review is the mobilisation of all stakeholders, then a potential outcome would be the **building of a clearer picture of the situation** being faced by people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in Portugal and **an increased engagement from stakeholders at different levels to finding solutions together.** This mobilisation should direct the **identification of priorities** for the NAP/incl and contribute to the **effective implementation** of the policies and measures being proposed.

In addition, the Social Networks being set up at local and regional levels should be implicated in the NAPs/incl **consultation process** and have a role in **evaluating the impact** of policies and measures contained within the NAPs/incl.

### **Questions for further discussion**

**Is the ambition to promote partnerships with people experiencing poverty and social exclusion at all levels?** The Community and Social Development measure aims to empower people living in disadvantaged communities but are the structures then in place to facilitate their participation at all levels of decision-making? At the moment it is not clear, for example, whether or not the Social Networks, Social Councils and Social Commissions under 5.1.1 also include people with direct experience of poverty.

**What about those with the most difficulties within a community?** What efforts are being made to encourage their participation bearing in mind that they are often the ones labelled as “lacking in motivation” or “breaking the rules on training conditions” or who face the most problems regarding “access and distance to facilities”, all of which are cited in the discussion paper as being difficulties relating to participants?



**Do the majority of development and social workers come from the communities themselves or from outside?** Is it an ambition to empower and train people from within the communities to take on these roles?

**How can smaller associations and community groups also benefit from the measure if they don't meet the current criteria to access funding?** What is being put in place to build their capacity and support them to access funding and participate in the wider development of the community?