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# Sure Start

Comment Paper, ATD Fourth World, UK



On behalf of  
**European Commission**  
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities

# Sure Start

## Overview from a European NGO perspective

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### 1. Background

The International Movement ATD Fourth World has worked for many years, including through its delegation to the EU based in Brussels, to enable those most affected by poverty to gain access to their fundamental rights, to a voice in society and to opportunities to contribute to the decision making process on issues that directly affect their lives. The knowledge acquired to meet these aims comes directly from grassroots projects involving people experiencing long-term poverty run by national teams across the world, including in 10 countries in western and central Europe. It is this knowledge fed up from the grassroots that has contributed to this document.

### 2. Reaching the poorest

#### 2.1 The challenges for Sure Start to reach the most vulnerable families

Reading both the synthesis paper on the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS ) and Fred Deven's discussion paper for this Peer Review, it is clear that there are two main concerns that must be addressed if the Sure Start programme is to meet its wider aims in the UK. These must be examined if the transferability of the Sure Start approach to other member states is being discussed.

2.1.1 The first is the suggestion that among deprived families those with comparatively better personal resources were better able to take advantage of Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLP) services and resources.<sup>1</sup> The outcome of this is that those families who would most benefit from the range of services offered (because of their poverty) are, as a rule, not being reached, as recognised by the NESS<sup>2</sup>.

2.1.2 The second concern is that children from the most disadvantaged families appear to have been adversely affected in comparison with counterparts outside the SSLP area<sup>3</sup>. This again suggests a problem in services reaching the most vulnerable families within the SSLP area and, even if they are initially met by Sure Start professionals, delivering the service in such a way as to

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<sup>1</sup> Paragraph 31, Deven's discussion paper for EC Peer Review of Sure Start and paragraph 32, Melhuish's synthesis paper on NESS.

<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 26, Melhuish's synthesis paper on NESS.

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 42, Deven's discussion paper for EC Peer Review of Sure Start and paragraph 29, Melhuish's synthesis paper on NESS.

foster trust. It is through this trust that a long-term relationship with the family can develop so they can reap the benefits of what is on offer.

2.1.3. This paper will attempt to highlight the reasons the most disadvantaged families are not currently benefiting from the Sure Start programme – a concern for the success of the new Children's Centres - based on the International Movement ATD Fourth World's experience of working alongside families experiencing long-term poverty across Europe.

## **2.2 Lessons learnt from the experience of people living poverty in accessing services**

In order to reach and engage with those most affected by poverty, it is important to recognise the barriers which they face to participating in society. As one parent taking part in a workshop on defining poverty put it: "Poverty is being treated like nothing, less than nothing, and accepting it."<sup>4</sup> This alienation from society is what Ruth Lister terms as "Othering", whereby people living in poverty are thought about, talked about and treated as "other" by the rest of society, establishing and maintaining a social distance which becomes harder to break down, both for those living in poverty and those attempting to reach them.<sup>5</sup> Once this process is identified, however, and the extent of the task ahead of engaging with the most excluded families recognised, it can become possible to address the barriers and create the conditions for their eventual participation.

2.2.1 A European seminar held in February 2005 by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, involving people with direct experience of poverty from ten European countries, concluded that in order to build a long-term relationship with families living in persistent poverty, agencies should:<sup>6</sup>

- Understand the risks families take in their interaction with professionals – for the "worker" the consequences of the relationship lasts as long as they are involved with the family, but the parents and children they will have to live with any undesirable consequence of the intervention
- Take time and do what is needed to calm the fears - of being judged or having to justify oneself, the fear of not knowing just how far to go in the explanations one gives... to break through fear is to understand what the other is looking for, and this takes time; professionals say that too often they do not have the necessary time.
- Create trust and reach out - professionals are often trained to "keep a professional distance". Without trust, no relationship is possible. If there is not a commitment on both sides to establish this, a long-term relationship is not possible.
- Establish a two-way relationship - the question of reciprocity in the relationship is vital: "When you help a family, you are the giver and the family is receiving. If they never get the chance to 'give something back', it is virtually impossible to establish a relationship."

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<sup>4</sup> Taken from a policy forum workshop run by ATD Fourth World in London in 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Lister R., "Poverty", Polity Press, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> International Movement ATD Fourth World, Summary document of a European Seminar entitled: "Exploring avenues of family support," February 2005.

- Recognise that the group gives strength to the individual - being with others as part of a "collective" enables people to prepare better for the encounter with professionals. Being able to express experiences and transmit them to a group makes people's personal experience and feelings "collective", giving strength to the group and to each member of it in their lives, commitments and responsibilities. This helps people commit to a lasting relationship of mutual respect. In this way it is important to work with already established local community groups.
- Let the other person reach you – "be open and honest", "be yourself", but above all, "let the other person reach you, change you", in order to find a common denominator: the eradication of extreme poverty and exclusion.
- Understand, letting the family's project emerge - be receptive to the solutions the family puts forward, setting aside your position as "the one who knows".

### 3. Examples of best practice in working with the most vulnerable families

The International Movement ATD Fourth World has extensive experience of creating and running projects which reflect the needs and the realities of parents and young children experiencing long-term poverty in Europe. The three examples of projects set out below provide an insight into how those most affected by poverty can be included and benefit from anti-poverty initiatives.

#### 3.1 The community and family pre-school, Noisy-le-Grand, France<sup>7</sup>

ATD Quart Monde and partner organisations have been running family accommodation and support projects in the suburbs of Paris for many years. These offer long-term schemes and are often the last resort for families facing insecurity and recurrent "crises", who are at risk of being split up by child protection agencies. The Family, Social and Cultural Promotion Project in Noisy-le-Grand, situated on a social housing estate, is made up of 35 housing units offering families experiencing long-term poverty a step towards social reintegration (families come to the project for a 3-year stay). The project comprises activities to strengthen parenting into a holistic programme to support the entire family.

3.1.1 The community and family pre-school enables parents to play an active role in their young child's development and awakening. Home visits (family pre-school) are also carried out for parents who find it hard to attend the community pre-school or who are not at ease with others watching them while playing with their children.

3.1.2 Alongside the project for young children exists other initiatives such as: a cultural project for older children; a community centre for adults; a work-training project; the training and support of "service-users" to support new arrivals on the estate.

<sup>7</sup> International Movement ATD Fourth World, "Valuing Children, Valuing Parents," ATD Fourth World publication, 2004

3.1.3 This holistic approach creates a balance between responding to young children's needs and support for parents over a long enough time to build up trust so that they can become aware of the problems and for the situation to change. The approach allows parents and little ones to "grow together" so that they can build a solid and trusting bond between one another.

3.1.4 Many of the families involved in the project receive intervention from social services, as well as from other agencies such as health professionals. The project's workers must therefore work in close cooperation with these professionals and their institutions to get to know each other better, to gain a shared understanding of the families concerned and to make sure that efforts to support the families' agenda are well coordinated. This also helps families to attain a greater sense of family wellbeing – the project team gives parents the support they need to access services such as nurseries, health centres, play areas and libraries.

3.1.5 To get to this stage, parents must feel confident in their abilities as parents and supported by the relationship they have with their children, Over the long-term, the project enables parents to share their knowledge and experience with others in confidence, and learn to recognise the abilities and needs of their children, in an atmosphere of security.

## 3.2 The "respiro familiar" project, Madrid, Spain<sup>8</sup>

Movimiento Cuarto Mundo has been working with very disadvantaged families, principally from the roma community (*gitanos*), for over ten years, initially in shanty towns on the outskirts of Madrid. From the outset, the project was rooted in the parents' wish, relayed to project workers, that, "We don't want our children to have to go through what we've been through, we want them to go to school and learn."

3.2.1 This led to the creation of Street Libraries in the shanty towns, social places revolving around books, allowing children to learn about other ways of life and the outside world. Although not uniquely targeting pre-school children, the project aimed to respond to the parents' request to prepare their young children for success from the outset in school. They stimulated interaction between children, concentrating attention on those children who found it hardest to participate – those whose experience of poverty was greatest. The emphasis on meeting the parents' wish for their young children to benefit, led to a high degree of trust and dialogue with the parents, allowing project workers to support the whole family in their project to improve their life.

3.2.2 In 2002, after three years of campaigning alongside the shanty town's residents, families were rehoused in different parts of the city. This was a time of great hope, even though it meant that they had to face new problems and live with fears relating to their new environment.

3.2.3 The sense of community and the mutual support from each other disappeared with the rehousing. The parents talked about trying to hold on to these bonds as they saw how the community aspect of the Street Library has brought benefits to their family, particularly in helping their young children grow in confidence. This has led Movimiento Cuarto Mundo to set up a project called the *Respiro Familiar* – breathing space for the family. Families who lived in the

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<sup>8</sup> International Movement ATD Fourth World, "Valuing Children, Valuing Parents," ATD Fourth World publication, 2004

shanty towns meet monthly alongside other members of the organisation, including parents with no direct experience of poverty themselves. The aim of these meetings is to give parents and children some time when they can feel pride and happiness together – an experience that is very different from their everyday lives. The parents discuss a topic that affects them all directly and the children take part in artistic and cultural activities.

3.2.4 The *Respiro Familiar* fulfils a vital need for both the parents and children: everyone feels at ease in an atmosphere of trust, in order for things to be discussed openly, for the children to play with one another and take part in an activity without fear of being picked on or judged. The children and parents carry forward in their everyday lives the positive experiences they enjoy through the project to face the challenges associated with their struggle against poverty and to be included in their community.

### 3.3 The doorstep library project, London, UK<sup>9</sup>

The most disadvantaged families – those who face the greatest difficulties – are often the very families who find it hardest to get the support they need. Reaching and involving those who are the most disadvantaged and vulnerable is the most vital, and also the most challenging, task facing all programmes to improve the wellbeing of children and families. The experience of ATD Fourth World's Doorstep Library shows that individuals and families often labelled as 'hard to reach' can become involved in services, and benefit from them, if the approach is sensitive to their needs. It is a question of choosing a good tool and using it well.

3.3.1 ATD Fourth World, with the support of Sure Start Brunswick, developed a pilot doorstep library on a housing estate in Southwark, south London – a community with the reputation of being "hard to reach." This project proved to be a very positive way to engage with disadvantaged families; it involved around 80 children under five from 50 families. The first step, in July 2004, was to set up an outdoor library running once a week for two hours. Blankets were spread out on the green area in front of a block of flats, with books and simple activities, such as colouring or musical instruments. The doorstep library team (workers and volunteers) knocked on all the doors in the building and invited parents and children to join the library. Some of the more outgoing families – those who were less excluded – had the confidence to join in the activities. Other families saw the library taking place and, bit by bit, became familiar with it. After six months, the library started to take books around the flats, offering to read to the children or simply to lend some books. People were always free to say no. The first week five families borrowed books, a month later it was 13 families, at the end of the second month 27 families were joining in. After a year, 43 families had borrowed books and children from 25 families had taken part in home reading sessions.

3.3.2 One of the main objectives of the Doorstep Library is to give to priority to those families who prove hardest to reach. A service designed to bring in the greatest numbers will be used by the easiest to reach; those who are most in need of support will be left behind. The most isolated and excluded families take the longest to feel comfortable with the doorstep library. By going back each week, and not giving up on those who do not accept the service the first few times, the most

<sup>9</sup> Leaflet published by ATD Fourth World, "Not too hard to reach: Keys for developing a tool to reach the most disadvantaged families," 2006.

vulnerable families have the opportunity to accept the doorstep library on their own terms, once ensured that the doorstep library team genuinely cares for them.

3.3.3 One year and a half into the project, the Doorstep Library has proven to be a successful tool to reach very disadvantaged and excluded families. It has supported children and families to access services, but most importantly it has enabled a trusting relationship to grow between the Doorstep Library and other local services and the community, particularly its most disadvantaged members, and has allowed for a mutual exchange of knowledge. This means that relevant services can now be created with the community – and existing services shaped – according to people's own knowledge, strengths, concerns and needs.

## **4. Conclusion**

The UK Government's pledge in 1999 to eradicate child poverty in a generation was a remarkable promise and brought about a range of anti-poverty policies designed to improve the lives of the poorest families in the UK. Sure Start remains one of the Government's best achievements within this aim. The initial NESS findings reminds us, however, that positive change for those families most affected by poverty is a difficult and time consuming challenge, but one which the poorest parents in our societies demand of us. Given the right approach, as the International Movement ATD Fourth World has proved through its extensive work with families at the sharp end of poverty and which can be applied equally in the UK and other member states, it is a challenge which can be reached.