

ENGAGING THE POOR IN POLICY-MAKING ON POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN FLANDERS (BELGIUM)

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Executive Summary

The report begins by describing why participation of the poor in policy-making is both challenging and important. The poor experience social exclusion more strongly, have access to fewer channels through which to exercise their rights, and meet with greater barriers to participation than other citizens. Not only does participation of the poor in policy-making imply their recognition as fully-fledged citizens and as being capable of contributing to the development of society – it also contributes to designing more effective policies against poverty and social exclusion. The report argues that participation by the poor could be used as a benchmark against which government policy and initiatives to strengthen government-citizen relations may be evaluated – those measures which prove successful in engaging the poor may well be valuable in fostering greater public participation on the part of all citizens.

The report goes on to review the legal and institutional development of the Belgian welfare state and the status of public participation in social policy. It charts the emergence of a “rights-based” approach to welfare from the mid-1970s, which made establishment of conditions for human dignity a prime objective and called for the active participation of the poor in the design of policies and services. The report also describes how participation by the poor has been fostered in practice in Flanders. In particular through the establishment of a permanent consultative forum in 1989 (VICA – Flemish Intersectoral Committee for Poverty Reduction) whose “theme groups” saw the active participation of the poor and their representative organisations. The important role of initiatives taken by local authorities and by the voluntary sector in overcoming social exclusion and poverty and ensuring effective participation of the poor in decision-making is also highlighted.

The case study itself focuses on the engagement of the poor in preparing the 1994 General Report on Poverty in which the “dialogue method” was used for the first time. This method aims to provide people living in poverty with the opportunity, through the associations in which they meet and have their say, to actively participate in the discussion of particular themes and, ultimately, in the formulation of policy proposals. It takes place on two main levels: a *social dialogue* between the poorest people, their associations, and the representatives of local welfare organisations which identify key issues and draw up proposals, followed by a *political dialogue* between the poor and their associations, representatives of local welfare organisations and policy-makers. A number of steps have since been taken to institutionalise this form of dialogue between the key actors – notably with the establishment of a Centre against Poverty, Social Insecurity and Social Exclusion in 1999.

The case study identifies several major challenges to engaging the poor in policy-making at the local and national level, such as: establishing the conditions for dialogue (which requires both time and commitment); coping with diversity (as the poor are not a homogeneous group); and raising the capacity of the poor to participate (e.g. by encouraging self-organisation by the poor and ensuring that the issues

and conditions of dialogue are explained and understood). The report concludes with a number of concrete policy lessons based on the experience of Flanders (Belgium), including the need to:

- *Ensure transparency* – the underlying policy vision, objectives and methods should be made explicit.
- *Provide clear and accessible information for all* with particular and continuous attention for those groups that cannot be fully reached through commonly used information channels.
- *Include opportunities for participation* in all phases of policy development and implementation.
- *Provide for more systematic and formalised participation channels* instead of an *ad hoc* approach.
- *Allow enough time, room and support* to conduct a full social and political dialogue with the poor.

The case study was submitted to the Secretariat in 2001 and covers events up to that date.

Introduction

The question of participation is important, as it is linked with the right to integration and citizenship. Participation implies the recognition of people as fully-fledged citizens and assumes they can substantially contribute to the development of society. Participation therefore implies respect and the recognition that people are competent in all aspects of personal and social life. This competence is not static, but takes shape based on different (and sometimes contradictory) experiences and interpretations. This is true for all citizens.

It is specific to the poor, however, that they meet with greater barriers to participation in our society. The poor, more than others, are confronted with the complexity of the society we live in. They more strongly experience exclusion than other citizens, because they do not have, or have less access to, other, alternative and socially accepted channels to exercise their rights (e.g. appeal to a lawyer). Starting from the observation that certain groups in society, such as the poor, are socially excluded, specific measures may be introduced. However, these measures are often taken without consulting the people concerned. Consequently, many of these measures prove inadequate and ultimately have no effect at all.

Problems concerning participation therefore conceal an underlying problem, which holds for all citizens: namely, the difficulty experienced by citizens when trying to understand the society they live in, the interrelations present within that society, and how to link their own personal experiences with current social structures. For example, most people experience their life situation in its entirety, whereas people living in poverty experience exclusion in different aspects of life (e.g. living, working, learning, health) at the same time. As a result, a fragmented policy with measures addressing each individual aspect will not be recognisable as such by the poor, nor will it reverse their overall situation of poverty.

This report will discuss the participation of disadvantaged citizens in policy-making in general, as well as their participation in policy-making for poverty reduction in particular. Concretely this means that politicians, the government and the administration should take action on all levels to ensure transparent policy-making and administration, and provide clear information to all citizens. This information should cover the overall vision of a given policy, and the policy options available, and should be accompanied by procedures to ensure the effective dissemination of this information.

Experiences with participation of the poor in policy-making may then be taken as a benchmark for developing measures to strengthen the relationship between citizens and policy-makers. As stated in a recent report on local development plans, "If the governmental policy stands the test of the poor, we can assume that this is quite applicable to other population groups as well and may therefore reach a larger part of the population" (Antwerps Platform Generatiearmen, 1999).

The ultimate aim of participation is the establishment of a policy from which all citizens rightly benefit. Participation of citizens, in this case the poor, relates to different phases in the development and implementation of policies: the definition of the problems, the formulation of possible solutions, implementation and follow-up of measures taken and, finally, evaluation.

Background of the Belgian Political System

Belgium is a federal state, composed of three Communities (the Flemish, the French and the German-speaking Communities) and three Regions (the Flemish, the Walloon and the Brussels Region), under which are the provincial and municipal levels. On the federal level, the parliament – of which the majority of its members (190 out of 221) are elected directly by all citizens aged 18 and over having Belgian nationality – exercises legislative power. The King and the government exercise executive power.

As this case study is drawn from Flanders, we will only discuss the Flemish institutions here when reviewing the level of Regions and Communities (Bouckaert and Van Hoecke, 1998). The Flemish Parliament, of which the majority of members (118 out of 124) are elected directly, and the Flemish Government exercise legislative and executive powers respectively. At the provincial level, the provincial council – whose members are elected directly by all inhabitants of the province having

reached the age of 18 – has legislative power, while the continuous deputation and the governor both have executive powers.

Finally, on the municipal level, the main political institutions are the town council (whose members are elected directly by all citizens who are over 18, are nationals of a member state of the European Union and living in the municipality) and the bench of mayor and aldermen.

Poverty and Participation in the Belgian Welfare State

The welfare state as it has developed in Belgium reflects how our society has dealt with “social problems” in the past and still does so today. Poverty was first seen as a matter of “personal guilt” (Vranken and Geldof, 1993, pp. 31-32). Later it was considered to be the result of a “personal accident” (such as illness, handicap). Measures were of a repressive or charitable nature and were intended to discipline the poor. Through a system of private insurance, citizens had to guarantee themselves against personal risks such as illness or accidents. Later, social rather than personal factors were identified as being the root cause of poverty (e.g. the economic climate). A “social accident model” emerged and influenced the development of the Belgian welfare state.

The definition of poverty used for the purposes of international comparisons, is: “the number of people living in families with less than half the median equivalised family income”. Under this definition, in 1985 a total of 4.4 per cent of the population lived in conditions of poverty in Belgium (Förster, 1994, Table 1, p. 10).

Over the last few decades in Belgium, poverty has been considered from a structural point of view, based on the so-called “social guilt model” which holds the view that the very structure of society causes poverty. The generally accepted definition of poverty now runs as follows: “*Poverty entails a network of social exclusions, which spreads over several fields of individual and collective existence. It separates the poor from the accepted modes of living of society. The poor cannot bridge this gap by themselves*” (Vrancken and Van Mexel, 1997, p. 35). This definition is also used in the Flemish “Action Plan for Poverty Reduction” approved by the Flemish Government on 23 February 2001 and is part of the Belgian “National Action Plan for Poverty Reduction”.

The transition from a “social accident” model to a “social guilt” model is connected with a fundamental change in society’s view of poverty: the transition from a ‘way of thinking focused on care’ to a “way of thinking focused on participation”. The “rediscovery” of poverty in the late 1960s (i.e. the realisation that poverty persists, in spite of a well-developed welfare state) led to the participation of the poor being proposed as a guideline for the future development of the welfare state. This could be given legal basis by incorporating the idea of participation as set out in the law on the Public Centres for Social Welfare and Article 23 of the Belgian Constitution. Recently, however, charitable approaches and the notion of “personal responsibility” (cf. the idea of activation) have begun to reappear in the discussion of poverty and the fight against it.

Legal and institutional framework

In Belgium, the social security system is based upon “labour”. Each working citizen pays a National Insurance contribution, which is deducted directly from wages and salaries. The starting point for this system is “compulsory” solidarity, upon which persons that are (temporarily) incapable of working due to illness or retirement can count.

On 7 August 1974, for the first time, an income was guaranteed for all Belgian citizens as a “subsistence minimum” and this measure was, at the time, intended to be the cornerstone of the social security system (Seynaeve and Simoens, 1995, p. 5). The implementation of that law was entrusted to the Public Centres for Social Assistance (C.O.O.), which were replaced by the Public Centres for Social Welfare (O.C.M.W.) in 1976.

The 1976 law on the Public Centres for Social Welfare entailed a fundamental change in Belgian social policies. Article 1 of the law on the Public Centres for Social Welfare stipulates that “each human being has the right to social care” which should “enable people to lead a life of human dignity”. Until then assistance was considered as a “favour” for the “bona fide” poor; this law redefined the former

relation of dependence between the social workers and those requesting assistance into a legal relationship based on human dignity and rights (Verhellen, 1992, p. 3). It established that in case of disputes concerning the right to social service and the right to a subsistence minimum, the industrial tribunal would be the competent authority to judge such cases.

The Public Centres for Social Welfare are obliged to give a reasoned answer to each request and as such cannot decide arbitrarily on the needs of those that ask for assistance, or clients of the social services. Focusing attention on “human dignity” as an autonomous value fundamentally implies an expression of respect towards people who ask for assistance and their recognition as citizens. In executing the right to social care, criteria for welfare, or criteria for “human dignity” can be established with the co-operation of the people concerned (Claeys, 2000). People then no longer merely think in “material terms” (i.e. “asking for assistance indicates material shortages”), but in terms of possibilities to become independent, to be able to cope for oneself, to obtain psychological ease and a certain freedom of choice to organise one’s own life (Bouverne-De Bie, 1997).

The services offered by the Public Centres for Social Welfare today therefore go beyond the reduction of poverty and the provision of (financial) assistance (Geldof and Luyten, 1998, p. 23). For example, they offer a number of services for senior citizens and also play a role in housing, in medical services, in offering legal assistance and in the search for employment by people living on a subsistence minimum.

Today, anyone with personal problems of a social, psychological or medical nature can appeal to a Public Centre for Social Welfare. However, we have observed that since the law was adopted, (financial) assistance has, once again, come strongly to the fore. A broader debate on welfare and poverty has been, in many ways, reduced to a discussion on “minimum standards” for the provision of support. Those requesting assistance are, to a lesser extent, encouraged to bring their own criteria regarding welfare and human dignity, into the discussion.

Moreover, for such reasons as high caseloads and limited capacity, the services of the Public Centres for Social Welfare are often restricted to offering individual assistance or else a bureaucratic interpretation prevails (Bouverne-De Bie *et al.*, 2000). The development of criteria for human dignity and bringing these criteria into the social debate are not top priorities. The fundamental significance of the law on the Public Centres for Social Welfare is increasingly being pushed into the background. Consequently, the Public Centres for Social Welfare are in danger of increasingly being considered as “poor relief institutions”, responsible for paying out the subsistence minimum, rather than as local institutions that should guarantee all citizens their right to welfare.

Article 23 of the 1994 Constitution enshrined these principles by establishing the following social rights:

- The right to labour and the free choice of professional work within the framework of a general employment policy that aims at, among other things, securing the highest and most stable employment level possible, the right to reasonable conditions of employment and reasonable pay, as well as the right to information, consultation and collective action,
- The right to social security, health protection and social, medical and judicial assistance,
- The right to proper housing,
- The right to protection of a healthy environment.
- The right to cultural and social development.

The “enforceability” of these fundamental social rights entails that the government is assigned an active task in this matter. The recognition of the right to a dignified life implies that one objective is to ensure policy implementation that helps all citizens in a dignified way. This means that policy implementation should be in line with the personal views and experiences of the people concerned, and that these people should, in turn, be able to influence the implementation of policy.

The exact significance of these fundamental rights is subject to discussion. We can distinguish between a “minimalist” and a “maximalist” approach. “Minimalists” believe that the constitutional

provision has no direct consequences. A “maximalist” interpretation, on the other hand, regards each regulation or treatment that is considered inconsistent with human dignity as potentially unconstitutional (such as arbitrary discharge or the exclusion from the right to an unemployment benefit or the minimum of subsistence) (Hubeau, 1995, pp. 157-166). In the last coalition agreement of July 1999, the Flemish Government once again emphasised the role of the poor as the main partners in the policy to fight poverty (Government of Flanders, 2000, p. 226).

Participation in practice

Participation in national policy-making on poverty reduction

In 1989, the Flemish Government adopted a policy document on poverty reduction. In this document the problem of poverty is considered a structural problem involving several aspects. Provision is made for the development of a policy for the underprivileged. Within this framework, the Flemish Intersectoral Committee for Poverty Reduction (VICA) was established in the same year with representatives from administrations, cabinets and organisations operating in this field, and has been an important consultative forum ever since.

In 1992, “theme groups” were set up within VICA to work on specific aspects of policy for the underprivileged with the objective of gaining a more in-depth knowledge of the problem and to propose relevant policy solutions (Vercammen, 1999, p. 19). The poor and their representative organisations were actively involved in most of the theme groups, which were established for welfare, youth, culture and sports, housing, health, education, employment and social renewal.

For the poor and their representative organisations, as well as for the public administration and policy-makers, these theme groups represented a means of learning about mutual differences in logic and exploring how agreements can be reached. The “culture” of policy-making (e.g. language usage, structures, channels) was also made more transparent to the poor and their organisations who gained more insight into, and gained a better understanding of, this piece of social reality. The representation of different “parties” in the working groups (administration, cabinet, voluntary sector, social partners, associations and the poor themselves) was an important factor in this.

New approaches

With the establishment of a new government, VICA has largely abandoned this way of working. From now on, the co-ordination of policy-making on the Flemish level is provided in the plan of action. Instead of the working groups, the associations in which the poorest people take the floor, other welfare organisations and other people concerned will now be informed and interviewed twice a year. In Spring 2001, this feedback was to have been organised within the framework of the “Progress Conference”, on the occasion of which all Flemish ministers could explain those aspects of their policy that relate to the fight against poverty. In Autumn 2001, the broader perspectives of the policy on poverty will be discussed. Such “symposia” have the advantage that a lot of people concerned can be informed and consulted at the same time. On the other hand, fears have been voiced that the choice to work only through plenary sessions in the future will lead to more generality and vagueness as the methodology is far more noncommittal, and that an important channel for participation will be lost.

Lessons learned

The experience with VICA illustrated a number of difficulties and obstacles, which serve as important lessons for the future:

- *Continuity in the process of participation* is important. Sufficient means should be allocated to provide the necessary support and personnel for the administration and to guarantee the continuous contribution of the poor and their organisations. It is proposed to appoint permanent contact persons in all administrations, who will follow developments in the field of poverty and the fight against it.

- *Support for the representative organisations* in which the poor take the floor is necessary to be able to hold effective social dialogue.
- *Opportunities for participation should be built into the policy-making process* at all levels – in addition to plenary hearings and information and discussion meetings. Co-ordination and co-operation are key elements of successful policy dialogue.
- *Clear information* about the future activities and the goals of consultative fora (such as VICA) must be provided to organisations representing the poor.

Participation in local development

Local government is the level of government closest to citizens, and is also searching for methods to involve different groups of the population in making plans and policies. Different views on participation are to be found and different methodologies are used. There are also issues regarding the participation of “specific” population groups such as the poor, immigrants, children and youth.

This process is also reinforced by the policy agreements between the Flemish Government and local governments, which form the basis for granting drawing rights to the latter under the Social Impulse Funds (SIF). These policy agreements are to be drawn up for each municipality, in co-operation with the town council and the Public Centres for Social Welfare. They should indicate how, at the local level, efforts are made to improve the quality of life and of the environment of marginalised areas and municipalities and to fight poverty and social exclusion. The decree on the SIF does not mention how participation should be carried out locally, but it does say that it is necessary. The policy plan should indicate the procedures the local government will follow. Another example of legislation which uses drawing rights as a lever and focuses on planning and participation is the decree on local youth work.

Participation through associations

The voluntary or third sector occupies a central place in Belgium, while the Belgian welfare state also includes a large variety of private initiatives (Bouverne-De Bie, 1996, p. 35). Recent research also demonstrates that participation in associations is very strong in Flanders. Approximately half of the population are active members of at least one organisation while 22 per cent are members of more than one organisation, 42 per cent are members of a trade union, and 20 per cent does volunteer work. Participation in associations is unequally distributed: men are more often members of clubs than women, higher skilled people are more active than semi- and unskilled people. Social integration and social exclusion seem to have a cumulative nature: people who have received little schooling also have fewer opportunities on the labour market, and participate less in associations and in cultural life (Elchardus *et al.*, 1999, p. 97). Consequently, those who are not “organised” also have fewer opportunities to participate in policy-making through associations.

In the past few decades a number of associations have been established in Flanders that describe themselves as associations in which the poor take the floor. They consist of groups of poor people and poor families that meet together with volunteers and, in some cases, also with professional social workers. Together they organise leisure and cultural as well as educational activities. They work together to improve their situation, to better inform the broader public of their situation and to influence those people who can help them solve their poverty problem (social workers and policy-makers).

However, not all initiatives that present themselves under this common denominator are really associations in which the poor play an active role and are able to take the floor – and it is often difficult to pass a clear judgement. Emphasis is placed on activities organised *by* and *with* the poor families themselves and not *for* the poor (e.g. food banks, second-hand shops or relief organisations). Over the last few years six criteria have been established in co-operation with the associations themselves, which indicate the approach such initiatives should adopt in seeking:

- *To get the poor organised:* to bring the poor together with other people in an independent non-profit organisation with the aim of breaking through the social isolation of the poor.

- *To let the poor speak*: to create the conditions to allow the poor to take the floor and, ultimately, to become fully-fledged discussion partners in society.
- *To work for the social emancipation of the poor*: to help the poor enjoy their civil rights to the full and to make society aware of the equality of poor with others in society.
- *To reform social structures*: to stimulate involvement of the poor in policy-making and to encourage evaluation of the social structures by the poor.
- *To promote dialogue and education*: to pursue solidarity between the poor and society. To achieve this the poor should organise educational activities and actively look for partners in society to exchange knowledge about poverty, based on the experience of the poor, and to overcome misunderstandings, prejudices and exclusion.
- *To actively reach out to poor people*: associations should show an active openness towards other people that live in poverty, even those who are most isolated.

There are approximately 40 associations receiving subsidies from the Flemish Government and they generally meet three or more of these criteria. This support is intended to enable co-operation in policy-making, participation in working groups, and provision of advice and support (e.g. costs of child care, transport). Associations in which the poor take the floor also continuously make sure that not only representatives but also poor people themselves participate in the working groups and consultations held with government.

A number of large associations, such as A.T.D. “Vierde Wereld Vlaanderen” (“A.T.D. Fourth World Flanders”) and the “Beweging van Mensen met een Laag Inkomen en Kinderen” (“Movement of People with a Low Income and Children”) also directly reach a larger group of poor people. The most important feature of these associations, however, is that they fulfil functions (e.g. documentation, education) that extend beyond the local level and closely follow policy developments at the Flemish, federal and European levels. Clearer agreements with these larger associations are being developed with regard to their tasks and functions – which often concern specific policy fields (e.g. education, housing, health care) or the organisation of direct participation of a group of poor people in a given policy-making process (e.g. discussion of a draft law).

Overview of the Case Study

This case study was carried out in different phases. First of all, the current situation regarding opportunities for public participation in policy-making in Flanders was reviewed, by means of relevant literature and documents. In the second phase, experts were consulted on the matter. The research findings were brought together and resulted in a number of conditions or criteria for the participation of citizens, and specifically, the poor.

Interviews were conducted with several experts acting at different levels or with different lines of approach to the issue. Representatives from the policy-making sphere (local, Flemish and federal), the voluntary sector and universities, as well as from associations in which the poor themselves take the floor, were also interviewed. The interviews were recorded on tape and the respondents received a report of the conversation. Observations and supplementary information from the respondents were also incorporated into this report.

The 1994 General Report on Poverty

In 1992, the federal government ordered the elaboration of a report on poverty. The poor and their representative organisations played a specific role in the process of drafting this report, as all those dealing with poverty and the poor (e.g. policy-makers, social workers, etc.) were required to make contact with them.

The 1994 General Report on Poverty is the result of two years of intense mobilisation and dialogue, a process engaging the poor and their associations, those working in the sector, and policy-makers from all parts of Belgium (Vrancken and Van Menxel, 1998, p. 197). This dialogue method became the basis

for all further actions. The General Report resulted in over 300 policy proposals – some of which were small, but some of which included radical and structural principles, such as those on equality of wages, labour market policy and the right to work. At the end of 1994, this report was submitted to the government. A number of initiatives have been developed since then, including: consultative bodies, Interministerial Conferences for Social Integration, legislative initiatives, and awareness-raising campaigns.

The General Report on Poverty put the fight against poverty and social exclusion high on the political agenda and created a stimulus for the federal government, as well as the governments of the Communities, Regions and local authorities, to take poverty-reducing initiatives, each in their own policy domain. The creation of this new political dynamics is probably the greatest merit of this report.

In the Flemish Government coalition agreement of 1995-1999, the follow-up of the General Report on Poverty was set out as an explicit goal (Government of Flanders, 2000, p. 224):

- In the period 1995 to 1999, five Interministerial Conferences for Social Integration were held, on which occasions key problems as well as policy proposals were discussed and approved in principle by all competent ministers.
- In 1995, the Anti-Poverty Unit was established within the federal administration to prepare the Interministerial Conferences. This was done in co-operation with the Centre for Equality of Chances and the Reduction of Racism (C.G.K.R.) which was charged with involving the organisations representing the poor in the preparations.
- In May 1998, the governments of the federal state, the regions and the communities signed the “Co-operation Agreement on the Continuation of the Policy on Poverty” (Official Gazette of Belgium, 1999) whose objective was to establish the permanent monitoring of the General Report on Poverty. This agreement institutionalised the dialogue between the associations in which the poor take the floor on the one hand, and the local authorities, the public administration and the social partners on the other (Government of Flanders, 1999, p. 8).

To this end a Centre against Poverty, Social Insecurity and Social Exclusion was established, replacing the former Anti-Poverty Unit. This Centre is charged with involving the associations in which the poor take the floor in a structural and continuous way, and drafting a two-yearly report containing concrete proposals for the reduction of poverty and social exclusion in all fields of policy.

The dialogue method

The dialogue method was used for the first time in preparing the General Report on Poverty in partnership with people living in poverty, as well as their associations (Otjacques and Luyts, 2000). The “dialogue method” aims to provide people living in poverty with the opportunity, through the associations in which they meet and have their say, to actively participate in the exchange and discussion of a particular theme and, ultimately, to formulate policy proposals (Antwerps Platform Generatiearmen, 1999). This method is based on respect for the rhythm of the groups on the ground as regards programming and decision-making. The ultimate goal is the elimination of the structural causes of poverty.

The dialogue method has a number of different steps:

1. *Social dialogue* between the poorest people and their associations on the one hand, and the representatives of local welfare organisations on the other, is established by means of several meetings:
 - *Preparation*: individual experiences are gathered through house visits and group meetings. At these meetings it is also decided which themes will be elaborated further. A “dialogue compilation” is prepared, which brings together shared experiences and proposals.
 - *Dialogue*: the dialogue between the poor and representatives of local welfare organisations is established in consultative meetings in which a delegation of the former submits the “dialogue compilation” to the latter. The local welfare organisations then prepare answers to the proposals.

In the last stage, a final text is drawn up, containing both proposals and answers. Feedback information is provided to the broader group of poor people on a regular basis.

2. *Political dialogue* between the poor and their associations, representatives of local welfare organisations and policy-makers is then organised:
 - *Preparation*: on the basis of the final text resulting from the social dialogue, the policy-makers prepare their answers (e.g. concepts for new legislation).
 - *Dialogue*: these answers and concepts are discussed and explained in consultative meetings. Agreements about the follow-up and an evaluation of the measures proposed are made in advance. This dialogue continues during the implementation and evaluation stages.

Box 41. Using the Dialogue Method with Poor Families in Ostend

Over a period of three years, nearly one hundred poor families in Ostend have tried to describe their experiences, especially as regards the placement of their children and the settlement of their debts. In order to structure discussions with these families on such subjects, three “work compilations” were developed, including testimonies of poor families that were included in earlier publications produced by associations of the poor. Each work compilation was discussed with a group of about 40 families, in their homes as well as at monthly meetings. Once the discussion of a work compilation was finished, a “dialogue compilation” was drawn up on the basis of indications from the families in which 75 proposals and suggestions were brought forward. These were discussed in the course of five meetings with 15 regional services and bodies who responded to the proposals of the poor families (Decock, 2001).

It must be emphasised that participation of the poor in policy-making through the dialogue method is a very intensive process for all parties involved. Before the real dialogue with the policy-makers and representatives of welfare organisations takes place, it is necessary to address the target group directly and convince them to participate in the process. The fact that people living in poverty are given an opportunity to be heard is itself important – and is considered by many participants to constitute personal recognition by policy-makers.

Since the publication of the General Report on Poverty in 1994, the number of organisations in which the poor take the floor has increased considerably. Some organisations are established by the poor themselves – whereas others originate, and are embedded in, existing initiatives (such as community work) that have already been working with specific target groups at the local level for many years.

Co-operation agreement

The Co-operation Agreement signed on 5 May 1998 by the Prime Minister and the ministers of the Federal State, the Flemish Region and the Flemish Community, the French-speaking Community, the German-speaking Community, the Walloon Region and the Brussels Region represents the continuation of the policy on poverty. The Co-operation Agreement was intended to bridge the gaps that existed between levels of government, each with their own competence in the fight against poverty, and to avoid fragmentation. Furthermore, it intended to legally embed the dialogue method as used in drafting the General Report on Poverty.

The Co-operation Agreement also provided for the establishment of the Centre against Poverty, Social Insecurity and Social Exclusion, which was opened in July 1999. The Centre is to provide all governments and people concerned with the possibility to participate in developing, elaborating and evaluating policies to reduce poverty – including those who live in poverty. It is a trilingual institution, working on the federal level, with a management committee composed of representatives from all levels of government. At present, the Minister of Social Integration chairs the Committee. In its first year of existence the Centre mainly functioned as a consultative platform between associations of the poor and

policy-makers, officials and experts, for discussion of a number of themes concerning juvenile justice and social security.

The Centre is also charged with drawing up a two-yearly report evaluating the policy on poverty pursued at the different levels of government, as well as on the degree of co-operation between them. The report is to be elaborated through dialogue with the various actors concerned. To this end, a number of working groups are set up and the material gathered at the local level systematically processed and compiled, as a basis for the dialogue. The activities of the different working groups of the Centre therefore depend partly on developments and initiatives at the local level. The dialogue process in the different working groups is reported as exhaustively as possible in order to give those who have not participated directly in the dialogue process the opportunity to follow the discussions.

The advantage of such an official report, with obligatory reading and reactions, is that one can always return to it and as such can always trace its impact on future policy-making. The first evaluation report is expected by June 2001.

Lessons for participation by the poor in national policy-making

Obstacles and challenges at the national level

This case study illustrates that there are many obstacles to the effective inclusion of poor citizens in policy making, which arise in several areas including:

- a) Establishing conditions for dialogue
 - *The organisation of dialogue takes time and needs preparation.* The poor should be given the chance to formulate their experiences. Individual experiences should become shared experiences and should be tested against the social reality. Knowledge of a particular theme should be acquired and there should be a possibility to identify potential bottlenecks and develop proposals. Policy-makers do not always realise how much time it takes to achieve a fruitful dialogue – it could vary from a few months to a year. If one wishes to have a dialogue from one day to the next, one risks that individual experiences and subjective perceptions become the norm of the discussion or that the poor are merely participating as a cover (De Keeting, 2000).
 - A major impediment is the great *reluctance of the poor to participate* in a dialogue with other partners, which is due to their personal experience of exclusion, isolation and shame.
 - *Expectations are often higher than the results.* Many poor people are sceptical about the channels for participation offered. The fact that the changes brought through policy dialogue are slow or imperceptible is discouraging.
 - Organisations engaged in community work or associations in which the poorest people take the floor are often regarded as “*participation specialists*”, to which policy-makers or other organisations can turn when they need to undertake dialogue. However, concern for and direct attention to participation should be the responsibility of all public authorities.
- b) Coping with diversity
 - The *poor are a very heterogeneous group*, and as a result it is difficult to achieve representative participation.
 - There are a *large variety of organisations and associations* in which the poor people take the floor. They work in different ways and different fields, and in so doing they emphasise different aspects. Diversity stimulates discussion and is therefore positive, but without mutual communication it may become an impediment.
 - The *main interlocutors change frequently* both among policy-makers and welfare organisations, as well as within the associations themselves, which hampers continuity.
- c) Capacity of the poor to participate
 - *The poor often appear difficult to organise.* Other citizens appear to be better equipped to link up with organisations or associations that, in one way or another, defend their interests. There is some

discussion about the need for a specific sectoral approach for the poor as a group. Without specific efforts the poor remain out of touch or difficult to reach. On the other hand, with specific measures there is the risk that the poor as a group will be treated as a “special” case and that the differences between poor citizens and other citizens will be reinforced.

- *Differences in education and language usage.* Lack of knowledge of social structures on the part of the poor, and of the world of experience of the poor on the part of policy-makers and welfare organisations, are significant challenges in establishing conditions for dialogue.
- *The very difficult living conditions and urgent problems* that are time- and energy-consuming often hamper the commitment of the poor to participate in such dialogue. They face a continuous struggle to avoid being overwhelmed by problems that urgently demand a solution and yet leave space for collective reflection.

Policy lessons for the national level

A number of policy lessons are offered by this case study on engaging the poor in policy-making, many of which may be applicable to other national contexts or policy areas, these include:

a) Support

- *Adequate guidance and support* should be provided for people participating in the dialogue. Participants should be able to rely on individual support and on the group as necessary.
- *Dialogue at the grass-roots level is a necessary condition* for holding effective dialogue at the national level. Financial and political support to grass-roots organisations is essential to guarantee the “social dialogue”.
- *Initiatives should be taken on different levels of government and in different policy fields.* The Centre against Poverty, Social Insecurity and Social Exclusion provides for the official participation of the poor in developing policy on poverty. To reach a more general level of participation of the poor in overall welfare policy, however, other channels are also necessary.

b) Full information and transparency

- *Providing information about the method and the conditions of the dialogue* to policy-makers and professionals should be an ongoing concern. Reliable reports and dissemination of information are necessary to allow associations to consult their members and allow a wider circle of people to comment.
- Continuous and clear *information on the development and follow-up of the measures* taken as a result of the policy dialogue is needed.
- *Regular contacts and the exchange of information* between the poor that participate directly in the consultation and those that do not are essential (e.g. through house visits and “daily accessibility”).
- *Information flow and mutual co-operation* between different organisations in which the poor participate is necessary to identify both the diversity, and common elements of, the experience of the poor and help put them on the political agenda.

c) Time and commitment

- *Significant and long-lasting commitment* is needed in order to establish a relationship based on mutual trust. Attention should be paid to the first contact. Long-lasting commitment of “professionals” operating in different social fields in engaging with the poor is necessary in order to develop shared insights.
- *Special efforts should be made to encourage better co-ordination* among organisations and associations in which the poor take the floor (and among the poor themselves). A lack of co-operation among organisations should not be used as an excuse by policy-makers for excluding the poor from the policy-making process.
- *Specific and repeated efforts should be made to involve the poorest citizens* in policy-making and in society by policy-makers and other relevant organisations.

d) Training

- Considerable efforts are necessary to ensure that people living in poverty form their own opinion and express that opinion in a language understandable to all. *Training and information tailored for poor citizens is essential* to achieving this (e.g. information about the rights of tenants when discussing the theme of housing).
- On the other hand, *actions should be taken to achieve a long-lasting and active willingness to listen on the part of public officials*. Here too, training of professionals and of policy-makers that directly or indirectly come into contact with poor citizens is necessary. Poverty is still too often considered as a mere financial problem. Knowledge of the different aspects of poverty is needed in order to be able to develop effective measures for reducing poverty.

e) Empowerment and results

- It is important that people living in poverty are involved in the intermediate steps and have a say in the entire course of the decision-making process. Due to the slow pace of most policy changes, tangible improvements that are clearly felt in daily life and are long-lasting are also needed. Working methods that give poor people participating in policy-making more power and knowledge, that they can put to use in their own lives are essential.

Lessons for participation by the poor in local decision-making*Obstacles and challenges at the local level*

While it is true that local government is closer to the individual citizen than the national level, this case study also revealed a number of obstacles to participation of the poor at the local level. These included:

a) Local decision-making cultures

- *Direct participation of citizens themselves is not yet part of the culture* of municipal decision-making in many areas. The idea that all actors (local welfare actors, organisations and inhabitants, including the poor) should be considered indispensable partners in the development of local plans for social and welfare services is still not widespread. Local welfare organisations and inhabitants are often not involved in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of such programmes. Local decision-makers, welfare professionals and other officials are not accustomed to beginning with the participation of the people concerned.
- Decisions to allow public participation are often based on *a defensive or a problem-oriented stance*. A proactive approach, that starts from the conviction that participation is an essential condition for developing and implementing policies and that takes the positive contribution of each individual as fundamental, appears to be rare in practice.

b) Capacity to manage public participation

- Local decision-makers may be willing to let people participate, but they *lack the knowledge and the skills* to organise public participation effectively. Local decision-makers often expect citizens to participate by adopting “classical” ways of working, e.g. by providing written comments on printed documents, oral reactions in consultative meetings, comments on maps showing plans for the development of a district. Many citizens, including the poor, are unfamiliar with these ways of working and the language used and meetings are not always geared to their needs. Knowledge of specific techniques for managing public participation may be lacking at the local level.
- *Differences in approaches to problem solving* between local decision-makers and the poor may undermine participation. Decision-makers often think in terms of distinct “policy fields” while for most citizens, and particularly for the poor, experiences and problems are contextually interrelated. Consequently, negative experiences with participation may lead local officials to take this difference in logic and tempo as an excuse for excluding the poor from participation in local decision-making.

c) Meeting expectations

- *Local governments often wait too long* before opening up decision-making to the public, and when opportunities for participation are offered they often relate to the details and not to the essence of the issue under discussion. If citizens, including the poor, are only allowed to take part in deciding on details (e.g. the choice between a flower box or a parking space) they are not being taken seriously by the decision-makers and are not considered to be competent as regards their own personal and social experiences.
- *Lack of information about the objectives and future impact of public participation exercises* prevents participants from formulating reasonable expectations. Such information is not always provided, nor is feedback given on the results of participation processes and their impact on the decisions made.

Policy lessons for the local level

A number of lessons for local decision-makers may be drawn from this case study, including the need to:

a) Develop partnerships

- Local decision-makers should *recognise that welfare organisations and associations representing the poor are their partners*. Participation should not be considered merely as a means to solve problems, but should be regarded as a necessary condition for the development, the implementation and the evaluation of local programmes. This implies a change in mentality among local officials, as well as a willingness to change established practices that will require training and awareness-raising.

b) Explore new methods

- There is an urgent need to *develop, and experiment with, alternative methods for participation*. Methods for participation that have traditionally been used should be reconsidered creatively and should link with tools that people use every day but may not recognise as such. For example, one way of inquiring about people's experience is to show them pictures. Even when "classical" channels of participation are used, enough time and room should be allowed.
- The *ultimate aim of the participation channels and methods chosen should be clear* to both parties. Requesting an opinion is more noncommittal than the joint analysis of a problem and the formulation of solutions. This should be made clear to the people involved from the outset.

c) Link levels of government

- Obstacles identified, or proposals made, by people at the local level which fall outside the competence of local government, should be passed on to the competent person(s) at other levels (provincial, Flemish, federal or European). Ideally, local governments should act as partners and actively assume their responsibilities by ensuring a liaison between levels of government in order to achieve better solutions over the long term.

Recent Developments

Experts in experience

Another means of involving the poor in policy-making is to work with "experts in experience". These are people who themselves used to be very poor and who gradually learn to deal with their experiences and extend them to the experiences of other poor people. Once they have dealt with their experiences and have generalised them, they are trained to use them in a professional way in the fight against poverty. They are also provided with methodologies to bridge the gap between the poor and policy-makers. This training is essential. The point of departure in such training is that the poor themselves should not necessarily follow the entire process from contributing their experiences to the elaboration of proposals and laws. The poor should provide content and should be involved in the follow-up and feedback of the policy-making process, but the translation of this content into laws and specific

measures may, for example, be the task of “experts in experience”. At the moment, this methodology is still under preparation and its applicability is still being investigated.

National plans of action and indicators

On 1 June 2001, at the initiative of the Belgian Government, the Member States of the European Union each submitted a national plan of action to fight poverty and social exclusion and agreed to develop common poverty indicators to measure the progress of this policy. The Belgian Presidency of the European Union makes reference to the need to directly engage the poor in its Work Programme (now available on the official web site, see: www.eu2001.be):

On 1 June 2001 all the Member States submitted a National Action Plan on Social Inclusion in which they explain how they will try to achieve their goals. These plans also describe the indicators and monitoring methods to be used to assess policies. Analysing these national action plans should make it possible by the end of the year to formulate an initial set of conclusions on future European collaboration on *the fight against poverty and social exclusion*. This collaboration will allow the Member States to teach each other – through the application of “good practice” – ways of organising the dialogue with the players involved: NGOs, the social partners, the poor and socially excluded groups. ... The commitment of the target group itself is critical: the use of indicators is not based solely on technical expertise, but also on a platform supported by all interested parties, which includes the poor and the socially excluded.

(Belgian Presidency of the EU 2001)

Two events related to the reduction of poverty and social exclusion are planned: a two-day conference (14-15 September 2001) on “social indicators”, chaired by Minister Vandembroucke (Belgium’s Minister of Social Affairs); and an initiative concerning “National Action Plans for Poverty Reduction” on 17 October 2001 (International Day on the Eradication of Poverty).

The Flemish Government has linked its own plan of action to the Belgian national plan. In parallel with the work of a scientific team engaged in developing practical poverty indicators, an action research programme will start in 2001, in which the associations “in which the poor take the floor” will look for qualitative indicators for evaluating the policy to fight poverty. In the course of this research, the dialogue method will play a central role.

New Flemish legislation

The Flemish Government plans to submit a new decree on poverty reduction to the Flemish Parliament for approval in 2001. This legislation should guarantee that a plan of action is drawn up on a regular basis and that the permanent co-ordination between all policy domains runs smoothly. In this decree, the participation of the poor is made possible by means of financial and professional support to associations of the poor at the grass-roots level and through a Forum of such organisations. This proposed legislation will also cover training and employment of “experts in experience” as regards poverty, research and the encouragement of municipal plans of action for fighting poverty and social exclusion with participation of the poorest citizens. Poor families and their associations were involved in the development of this draft legislation through several informal contacts and several information sessions.

Evaluation

In the context of this case study, the term “evaluation” may be applied in two ways:

- Evaluation as a phase in the policy cycle (policy-making, implementation, evaluation) and the participation of citizens in the evaluation of public policies.
- Evaluation of existing channels for participation.

Evaluation of policy measures by the poor

The evaluation of policy measures does not always happen systematically, and policy-makers do not always include in the process opportunities for public participation. However, the participation of

citizens, and in particular the poor, in the evaluation of policy measures is a necessary phase in the follow-up of policy implementation. The reality of exclusion is often more sophisticated than the policy measures themselves. It is the poor that, on the basis of their daily evaluation of the measures taken, are able to tell policy-makers what works and what does not. The following example from Belgium clarifies this point: considering that everyone has the right to a minimum level of energy supply, electricity companies were prohibited from cutting off electricity supply to homes. At the same time, however, the same companies were not given a “command to connect”. As a consequence, the electricity companies refused to reconnect people that had moved until the entire debt was paid from their previous residence.

Follow-up and evaluation of policy measures on a regular basis should be provided from the beginning. To involve citizens, and in particular the poor, in the follow-up and evaluation of policy implies, for example, that the policy options and measures taken are made more explicit and are motivated. This type of follow-up is an essential element in open and communicative policy-making and should be a continuous exercise, given that situations and target groups also change over time.

Evaluation of existing participation channels for the poor

Systematic evaluation of the current channels for public participation in general, or for the poor in particular, is not currently carried out in Belgium. The 1994 General Report on Poverty was first and foremost a stimulus for the federal, the regional and the local governments. The report also gave rise to a number of services and organisations as well as several projects (e.g. on special youth care, social housing, community health care). To date, however, a systematic and general evaluation of the report has not been carried out.

Among the evaluation efforts that have been conducted, the following are worthy of note:

- *Regular government “progress reports”* are prepared for the Interministerial Conferences on Social Integration, in which the conclusions and proposals of the 1994 General Report on Poverty are always taken as a point of departure. The two-yearly report of the Anti-Poverty Unit on the state of affairs in poverty reduction policy is also based on the General Report and the “rights” stipulated therein.
- The “*Yearbook Poverty and Social Exclusion*”, prepared by Antwerp University and published under the authority of the Flemish Government, is an important reference on poverty in Flanders, with respect to both the collection of data and policy evaluation and prospects for the future.
- *Individual research studies* on poverty-related issues, most of which take the 1994 General Report on Poverty as a frame of reference as regards the point of view of poor people themselves.

It is, at present, an open question as to which criteria should be taken as a basis for evaluation. Some of the conditions, as described in the case study above, could be taken as a starting point in developing criteria for active citizen participation. At the same time, criteria for the final outcome of participation cannot be laid down in advance.

Further elaboration and a general discussion on these criteria with the various actors concerned is necessary. More emphasis could be laid on the role of universities and research centres in conducting evaluations as one of their key tasks. As a first step, a systematic inventory of the existing material should be made and an evaluation of the “dialogue method” as a tool for public participation conducted.

Conclusions

Participation means recognition and respect for people, and implies that they are considered and approached as competent with regard to their personal situation and the social context in which they live. Consequently, the potential fields for participation cover all aspects people come into contact with, and have gained experience in. It is not merely a matter of opinions, but also of experiences. To allow people to make their opinions and experiences explicit and to bring these together in a social dialogue

which provides input into policy-making, support is needed. An open approach to policy-making, structural provisions, concrete opportunities and channels for participation are all essential.

However, participation is much more than the application of ready-made methods. It starts with making the policy vision more explicit. Participation further means setting up processes according to an overall plan, in which citizens, including the poor, are involved in the different phases of the development and implementation of a given policy. This includes the policy's preparation (gathering data, social analysis and problem definition), the definition of policy objectives and concrete measures, and its follow-up or evaluation. Central issues are the inclusion of opportunities for dialogue and the question of whether each citizen equitably benefits from the policy.

It can be claimed that the change in mentality of those who participate in such a dialogue is as important a result as the amendment of a law or a policy document. Such dialogue gives the poor the chance to regain control of their own lives and experience, and to become part of society once again. Dialogue with the poor can also enrich the personal and social vision of those engaged in the administration and in policy-making.

For public sector managers, the following are important conditions for strengthening relations between citizens and the government and ensuring the participation of citizens, especially the poor:

- *Ensure transparency* with regard to the underlying vision, objectives and methods of the policy.
- *Make explicit* the underlying vision, objectives and methods of the policy.
- *Provide clear and accessible information for all* with particular and continuous attention to those groups that cannot be fully reached through commonly used information channels.
- *Include opportunities for participation in all phases* of policy development and implementation.
- *Adopt a proactive approach* in which public participation is considered as a necessary precondition for effective policy-making.
- *Provide for more systematic and formalised participation channels* instead of an *ad hoc* approach to public participation.
- *Train* those who are working on poverty reduction policies as regards the reality of poverty.
- *Allow enough time, room and support* to conduct a full social and political dialogue with the poor.

The obstacles and policy lessons described in this report indicate that the debate on participation channels for the poor should also be linked to a wider reflection on the general conditions for the development of a more participatory democracy. Indeed, lessons learned from the experience of fostering participation by the poor should be the basis for extending and/or reconsidering the possibilities for participation in public decision-making by *all* citizens. The definition of policy objectives should always be linked to a social debate in which the government aims at achieving an ongoing commitment of as many citizens as possible. This commitment should be considered as a valuable objective in its own right, not only as a means. Formal and informal participation channels may then be considered as important policy networks that help to develop interactive policy-making and implementation (Redig, 2000). This requires public officials to adopt a proactive position and assume the responsibility of ensuring conditions for participation by the poor in policy-making.

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