

The Impact of Cultural and Citizenship Education on Social Cohesion

**3 – 5 December 2009
Vilnius, Lithuania
European Capital of Culture 2009**

Input

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

by
Anneliese Oeschger
International Movement ATD Fourth World, Germany

www.nece.eu

Introduction

My presentation will focus on two topics:

- I Social cohesion and participation of people living in severe poverty: general points and the approach of the Council of Europe.
- II “The Merging of Knowledge”: a practice of cooperation between professionals and people living in severe poverty developed by ATD Fourth World.

I Social cohesion and participation of people living in severe poverty: general points and the approach of the Council of Europe

1) To set the problem

- a) Very poor families are most of the time seen as people on the receiving end, as always asking, demanding. But working with people experiencing chronic poverty, in whatever country they live, teaches us that their deep aspiration is to participate and to be useful for their families and the larger community.
- b) Participation of people living in severe poverty is not simply a good method of integrating them into a given community, but it is a precondition for creating a democratic society where everybody’s human rights are respected and where everybody can contribute. Thus, in the end the issue is not integration but co-creation.
- c) The participation of very poor people need not be confined to specific problems and special measures linked to poverty, as if they were concerned only with a narrow range of issues while the other citizens are expected to take an interest in the broader political process.

2) The need for adequate resources

- a) Given the extent to which exclusion has deprived poor people of vital resources, including cultural resources, a considerable investment in time and human and material means has to be made to allow participation – locally, nationally and internationally.
- b) Policy-makers and voters have to be persuaded of the political necessity of this investment – an extremely difficult job.

Outcome:

Participants in the workshop coming from different countries have made the same experience: It is much easier to get financial support for material requirements than for wages. Thus, social cohesion can only be reached and maintained by the sustainable commitment of human beings – as the Wolof (Senegal) expression puts it so accurately: "Man is the remedy of Man". This needs a huge amount of additional funds for more well-trained personnel in both the public and the third sector.

One of the conference’s conclusions could be to claim such financial support for increased human investment – linked to the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010.

3) The agenda set by the Council of Europe for social cohesion development in Europe:

See: www.coe.int/t/DG3/default_en.asp

The preparatory work for this social cohesion strategy has partly been developed with the direct and indirect participation of people living in poverty.



- a) Taking a human rights approach, stressing their indivisibility and interdependence. As the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe put it: Civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights “cannot be ranked in any hierarchy... Poor, disadvantaged and marginalised people also suffer other human rights violations in addition to material deprivation. Their situation is almost always linked to exclusion and lack of any influence. They tend to be voiceless. This in turn augments their lack of basic security. To break their alienation is now one of our key challenges.” (Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for social cohesion, Moscow, 26 February 2009)
- b) Stressing the dignity of each person and providing the possibility for each person to actively participate as a full member of society – which requires special attention to the needs of the vulnerable members of society, while avoiding their stigmatisation.

The Council of Europe has defined components of social cohesion replacing traditional benchmarks focusing exclusively on economic aspects:

- Equity and economic well-being
 - Dignity and recognition of diversity
 - Participation
 - Sense of belonging
 - Sharing responsibilities.
- c) Putting a spotlight on the social responsibility of elites, the actions of civil society, the leadership shown by employers is a multi-stakeholder approach while reaffirming the essential responsibilities of the state.
 - d) Asking for the integration of the dimension of social justice into economic life.
 - e) Presenting a large scale of programmes to develop democratic skills as a component of civil education, with a focus on reactivating democratic processes, including the most vulnerable populations.
See: www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/edc/

II “The Merging of Knowledge”: a practice of cooperation between professionals and people living in severe poverty developed by ATD Fourth World

1) The origin of this project is intrinsic to the origin of the ATD Fourth World Movement itself and starts with two seminars by Joseph Wresinski, founder of ATD Fourth World:

- 1980 at UNESCO in Paris: “A knowledge driving to the struggle against poverty”
- 1983 at the Sorbonne University in Paris: “Overcoming Poverty” where J. Wresinski asked that “the academic world turn its attention to people living in poverty, not in the first instance to teach, but to engage a dialogue and to learn from it.”

The basic elements of this approach can be summarized by two points:

- The deepest form of exclusion is the exclusion from culture and
- People living in severe poverty possess a knowledge which is based on the experience of their own lives and which is indispensable for themselves but also for society as a whole.

In the meantime the “Fourth World People’s Universities” were created (1972) and developed in several countries as a meeting opportunity between people living in great poverty and other people engaged with them, in order to allow “voiceless people” to express themselves and to be heard. It became clear that research on poverty has to be done not on the poorest, but with the poorest.

2) In 1993 a working group made of Fourth World activists living in poverty, Fourth World volunteers and academics was formed to define the scope and the conditions for an experimental project “merging” three types of knowledge to create a new type of knowledge:

- Life experience based knowledge (Fourth World activists): usually not recognised
- Academic knowledge (University teachers and researchers): usually well recognised
- “Action” knowledge (Fourth World volunteers)

Two years were then needed to establish the core team (from France and Belgium), the pedagogical team and the Academic Panel and to look for national and European funds.

3) From 1996 to 1998 the programme was:

- Choice of the five subjects for the “Mémoires” to be developed in the five working groups:
 - History: from shame to pride.
 - Family: the family plan and time.
 - Knowledge: releasing knowledge.
 - Work and human activity: hidden talents.
 - Citizenship: representation and extreme poverty.
- Collection, analysis and writing in common of the five “Mémoires”.
- Oral presentation of the results and publication of the resulting book “Le croisement des savoirs”. (“The Merging of Knowledge – people in poverty and academics thinking together”, University Press of America, 2007)

See: www.atd-fourthworld.org/-Acces-a-la-parole-croisement-des-.html

An example of the discoveries made:

In the Mémoire “Family: the family plan and time” we can find a remarkable analysis of the perception of time by the poor, which is not linear (a continuous progression), nor circular (a “vicious cycle”) but a kind of combination of both: the “time in loops” where progression and returning to some fixed points allow for fresh starts after a failure.

4) The conditions without which this “experiment” would not have been possible:

- For the academics: reject the conviction, frequent in our society, that the poor cannot have a respect- and interest-worthy personal reflection on their specific reality as well as about overall society and the world.
- Gradually develop a condition of reciprocal trust between poor participants and academics.
- Accept to work under a permanent condition of “equal footing”, the ideas of a participant living in poverty having the same “weight” as those of an academic.
- Sufficient amount of time (it is impossible to press on).
- Need, for participants living in poverty, of quite a long period of training to develop clear oral and written expression.

5) Follow up

- This first experience triggered off an increasing number of initiatives, meetings, workshops, co-formations and publications. Among them are the programme “Le croisement des pratiques” (2000-2001), a second generation project where poor people and social workers merged their knowledge, and the book “Le croisement des pouvoirs” (2008), a broad analysis of the developments of the past ten years and future prospects.
- A “Charter for the merging of knowledge and practices” has been established by the participants, thereby fixing the pre-requirements and the conditions for the realisation of future initiatives.
- A lot of national action plans and European initiatives for the fight against poverty and social exclusion have been inspired by the methods and results of the project “Merging of Knowledge”.

See for instance:

- “Voices for a change – finding solutions to the experience of poverty in London”: www.atd-uk.org/ukprogrammes/UKPa.htm
- “Get Heard – Toolkit”: www.ukcap.org/getheard/
- “Getting the Right Trainers – Enabling service users to train social work students and practitioners about the realities of family poverty in the UK”: www.atd-uk.org/ukprogrammes/UKPa.htm