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★ NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

# **The Impact of Cultural and Citizenship Education on Social Cohesion**

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## **Report**

**Workshop 5  
Poverty – Social Exclusion – Civic Participation: How to Organise  
Access from the Fringes?**

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**Poverty – Social Exclusion – Civic Participation: How to Organise Access from the Fringes of Society?**

**Scientific Inputs:**

Annelise Oeschger, International Movement ATD Fourth World (Germany)

**Project Presentations:**

Mac Mahon, Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (Ireland)

**Moderation:**

Alicia Pacewicz, Center for Citizenship Education (Poland)

**Introduction**

The focus of the workshop was ‘How to Organise Access from the Fringes?’ The moderator was Alicia Pacewicz, Input by Annelise Oeschger and Presentation by Bernadette Mac Mahon. The workshop did not focus on the concept of social cohesion but was concerned with examples of Good Practice in terms of engaging those in civic participation that are on the fringes of society.

**Workshop**

The workshop began with an Input by **Annelise Oeschger**. Annelise stressed the need for people in poverty to participate in civic society. This is fundamental for a democratic society. However, it was noted that participation is not merely about integrating people in poverty into society, but rather it is about co-creation, working together, sharing knowledge and experience. Annelise pointed out that while Europe is not poor, inadequate and insufficient resources are invested in programmes and projects to engage people in poverty. There is a need to convince politicians and policy makers of the worthiness of investing in programmes that contribute to increased civic participation among all sections of society.

Annelise also spoke about the work of ATD 4<sup>th</sup> World, an organisation founded in Paris in 1957. ATD 4<sup>th</sup> World was involved with a project that merged academic knowledge with the knowledge of people living the reality of poverty. The project examined five areas: (1) History; (2) Family; (3) Knowledge; (4) Work and Human Activity and (5) Citizenship. This project demonstrated that people in poverty are not a separate category of human beings, but rather they are people with unique knowledge and insight. This approach has now been adopted by organisations such as the World Bank and the Council of Europe, for example, and is seen as a way to increase civic participation.

In the second half of the workshop **Bernadette Mac Mahon** gave a presentation demonstrating some of the exercises from the Active Citizenship/ Voter Education Programme that is used by her organisation (Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice) in disadvantaged communities in Ireland. The programme is composed of 85% participation, 15% information, and it has encouraged people to believe in their power to influence, to participate in the democratic process and to have a say in how their country is governed. The Programme is strictly non-party political and covers the following questions with participants:

- What is my issue?
- Who is affected by it?
- How are they affected?
- Why is it happening?
- What do we want to be done about it?

The programme is made up of three units, each covering a different area and the questions above:

Unit 1: Explores the reasons to vote and how to vote.

Unit 2: Finding out what your issues are and considers ways of taking an informed stance on these issues.

Unit 3: Finding out who are the candidates and choosing a candidate who is interested in issues of concern to you.

Bernadette demonstrated a number of exercises from the Programme with participants, including one entitled 'The Gallery Walk'. This exercise is a picture gallery that shows a number of people who have struggled to have the right to vote because they were women, or black, or were not wealthy, for example. The exercise demonstrated that voting has not always been a democratic right and that people were treated as second class citizens in their own countries. It thereby highlights that we should use our vote and our voice because so many were and still are denied that right.

The programme has been used in Ireland to great effect and it has encouraged people to use their vote, to stand up for themselves and their communities. It has played a part in reversing falling numbers of people voting and has increased voter turnout in disadvantaged communities which have used the programme.

### **Discussion following the Workshop.**

Following on the input and the presentation, the participants in the workshop were asked to think about the groups they considered to be most in need of targeting in their own countries. Various groups emerged, such as children of Turkish immigrants in Germany, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual groups in Poland and in Lithuania, children who are left with relatives because their parents have emigrated to seek work elsewhere. However, among participants there was a consensus that the Roma minority were the group most in need of targeting – this was cited by several participants from different countries.

Several ideas were put forward by participants in the workshop on how to bring the Roma minority in from the fringes of society. The idea of a Commissioner for Roma people in Europe was discussed. Education was also seen as a possible way to increase the Roma minority's participation in society. The issue of education was seen as a fundamental issue in the workshop, as Roma children do not have access to their own schools. Participants in the workshop also felt that music, art and sports could also be used as a means to bind the 'majority' and the 'minority' together.

### **Challenges**

A number of challenges were highlighted by participants in the workshop that would have to be overcome if there is to be social inclusion and social cohesion. These are outlined below:

- At local elections everyone can vote, but this is not the case at the national level. People may not vote in local elections because their views are not taken into account at the national level. Therefore, there exists the challenge of overcoming the issue of power and discrimination.
- The challenge to overcome manipulation. There is a need for activities to increase critical thinking to look behind the 'spin' that politicians and the media can put on issues.



- The challenge for non-partisan citizenship education.
- The challenge of overcoming the distrust of politicians and the cynicism that exists about politics in general.
- The challenge of making people interested in their own problems and that they can have a say and influence in their own issues, and also the challenge to remind people that poverty is not an 'us' and 'them' issue but rather an 'OUR' collective problem.
- The challenge of encouraging people to engage with and participate in all the worthwhile projects/ programmes that exist at a local, national and regional level.
- The challenge of persuading decision makers and politicians for the need to properly invest in programmes and projects that increase civic education and voter participation.

## **Conclusion**

The workshop provided examples of ways to organise access from the fringes (1) by merging the knowledge of people in poverty with that of academics and (2) by the Active Citizenship/ Voter Education programme that encourages disadvantaged communities and groups to use their vote and their voice and participate in the democratic process.

Much of the discussion centred around groups that should be targeted in the participants' own countries. The Roma minority, however, emerged as the group that was highlighted most and the group deemed most in need of targeting.

The challenges of organising access from the fringes were many, and the participants highlighted the need to properly address these issues if we truly are to have an inclusive democratic society. The need to persist on these issues is as relevant today as it has always been.