

The NAPInclusion Social Inclusion Forum

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1. Background

Since its very beginning in 1957, the founder of the ATD Fourth World Movement (ATD FW), Joseph Wresinski had the goal of introducing the very poor as partners in the places where human beings think about their futures; The Council of Europe, the European Union, the United Nations, UNESCO etc. For the past 50 years ATD FW has worked to see this partnership introduced everywhere and continues to do so today with permanent representation in all of the above mentioned places. Across Europe and the world this is what we have always strived for and continue to strive for today and this is reflected in the projects that exist worldwide, aiming to do just that on all different levels. This paper is based on the long experience/history that ATD FW has had in advocating the need for dialogue and real partnership with people experiencing poverty, coming from a very grassroots level and from an organisation that is also made up of the people that we will be speaking about here today.

This paper will focus on the perspective of those who the least easy to include in this type of dialogue, those who are furthest from this process yet who are the most important to be heard – those who have direct experience of poverty. We have contributed using our area of experience with the hope of strengthening the practice that has been put forward.

2. Possible relevance of the structure to other countries in the EU

2.1 Participation as a fundamental right

This project demonstrates a positive ambition that should be relevant across all countries within the EU. It aims to give a voice to different stakeholders in the social inclusion process including those who live in difficult conditions who are otherwise never heard. It gives policy makers the chance to hear first hand the impact of their policies on the life of those they are designed for.

From the perspective of the International Movement ATD Fourth World the practice of good participation opens up a potential wealth of opportunities for the society in which we live that incorporates but also goes much further than improving social inclusion policies. There is much more at stake;

- **Enabling the participation of people experiencing poverty addresses a question of human rights.**

To be deprived of participation means not having a voice, not being counted and not being considered. It is impossible to exercise one's right to be a citizen. The non participation of the very poor is a denial of their fundamental rights and more seriously, it prevents our societies from making progress in the fight for human rights for all. Therefore the aim to include those with direct experience of poverty in this project can be seen as a first step towards making this more of a reality for those who are normally denied that right.

- **People experiencing poverty are the first to act in the fight against it.**
What is often forgotten in discussions and debates between researchers, government representatives and sometimes even NGOs on the subject of poverty is that the people who experience it are the very first ones to act against it. It is not only those of us who work in this domain who are fighting against it, the people themselves do this everyday. Efforts are made to find solutions to problems that they are faced with daily but also for ways to improve their situation, for themselves and for their children. Not including them in the debate is effectively treating them as second class citizens, not recognising the value of their particular knowledge and not acknowledging that they have an invaluable contribution to make. They are not waiting for us to create the solutions, they make this effort each day - however this is not recognised nearly enough. They are stigmatised, labelled as lazy and discriminated against by society. They are not considered capable enough to contribute to the discussions about and that affect their lives, yet who knows more about poverty than those who live it?

- **Empowerment and improved democracy**
Enabling the participation of people living in poverty is a prerequisite in order for our society to be able to achieve the ideals that we proclaim. The situations of those at the bottom of the social ladder show society its failings and where it needs to improve. The biggest injustice especially here in Europe, is that our societies are not even aware that these ideals are not realities for everyone. The active participation of people living in poverty effectively makes our democracies more valid, it empowers people, enables them to access their fundamental rights and at the same time forces society to address its shortcomings in a more effective and (more importantly) humane way. Therefore any efforts to enable this participation must be applauded and replicated across Europe as good practice.

However, effective and true participation is quite a challenge for those who have been denied an education and who have not had the experience of reflecting on their own lives and who are not directly involved in the political process. Therefore the realisation of this requires a huge investment and commitment if we want to arrive at a real dialogue. There are certain aspects that must be taken into consideration and certain conditions that need to be met in order to do this.

2.2 Strengths and Weaknesses – challenges for the Social Inclusion Forum to reach its objective of *'addressing the gap... in consulting directly with people experiencing poverty'*

Conditions necessary for creating real dialogue

There is much talk of participation in national governments and at European level which is a positive step forward, however there are some potential risks that are posed if we are not careful, most notably the possibility of tokenistic involvement. In this context I want to speak about the conditions that are necessary to put in place in order that a real dialogue can be achieved with the aim of steering as far away as possible from the danger of utilising the most vulnerable in our society. If we are to discuss the transferability of this institutional structure it is highly important that we address this point. These conditions are something that need to be thought about con-

stantly and created according to the particular circumstances involved, however, the experience of the International Movement ATD Fourth World allow us to say that there are prerequisites that are rediscovered in nearly all circumstances.

There are landmarks that can facilitate this participation and prevent unfortunate experiences from happening that are often at the expense of the weakest members of society. One of the most important of these is linked to the quality of preparation that is done before the meeting itself and it would appear from the comments in the evaluation section of the project paper that there are quite a lot of weaknesses in this area. (It must be noted that there was no indication of how many people experiencing poverty participated in the forum itself so I am assuming that at least some of the evaluations came from them).

A positive practice that was referred to that came from the Social Inclusion Forum are the 'consultative and awareness meetings' that were held to increase the capacity to participate in the Social Inclusion Forum. It would be interesting to have more details about these capacity building meetings and what methods were used to prepare with people from disadvantaged backgrounds in order that they were confident enough to fully participate in the forum.

2.2.1 The value of good preparation

If a project aims to include the weakest members of society as this one claims to do '*Social partnership does not accommodate consultation directly with people experiencing poverty...the rationale lies in at least partly addressing this gap...*' then it really has to invest the time and means necessary. It is here that we would like more attention to be paid.

Our long experience with enabling the participation of people in situations of poverty has taught us that the strength of a meeting that aims to produce dialogue between different actors lies in the time and energy that is invested in the preparation for the meeting beforehand. This relates to one of the issues that the discussion paper highlighted – the lack of time necessary to ensure sufficient involvement and also to the problems that participants raised in the evaluation - *"...Participants felt that workshops were too rushed, too crowded and that there was not enough time for deliberation...language was difficult for some participants...too much jargon was used"*.

It is to be expected that in a meeting that gathers many different people together at one time, there will be limited time for dialogue. This could be addressed by altering the organisation of the meeting itself – more and smaller workshops, over a longer time period etc but this would be more tiring and the time with the interlocutors themselves would not necessarily be any longer as they only have short amounts of time to spend at any meeting. What would be more beneficial is investing more time in the preparation beforehand.

2.2.2 Time and means necessary

True dialogue can only be achieved if both actors fully understand the process in which they are taking part. Invited speakers should, as a matter of course, take into consideration the audience that they address, therefore take into account that the jargon that is often used is not necessarily comprehensible to all who are present. Effort should be made to speak in a language that is understandable to all in order to avoid the potential disempowerment of anyone present. However, a

better solution would be to really invest the time necessary in preparing with the participants to explain the whole process with which they are about to engage in order to facilitate a good understanding of what exactly they are participating in and contributing to. This would be a real exercise of empowerment, which would require a lot of time and energy but in the end would respond to the problems of language and the lack of time for deliberation that was brought up in the evaluation '*the opportunity to meet people and network*' and the '*information received through hand outs and inputs*'.

Within all of our participatory initiatives a lot of time is invested in preparing with participants before any dialogue with any people whether they are professionals, civil servants or representatives of governments. We create spaces where people can come together to reflect on their situations with others and with the help of support workers. This is beneficial in several different ways:

- 1) It is closer to the whole truth rather than a partial one;
- 2) It strengthens the message as it represents the experience of many and not only one person;
- 3) It protects the participants and builds courage and confidence in speaking out for themselves and others.

Another very important aspect is to ensure that people know who they are in dialogue with and what role they play. Past experience has shown that due to a lack of understanding, people have assumed that the person they are speaking with have a certain role, that in actual fact they don't have. Therefore the dialogue that occurred was not so useful because it was based on misunderstanding of the interlocuter's capacities and powers. This also joins with an aspect that regularly gets mentioned by people who have experience in participating in such meetings which is the **importance of being aware of what is at stake**. It is very important that people are not led to believe that after such a meeting they will see an immediate change in their life. The slow process must be explained otherwise it quite easily leads to disappointment, frustration and disillusion. '*I feel like a puppet that is used to help people write their reports.*'

In order for the transferability of this practice to be gauged it is important that more attention be paid to what is being carried out in order to support those with experience of poverty to reflect on their situations and be capable of participating in such events. If people who are already working on poverty issues found it difficult to engage, it is all that much further away for someone who has no experience of participating in such high level events and who is not used to being asked their opinion. The consultative and awareness meetings are an interesting and positive part of the process but again would have to be evaluated in their own right to see the level of support and time given to enable true participation.

2.3 Obstacles to the transfer to other countries – Accountability and Transparency

In addition to the long path that we have to follow in order to enable real participation another aspect which also needs to be addressed is the issue of transparency that was also brought up in the discussion paper.

The host country paper indicates that; *'The Social Inclusion Forum facilitates the engagement of all stakeholders in social inclusion processes allowing for consultation and discourse between national policy bodies, social partners and local authorities, NGOs and people experiencing poverty'... 'to provide all stakeholders the opportunity to hear about the NAP and to have their views heard by government officials and others'*

However, is this approach sufficient enough to constitute engagement and participation? Or is it limited to simple consultation that can quite easily be ignored? This seems to be a reoccurring issue that arises in similar processes elsewhere. For example – The UK 'Get Heard' project (which was much more focussed on making the voices of people with experience of poverty heard on the National Action Plan) had similar reflections – that although the process and the commitment of the participants and the civil servants who were involved was to be applauded, it was not at all clear how it had influenced the outcome or the content of the National Action Plan.

The risk of using the most vulnerable in our society.

There is a real danger of using the work and time that is invested in such meetings by people experiencing poverty (and those who represent them) under the label of 'participation'. There is a risk that this is used as an alibi – to say that there were people present who participated but the problem lies in the fact that these participants are not sure if they have been taken into account at all.

The last European Round Table on Poverty organised by the European Commission and the Portuguese Presidency gave 12 places to people experiencing poverty so they could take part in the workshops that took place which was very welcomed. However, when the outcomes of the workshops were reported back, it was mentioned that there were people with experience of poverty that took part, however there was little reference to the strong statements that were made by them in the feedback to the plenary session. (I refer to one particular working group).

This is not to be entirely negative it is just to underline the risk that we run in claiming participation but not really managing to achieve it. The fact that we speak so much about participation and that these initiatives have arrived is a positive step forward but there are still many improvements to be made. If this involvement is to be continued the problems of fatigue, pessimism and feelings of having being used (which in turn reinforces citizens mistrust in government and institutes) have to be addressed. Feedback is required on how the consultation was taken into account and a more transparent process is necessary in order to make this a worthwhile investment for all concerned.

Conclusion

Although the initiative has some strong points and the ambition and objectives are to be applauded, it is important to reflect on what is at stake when we speak about participation and what we effectively claim to do. Much more time and investment is necessary in order to really create the conditions whereby people from difficult backgrounds can truly contribute and bring something to the debate and that both parties involved can mutually learn from one another. This is something that we can continue to build on and improve in order that people living in poverty can eventually have a full place in this debate and can fully participate, not only at high level meetings but also in the rest of society. It is more than just a question of hearing the voice of experience

but also a question of empowerment in order that they also benefit from the exchange so that we move towards a partnership approach with people living in poverty.

Perhaps a more ambitious approach could be the way forward – something more than consultation where people experiencing poverty come to the table, say what they have to say and then leave again whilst someone else takes the decision. What could be more effective and what could enable future policies to be shaped by people's experience (therefore correspond more to their realities) would be projects and initiatives set up with the aim of thinking together with and creating something together with those living in poverty (please see examples of different European project descriptions below).

When designing any project that aims to include society's most excluded members, it is essential that it is created with them in mind and that it goes at a speed and rhythm that will really allow for their participation. We must question whether a meeting organised at such a high level really allows for this dialogue. It is possible, but much more time and investment is necessary.

3. Examples of good practice in enabling participation

There are many examples of good practice that exist in the different countries and at European level. There is a lot to be drawn from these experiences. The International Movement ATD Fourth World has extensive experience participating in projects which aim to create partnerships between people experiencing poverty and other actors who work on the issue of poverty. The first two European examples below were both initiated by several different actors in society provide an insight into how those most affected by poverty can be fully included in the design and carrying out of anti-poverty initiatives.

'Another Approach to Poverty Indicators' – Belgium (www.luttepauvrete.be/publications) is the result of an innovative two year project that had as its core the objective to enable a real collaboration between people experiencing poverty, regional and national government, scientists, social partners and six different organisations working with the issue of poverty. Together they created a publication on poverty indicators that would fill the need to create indicators that would more effectively reflect the realities of living in poverty.

Some lessons learned:

- Time is of the utmost importance in allowing a knowledge and understanding to be gained in order that their participation is made possible.
- It is essential that the participants from a disadvantaged background must be delegates of the place and people who they represent. This ensures that this person is not on their own in working on this research but that they stay anchored to their realities and that of others.
- The place of the people experiencing poverty must be clearly established. If we only see them as bringers of knowledge, we risk confining them to a role of 'testimony' with the other participants left to interpret, analyse what was said and to define the direction in which to go. All actors of the project should be active in all steps which includes the drafting of the conclusions.

'Getting the Right Trainers' – UK – (www.atd-uk.org/ukprogrammes) is a joint project between ATD Fourth World, Family Rights Group and Royal Holloway, University of London. It is a project created with people experiencing poverty (and their organisations), social work practitioners and university professors in order to inform experienced social workers on the issues of poverty through a post graduate study module. The entire project was created with all actors on equal levels and resulted in ex-social service users being trained up in order to deliver workshops on the effects of poverty at various different universities throughout the UK.

Some lessons learned:

- The pace of the project had to be informed by the needs and preferences of the people with experience of poverty.
- Ground rules had to be put in place to ensure that all members of the working group were respected equally.
- Support had to be given to participants through personal difficulties and crises that arose during the project.
- Support mechanisms were set up in between key meetings in order to offer support and preparation time and in order to create a sense of group cohesion, mutual support and shared ownership of the programme.

This last example is of a practice carried out for 12 years, initiated by ATD Fourth World bears some resemblance to the structure that is under review:

European Fourth World People's University – Brussels - European Conferences that used to be held every two years (from 1989 to 2001) between 200 representatives of ATD FW members (predominantly people experiencing poverty) across Europe with members and officials of the European institutes, Member State governments, Trade Unionists and NGOs. The aim was to facilitate a dialogue between those living in persistent poverty and various other people who held positions of responsibility at EU and national level.

Some lessons learned:

- Investment in time and energy was paramount – therefore the meetings were done in two year intervals.
- Subjects were decided beforehand and regularly and fully worked upon during those two years.
- Preparation with the interlocutors was really important – preparation meetings were also held with them and papers were sent before the main event in order that a good dialogue could be achieved.