



An assessment of the participation of people living in poverty to the Brussels poverty
report.

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Summary

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INTRODUCTION

The report on poverty in Brussels involves a wide range of partners in the discussion concerning the fight against poverty in the Brussels-Capital Region. The regulation relating to the poverty report defines the various stages in the procedure and lists the partners. Participation of people living in poverty is only expected for the round-table stage. However, the Brussels Health and Social Observatory has attempted to involve them in the drafting of the last three poverty reports. This experience has raised a certain number of questions: Can such participation be organised in a satisfactory manner? How can a procedure be planned without discouraging the participants? How can the contributions from persons living in poverty be valued? Is it possible to organise participation in the Observatory given its limited means? Should other pathways be sought?

In order to seek an answer as objective as possible to these questions, the Brussels Health and Social Observatory commissioned a study by the K.U.Leuven. On the basis of the literature and interviews with resource people and associations, a conceptual framework was first drawn up. This is followed by an outline of the two types of associations existing in the Brussels region who are developing a participatory initiative. In the same way, the legal and institutional framework is described and assessed. On this basis a number of pathways are proposed and discussed from the point of view of their strong points, advantages and disadvantages. In this way the bases have been established for ways to pursue discussion relating to the way in which the participation of persons living in poverty can be organised in the drafting of the report on poverty in Brussels.

PARTICIPATION AND THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

In current discourse, “living in poverty” is seen as deviant behaviour. People are seen as responsible and are castigated for having missed opportunities. Social integration is therefore *the* strategy to be adopted in the fight against poverty. Power relationships are no longer seen as the cause of poverty. Poverty is no longer fought by combating the mechanisms of exclusion and exploitation. Efforts are made to improve policies by participation. The starting principle is that everything can be resolved by dialogue.

What is to be expected from participation?

Participation *as a method per se* has a range of functions: to socialise, pacify and integrate. Via this approach poverty can be escaped if appropriate skills are implemented. Social policies should be constructed on a basis of the common interest and should activate people with a view to increased availability and greater independence. In this way poverty is ‘managed’ rather than ‘fought’.

Participation *as a political principle* recognises the right to take the initiative in formulating needs as a right held by all, not one reserved to various elites. Participation thus consists of proposing work and learning places whereby citizens can learn to form an opinion in a responsible manner.

Although both views sharply diverge, they both recognise the importance of participation.

There is often a lack of clarity as regards what is expected from participation and who is expecting it.

What tends to be expected on a basis of the political principle is collective support from organisations of poor people, support similar to that of workers' organisations. What tends to be expected on a basis of the methodological principle is technical opinion, which can often be acquired individually in appropriate cases. It may consist of personalised political opinion, or opinion from the experience of experts or social workers. A number of associations believe that this form of participation may trigger a dynamic of emancipation and citizenship. However, since persons living in poverty are unable to control the procedure, the rhythm will be decided by political personalities. There is also a danger that people living in poverty may be seen as a single source of information, and not as independent individuals capable of developing their own way of thinking.

Because of this fact the associations attach a great deal of importance to better developed methods or participatory agreement, without paying a great deal of attention to the conceptualisation of these methods.

Participatory consultation in all its forms

"**Cross-referenced knowledge**" is an approach worked out by the *Fourth World University Research Group*. The purpose of this "research-action-training" experiment is to "produce a new way of understanding the fight against extreme poverty" and hence to evolve knowledge which will free people from poverty. The group distinguishes between three types of knowledge:

- The experiential knowledge of people living in poverty: they analyse and form a perspective on their own lives.
- University or theoretical knowledge: the educational institution and recognised knowledge sets are essential tools in emancipation.
- Knowledge derived from action: arising from engagement with others.

These three types of knowledge are placed on an equal footing.

At the same time increased use is made of "cross-referenced knowledge" to define dialogue between the various partners, even when the production of knowledge is not the main objective.

Cross-referenced practices are a variation. This takes the form of shared training modules involving professionals and poor persons, from which lessons may be drawn for future training initiatives.

Using the **dialogue method** the associations attempt to complement the knowledge of poor people by the knowledge provided by other partners. Theoretical knowledge does not necessarily form part of this method. On the other hand, the policies and services concerned are involved.

Dialogue proceeds away from power relationships. "**Knowledge negotiation**" arises from a conflict between social groups. This is why a mediator is required to operate between the negotiators. Most of the time the negotiator is speaking on behalf of a group whose interests he is defending.

The two forms of reaching an agreement genuinely contain a **paradox** which appears at three levels:

- The issue of the dialogue: negotiation is not simply a matter of defending interests, as values are also involved.
- The players are highly diverse. Is it possible for them to negotiate and enter into a dialogue at the same time, when the rules, attitudes and behaviour patterns are different? Is it possible to negotiate and enter into a dialogue with the same people?
- Present-day society is based on power relationships. What is expected of partners who occupy a position of power? For them to enter into dialogue with the poorest people without denying them right to negotiate via their organisations? If this is not the case, collaboration loses its credibility.

Via the various forms of participatory consultation, sufficient attention should be placed on the following points:

- Avoid fragmenting knowledge by locking people into a single form of knowledge.
- Think about the way the poor are represented (accent on expertise or collective awareness raising)
- Clarify the nature of the consultation process (negotiation versus dialogue)
- Recognise and support the venues where the poor can meet, learn and jointly build individual and collective thought:
- Check the information
- Leave enough time for the process

The theoretical framework of participatory consultation finally produces a series of examples of initiatives of existing methods, which provide a picture of the **range of forms** which this consultation process may take: permanent consultation, interface between city and associations, talk forum, consultative committees, consultation groups within an administration, research-action-training.

Conditions for participatory consultation (within the Brussels Health and Social Observatory)

A certain number of conditions are connected to the organisation of ongoing consultation, which have not often been satisfied. A “methodological net” should be built up to develop collaboration with poor persons which respects the positions and strengths of each party.

In the first place the *framework* should be clear: who are the instigators, what are the consultation methods, what is the viewpoint from which each party is working and what methods are being used? The various partners must be involved from the beginning and must declare their agreement. A flexible legal framework may provide protection, without the negative effects arising from too tight a procedure.

From the *partners* (associations of poor persons, social players, political personalities and even scientists) the following is expected: mutual respect, recognition of the others, and discretion. The various roles and reciprocal expectation should be clarified. Continuity and balance in the membership of the groups should be aimed at, although power relationships will never be completely absent. Respect also implies the fact that the partners are not to be manipulated, that there will be reciprocal independence and an absence of a financial connection in the framework of participation in the poverty report. The question may be asked as to whether criteria should be established for the partners involved, but efforts should be made to avoid complicating the procedure.

The various steps in the *development* of the consultation procedure should be clear. The procedure should preferably be divided into a number of clear steps, for example initially a stage during which the associations of poor persons explore the subject and draft an initial note, followed by exchanges from the various partner, concluding with a third phase of fresh understanding which can be communicated to the political personalities. Each stage will be broken down into various steps. In order for the dialogue with the various partners to be successful, sufficient time should be allowed for each person to be identified, understood and known, for reciprocal recognition to take place and for a knowledge base to be developed jointly. The work should be seen as having a long-term framework. The poor person should have control over the timetable. They should receive sufficient means to be able to participate in the various steps, up to and including the drafting and re-reading of the documentation.

Permanent consultation also requires *supervisory staff*. On the one hand, supervisory staff is required to monitor the procedure. This can be carried out by a steering group, a support committee, a scientific committee and/or an academic backup group. Permanent consultation within the Observatory must also be provided with an assessment and evaluation tool, although this must not be too unwieldy. And on the other hand, specific support is needed by the associations. The poor persons must be provided

with adequate opportunity to prepare themselves within an association and to build a collective awareness. The representatives of the poor persons must work within their association on the collective building up of their knowledge.

In conclusion a number of practical conditions are necessary for the success of participatory consultation: translation, note taking and report writing, financial support for the associations of poor persons, adequate time for informal exchanges, etc.

THE ASSOCIATIONS IN BRUSSELS: PARTNERS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

On the basis of activity reports and interviews with representatives from twelve organisations in Brussels, a classification of the types of associations which work with poor people has been developed. The classification is based on two dimensions, the purpose of the organisations and the working method. The objective may be simply to free people from poverty, which implies that members should be placed in a situation whereby they can get a better grip on their life experience. The association may also have a political objective when it addresses the authorities, organisations or institutions with a view to bringing about structural changes. As regards methods, a distinction is drawn between individual support and collective work.

In Brussels two networks exist which support the associations: the *Brussels forum for the fight against poverty (Fr)*, and the *Brussels poverty platform (Du)*.

PARTICIPATION IN BRUSSELS ANTI-POVERTY POLICY

Assessment

The regulation relating to the report on the poverty situation states that the College shall each year organise a round table with all the players concerned with a view to "debating the concerted actions to be taken in the fight against at-risk situations, poverty, social exclusion and inequalities of access to rights in the Brussels-Capital Region".

When they incorporated a round table into the regulation, **Parliamentarians** had different objectives in mind: "to undertake a yearly appraisal of the poverty situation in Brussels, to discuss concerted action plans, to motivate the players in question in the light of an agreed policy, to provide material for Parliamentary recommendations for the *Collège réuni*, to direct discussions towards results, etc." Some also attached importance to the part played by the people who lived in poverty: "to encourage persons living in poverty to speak up for themselves, to assess policy in the light of the point of view of the poorest, the fight against poverty without the participation of the poorest is not possible,..." No agreement is stated as to whether the CPAS (Public Social Aid Centres) should have a privileged part to play or not.

In the framework of this study 120 political partners (members of parliament, CPAS chairmen and mayors) were questioned via a written survey. Only 8 responded. They defined the objectives of the round table as follows: to evaluate policy from the point of view of people living in poverty, to bring about political change to improve the situation of those living in poverty, to analyse and interpret the data in the poverty report, since this is a tool intended to underpin regulatory provisions, and to raise the awareness of the various players concerned with poverty. Some made references to "giving a voice to poor persons and ensuring that they have democratic representation".

Has the main policy of the round table moved from data analysis to the analysis of policy as seen through the eyes of the poor? Are the poor no longer seen as merely "poverty experts" but also as entirely separate partners?

In the last three poverty reports the **Associations of Poor Persons** have already been involved in the drafting of the report. In the 7th report they were offered a draft text, in the 8th an open meeting was organised, and in the 9th a written questionnaire was offered. Each association chose its modus operandi in the framework offered by the report. After drafting the report, these associations were then

always invited to a meeting preparatory to the round table, with or without social workers. It was at this stage that they nominated one or more representatives to make a report to the round table.

Resource people from Brussels organisations (TOM NOTE: Is this the name of a group?) were interviewed on the subject of their participation in the poverty report and the round table.

They expressed difficulty in clearly understanding the objectives and possible consequences of the process. Comments were made on the way in which the poverty report information was put together, on the frequency of the consultation sessions, on the way the texts were written up, on timetabling, the choice of subject matters, and on contact between the Observatory and the people on the ground.

The round table is generally seen as a significant moment, but it also gives rise to many frustrations. The most important comments deal with the lack of political follow-up, the lack of concrete meetings, and the lack of consultation between the various levels of power. The associations wanted to be informed what was to be made of their proposals and why certain choices had (not) been made.

On the one hand the associations of poor persons required greater participation and more involved participation, while on the other they were put off by a highly developed structure and the investment of too great an amount of time. In order to fulfil their role, they needed recognition and support.

The **political partners** were questioned by the written survey about the participation of the various players in the three last poverty reports. They found it necessary to involve persons living in poverty (via the associations) in the poverty debate. Some felt that the participation of poor persons was an illusion. They felt that it was a positive move for different players to be involved and that an assessment of policy should be made. They, too, felt there was too little follow up, too little effect on budgetary priorities and that the timetabling should be improved.

The researcher also interviewed the resource people on the subject of the **role of the Observatory**. The perception of the (desired) role of the Observatory is always closely linked to the pathways which will be offered for the future. Some felt that the Observatory should concentrate on its principal tasks, that is, to observe and analyse, in order to provide the players with the necessary foundations for working out recommendations. The majority of the associations actually felt that the Observatory should make proposals and should strengthen proposals on the ground. They thought it was important for the Observatory to have an adequate presence on the ground.

PATHWAYS FOR THE FUTURE

Pathway 1: Participation via collaboration with the Service for the Fight against Poverty, Social Risk and Social Exclusion.

This pathway assumes that the Observatory will concentrate on its observation mission, and will not itself organise consultation with persons living in poverty. For this area, the Poverty Service will be called upon. The advantage of this pathway is that the associations are not excessively in demand and that complementarity exists between the organisations. The Poverty Service possesses added value because it has experience of working with poor people. The weak point is to be found in political follow-up. Questions relating to the relevance of the debate to the Brussels parliament, the assessment of parliamentary recommendations and the development of an effective support tool for policy for the Brussels region should then be developed. This pathway does not call for a great deal of additional resources.

Pathway 2: Permanent consultation within Brussels Health and Social Observatory

This pathway assumes that consultation relating to the poverty report and the round table are more widely developed within the Observatory. Individual consultation should be combined with collective consultation. The associations should consult each other, but other partners should also take part in the dialogue. The advantage of this pathway is that the work can be continued at the Brussels level. The danger is that too much may be asked of the partners. In addition the large number of conditions required to organise permanent consultation has a high cost in human resources.

A **third pathway**, permanent consultation at the local (municipal) level seems difficult to organise within the duties of the Observatory.

Similarly, the **fourth pathway** does not match the role of the Observatory. The proposal is to seek other forms of participation, such as service user participation initiatives. This kind of participation could possibly be organised by social organisations forming part of the Brussels Anti-Poverty Forum.

In order to guarantee follow-up in the observations and recommendations of the poverty report, a **fifth pathway** has been proposed. An independent “watch committee” could be set up as a pressure group in respect of the political players. This committee would be external to the Observatory. It would legitimate and reinforce procedures related to the poverty report. It would be an informal meeting venue, a coordination of a whole series of social players.

And in the final analysis the authors of the report suggest a **combination** of the first two pathways, that is a "permanent light consultation" on a subject area marked out by the Observatory - while respecting the conditions for permanent consultation - combined with a Brussels delegation of this consultation in one or more subject based groups within the Poverty Service.

In this scenario as well, people in poverty must receive adequate support to be able to hold meetings, to meet within their association and to be able to build up a collective knowledge base founded on individual experience. Consultation should be organised earlier in the process of the “poverty report” rather than as previously done. This requires that human and financial resources be made available for the associations, and it should be done in such a way as not to compromise their independence. Likewise, political follow-up remains of crucial importance. It is for this reason that times for assessment and times for feedback to partners should be timetabled in.

CONCLUSION

The final choice of the type of consultation has consequences on the regulation of the poverty report. In the end the political personalities must assess what place they wish to give to the participation of persons who live in poverty, factoring in the consequences of the harmonisation of the various stages in the poverty report and the provision of the necessary resources.