



THE REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS
LA REPUBLIQUE DE CHYPRE



COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Council of Europe Forum for the Future of Democracy

**13-14 October 2011
Limassol, Cyprus**

Strasbourg, 5 September 2011

FFD (2011) 4.1A

The Interdependency of Democracy and Social Cohesion: Strengthening representation and democratic participation through public dialogue and civic engagement

Issue paper for Working Session 1A:
**Promoting and enabling broad democratic
engagement by empowering all members of society**

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*The views expressed in this paper are the responsibility of the author
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1. Introduction¹

The starting point for this Issue Paper is the belief that the greater the democratic engagement in public affairs by all sections of society, the greater the legitimacy, inclusiveness, effectiveness and sustainability of a country's democratic systems. The legitimacy of democratic structures depends on maximising inclusion and participation and giving full recognition to the rights of all citizens to inclusion in shaping the political process and the decisions that affect their lives. If some sections of a society find that the political system is remote from or irrelevant to their needs or if they feel excluded and powerless and lacking the skills and knowledge to enable them to participate in the decisions that affect their lives then democratic engagement is diminished, social cohesion is undermined and people's fundamental rights are curtailed. It also leads to poor policy making as the failure to involve those affected by policy decisions in their formulation, implementation and monitoring results in less effective policies and programmes. To ensure strong democracies it is essential to empower people to participate and influence the decisions that affect their lives and to have control over those who make decisions on their behalf. Thus this paper does two things. First, it briefly identifies some of the barriers that disempower people and hinder their democratic engagement. Secondly, it identifies seven key issues that arise from this analysis and suggests how they can be addressed.

2. Barriers to empowerment

In order to identify what is needed to empower all members of society so that they can engage in democratic processes it is first necessary to identify what causes disempowerment and what are the barriers to engagement. The following is a brief summary of six key barriers.

(i) *Poverty, inequality and social exclusion*

The extensive literature showing how poverty, inequality and social exclusion leads to disempowerment and disengagement and alienation from democratic processes can only be very briefly summarised here. As the European Anti Poverty Network has shown (EAPN, 2009), living in poverty can mean that people become isolated from family and friends. They lack hope and feel powerless and excluded with little control over the decisions that affect their day to day lives. They often lack information about the supports and services available to them. They frequently experience problems in dealing with bureaucracies and accessing essential services. They experience stigma, prejudice and lack of respect which further isolates them. Access to their fundamental rights is limited and they become trapped in poverty. They often lack the skills, knowledge and information necessary to engage with institutions.

As a result, poverty and social exclusion limit people's ability to engage in democratic processes in three particular respects. First, they undermine people's skills and self-confidence to engage with policy makers and to express their opinions as equals and to participate in making decisions and implementing them. Secondly, because life can become a day to day struggle to survive, there is often little time, energy or resources left to engage with democratic processes. Thirdly, democratic processes often seem very remote and irrelevant and people do not engage not because they are apathetic but because they do not think that their concerns and voices will be listened to. They feel disengaged from the democratic process and powerless to influence it.

¹ This paper draws mainly on two sources. These are: first, the lessons learned over the last decade of combating poverty and social exclusion in the European Union and empowering the inclusion of those who are on the margins of society; secondly, recent experience in Ireland on empowering marginalised groups and communities and promoting greater democratic engagement. Some key sources are listed at the end.

(ii) *Discrimination, racism, prejudice and a lack of respect for rights*

A second key factor is racism, discrimination, prejudice and a lack of respect for rights. This leads to the marginalisation of some individuals and groups such as migrants and ethnic minorities and their isolation from the society in which they are living. It also often leads to poverty and social exclusion and to feelings of alienation and powerlessness. As with poverty, this can mean that people find themselves without the information, skills, self-confidence, resources, organisational means and sometimes the language to engage effectively in democratic processes.

(iii) *Narrow and exclusive political structures*

A third factor that disempowers people is when democratic systems are very narrow and exclusive and when many people do not feel that the processes of formal democracy offer them enough influence over political decisions. Participation is undermined where people feel that they only have a token or “formal” role in the democratic process but no real influence over the outcomes that affect them. Thus democratic engagement is severely undermined where involvement is just limited to periodic elections and where day to day decision-making appears to be largely controlled by powerful elites and decisions seem to be taken in a top-down manner and often largely in the interest of elites. The exercise of the right to vote should be only one part of a cycle of political participation in democratic governance.

(iv) *Poor and inaccessible public services*

A fourth factor which increases marginalisation and disempowerment is when some groups in society have poor or limited access to essential public services (e.g. health, education, housing, social protection and social services) and when public services are delivered in ways that limit participation and involvement. Disempowerment can also be increased when public services are not universal and significant groups in society opt out of public services which then become residual and second class services used mainly by those who are marginalised and excluded.

(v) *Weak civil society*

Where there is a lack of strong civil society organisations, particularly NGOs, or where these organisations do not have a strong participative culture or where their role in civil dialogue is unrecognised by the state, then the opportunities for those experiencing exclusion is curtailed. So supporting and building a strong, inclusive civil society is an essential prerequisite for participation.

(vi) *Over dependence on the market and lack of a culture of solidarity*

More generally, a political and societal culture that becomes overly dominated by a market ideology can undermine collective social solidarity and increase the marginalisation of some groups. If people are seen primarily as consumers, workers or clients rather than as citizens, then respect and understanding of the collective contribution that people can bring to well-being is undervalued and an undue emphasis is put just on people’s earning or buying power. This can reinforce the marginalisation and disempowerment of those who lack such power.

3. Facilitating empowerment and overcoming barriers to democratic engagement

Arising from this brief survey of barriers, seven interconnected issues can be identified. First, how can democratic structures be made more relevant, accessible and inclusive? Secondly, what do countries need to do to combat poverty, inequality and social exclusion and promote social rights? Thirdly, what specific programmes can be put in place which will work directly to empower those who are living in poverty and to ensure a strong and inclusive civil society? Fourthly, how can a strong and inclusive civil society be ensured? Fifthly, how best can discrimination and racism be countered and gender equality and respect for migrants' rights be supported? Sixthly, how can public services be delivered in ways which make them inclusive and empowering? Seventhly, how can countries build a culture of solidarity and inclusion? Some ways of addressing these seven issues are briefly elaborated below.

(i) Developing more inclusive, participative open and accountable democratic structures

The ways of ensuring that democratic structures can become more participative and inclusive can be grouped into two broad categories. First, there are measures aimed at enhancing the openness, accountability and inclusiveness of formal representative democratic systems so that they are more accessible and relevant to people who feel powerless and excluded. Secondly, there are measures to complement representative democratic structures with participatory democracy through developing participatory/deliberative forms of citizens' engagement in public governance and enhancing democratic participation by fostering the advocacy role of civil society organisations, civics/ethics education in all school levels and a diverse media.

Some of the ways that have been suggested to make formal representative democratic systems more inclusive include: limiting the power of the executive and unaccountable bodies and emphasising the power of parliament and local government; creating mechanisms whereby citizens, including those who are marginalised and excluded, can have a direct and focused say over political decisions and policies (e.g. through the right to initiate legislative processes); limiting and making visible the inputs of interest groups into the political process; requiring increased accountability and visibility of elected politicians; increasing information to citizens on how to influence and participate in democratic processes (e.g. establishing democracy resource centres at local authority level where people can access information and advice to navigate their way through the democratic system; organising voter registration campaigns; and organising Voter Education-Active Citizenship programmes, especially for excluded groups and communities).

The role and benefits of participatory democracy has been well summarised by the Platform of European Social NGOs (Social Platform):

“The primary objective is to engage all people in the fabric of society, and ultimately promote social cohesion, solidarity and social justice, creating a better quality of life for everyone. Participatory democracy also aims to achieve quality services for people that are better targeted to their needs. Participatory democracy creates public space for discussion and therefore gives people more ownership of decisions. It aims to engage with disengaged people who are not politically active (e.g. those who do not vote), nor active in associations, creating a more active citizenship. It sets people as actors in all areas of life, extending the concept of citizenship beyond the conventional political sphere (e.g. involving users in the provision of services, involving parents in schooling, etc)...By involving people to intervene, participatory democracy can produce solutions that are effective and legitimate, and go beyond traditional political divides. In that sense, it strengthens the legitimacy of decision makers/services providers since their decisions will be based on the real views of people.

Participatory democracy therefore aims to improve trust and accountability” (Social Platform, 2008).

The types of measures that can enhance inclusive participatory democracy, especially at local level, include: requiring regional and local authorities to establish structures in all policy areas which will involve social partners and civil society organisations in the planning, delivery, coordination and monitoring of policies; making wider use of local plebiscites; and providing local citizens information and advice services which support and provide information to citizens on how they can engage in the democratic process.

Over the last decade the EU’s social inclusion processes had given considerable emphasis to promoting greater participation of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in policy making processes, including the organisation every year of an Annual Meeting of People Experiencing Poverty organised by the Commission and EU Presidency. Much good practice has been identified on what is needed to make participation effective and there is a growing demand for the Commission and Member States to agree guidelines and minimum standards on the effective involvement of stakeholders (including people experiencing poverty) in all phases of the preparation, implementation, evaluation and monitoring of social inclusion policies (see for instance EAPN 2009, Frazer and Marlier 2010 and Inbas and Engender 2010). The importance of participatory democracy has also been reinforced with its recognition in Article 11 of the revised Lisbon Treaty.

(ii) Reducing poverty, inequality & social exclusion & promoting social rights

There is only space to briefly summarise the key elements necessary to reduce poverty and social exclusion. Lessons from the EU social protection and social inclusion process between 2000 and 2010 suggest that ten factors are important in developing effective social inclusion strategies (see Frazer et al, 2010). These are: strong political leadership which prioritises social inclusion objectives; systematic mainstreaming and integrating of social inclusion objectives into all areas of national and sub-national policy making; the use of ex-ante and ex-post social inclusion and equality (including gender equality) assessments of the impact of all policies on social inclusion and equality; a commitment to promoting social rights for all; the availability of in-depth analysis supported by quality and timely data; a strategic evidence-based approach based on clear objectives and targets; a balance between universal and targeted approaches and between prevention and alleviation; effective arrangements for the involvement of key actors in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes; effective delivery arrangements at local level; and effective monitoring and reporting arrangements.

In terms of policies it is clear from the EU experience that, given the complex nature of poverty, a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach, involving integrated and coordinated actions across a range of policy areas is required. In particular the EU process has actively encouraged Member States to adopt an active inclusion approach. This has emphasised that effectively empowering people to become active participants in society and the labour market requires the implementation of a comprehensive social inclusion strategy combining in an integrated way adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services (see European Commission, 2008b)².

² The EU process has also highlighted the importance of a comprehensive and integrated policy for the social inclusion of children and families should combine: policies to ensure an adequate income both through work and social protection; access to and participation in services, the development of effective care and protection policies; and the promotion of access to and participation in social, cultural and recreational activities (see Frazer and Devlin, 2011 and Frazer, Marlier and Nicaise, 2010 for more details).

(iii) Programmes to empower marginalised individuals and groups

As well as overall social inclusion strategies there is also a need for specific programmes which will work directly to empower those who are living in poverty and to ensure a strong and inclusive civil society. In this regard supporting community development, community education and community arts projects can play a crucial role. Community development is based on working with and supporting groups of people. It enables them to develop knowledge, skills and confidence so that they can develop an analysis, identify priority needs and issues and address these through collective action. Professional community work practice emphasises empowerment, social justice, promoting equality and anti-discrimination and participation. It particularly promotes the involvement of groups who experience social exclusion, marginalisation, and discrimination in decision-making, planning and action at all levels from the local to the global (see for instance Community Workers Cooperative, 2010). The important role that can be played by community development was highlighted in the Budapest Declaration which was agreed by community workers, researchers, funders, policy makers and representatives from governments, civil society organisations and community groups from 33 countries across the European Union and beyond, who attended the ‘Building Civil Society in Europe through Community Development’ Conference in Budapest in 2004. They defined community development in the following way:

“community development is a way of strengthening civil society by prioritising the actions of communities and their perspectives in the development of social, economic and environmental policy. It seeks the empowerment of local communities, taken to mean both geographical communities, communities of interest or identity and communities organising around specific themes or policy initiatives. It strengthens the capacity of people as active citizens through their community groups, organisations and networks; and the capacity of institutions and agencies (public, private and non-governmental) to work in dialogue with citizens to shape and determine change in their communities. It plays a crucial role in supporting active democratic life by promoting the autonomous voice of disadvantaged and vulnerable communities. It has a set of core values/social principles covering human rights, social inclusion, equality and respect for diversity, and a specific skills and knowledge base”.

The role that adult and community education can play in empowering people who are disadvantaged and in complementing and working with community development and other initiatives is well documented (see for example Aontas, 2005). With its emphasis on the needs of the learner and its creative methodologies it can create space for meaningful engagement for many people who are marginalised and excluded and give them the opportunity to continually learn and develop their skills and capacities. It is also education that keeps its focus on empowerment through group solidarity and co-operation, collective participation in decision-making processes, the insertion of human rights perspectives, recognition of community, and the generation of policy and practice lessons in addressing exclusion. It supports and resources dynamic models of personal, social and community development, and challenges discrimination. Likewise promoting participation in community arts projects and cultural activities can be very important in empowering excluded groups and communities and encouraging democratic participation. Community arts can help to build skills and self-confidence, enhance self-esteem and identity, overcome cultural diversity and discrimination, create employment opportunities, increase access to information and services and promote social integration. It can also contribute to a community development process and be a means for disadvantaged groups and communities to explore and highlight issues that affect them (see Centre for Public Policy 2005 and Moore 1997).

(iv) *Building a strong and inclusive civil society*

Support for community development, community education and community arts projects will gain in impact if there is a strong civil society and a commitment to its involvement in policy making. This means establishing a clear legal framework and providing adequate resources to support the participation of NGOs. It also involves formal recognition of the right to meaningful involvement at all stages of decision making (i.e. policy design, implementation and evaluation).³

(v) *Tackling discrimination and racism; guaranteeing gender equality and respect for migrants' rights*

As highlighted earlier, racism and discrimination, particularly when combined with poverty and social exclusion, leads to the isolation, segregation and disempowerment of minority groups, particularly some ethnic minorities and migrant groups. Experience suggests a range of actions that are necessary to ensure that minority groups are empowered to engage in democratic systems (see for instance Crowley, 2010). First, there is a need for strong political leadership which provides a positive vision of ethnically diverse and inclusive societies characterised by equality, including gender equality. Secondly, it is essential that strong equality and anti-discrimination legislation is in place and is rigorously enforced and monitored. Thirdly, legislation should be backed up with national strategies to combat racism, with programmes to support the integration of minorities, with public services that give particular attention to the needs of minority and at risk groups and with programmes of intercultural education which promote a belief in solidarity and equality and a respect for difference and diversity. It is also important to support community development and community education projects (see above) which prioritise migrant and ethnic minority groups and support them to act collectively to assert their rights and to change unjust social conditions through awareness raising, participation, education and collective actions (see for instance MRCI, 2008).

(vi) *Developing inclusive and universal public services*

Accessing public services is fundamental to ensuring people's social rights and to their empowerment. The EU's social inclusion and social protection process and particularly the focus on active inclusion has emphasised the importance of access to high quality public services. As the Social Platform has emphasised, social cohesion and respect of human dignity can only be achieved if people have access to quality public services that respond to their needs, particularly social and health services. Thus investing in such services so that they are accessible, affordable and adapted to people's changing needs is essential to ensure greater participation in society. It is also essential that public services give particular attention to ensuring that they are delivered in ways that reach those individuals and groups who are most isolated and excluded and that their needs are met in ways which empower them. Public services should develop codes of practice and develop staff training programmes to ensure access for and the involvement of marginalised groups.

(vii) *Building a culture of solidarity and inclusion*

Creating a climate in which the empowerment and participation of all is prioritised requires building societies whose culture emphasises values such as equality for all, solidarity between all sectors of society, accountability from those in power, participation by people in decision-making and environmental sustainability (see for instance Claiming Our Future 2010, Is Feidir Linn 2009 and

³ The EU funded *Mainstreaming Social Inclusion* project developed a useful spectrum of the interaction between those in a position of authority and those in a subordinate role, for example, between government and citizens. The spectrum ranges from the provision of information through consultation, participation to joint decision-making or co-determination (Combat Poverty Agency, 2006).

Spring Alliance 2010). This will mean rebalancing our models of development away from an over-reliance on the market place and competition towards an understanding of the economy as part of the social system, working in the service of society and for the human and social development of a sustainable and inclusive social system. It will also mean actively promoting a culture of solidarity and equality through civic education programmes in schools.

4. Pointers for Forum conclusions and outcomes

- All countries should seek ways to increase the openness and accountability of representative democratic structures to those experiencing poverty and social exclusion.
- All countries should put in place formal systems and set standard for promoting participatory democracy alongside representative democracy.
- As developing effective policies to reduce inequalities and combat poverty and social exclusion is essential to empowering people to engage democratically, countries should set targets and objectives for reducing poverty and social exclusion and should mainstream social inclusion objectives across all policy areas and introduce social impact assessments to ensure that all policy areas contribute fully.
- All countries should invest in community development, community education and community arts programmes aimed at marginalised and excluded groups so as to give individuals the skills and self-confidence to participate in democratic processes and to organise collectively to ensure that their voice is heard in policy making.
- All countries should establish a clear legal framework and provide adequate resources and support to encourage the participation of NGOs in policy making.
- All countries should put in place and enforce strong legislation and systems to promote fundamental rights and develop programmes to counter racism and discrimination and promote tolerance and respect for diversity.
- Civic education programmes promoting the values of solidarity and equality should be developed in schools.
- Affordable, accessible and high quality public services should be developed for all citizens and public services should develop codes of practice and develop staff training programmes to ensure access for marginalised groups.

Questions for the working session discussion

Do the six causes of disempowerment and barriers to democratic engagement identified in section two of the issue paper adequately reflect the reality across Europe? Are there others that should be highlighted?

Are the seven key issues identified in section three of the issue paper the most important ones? Are there others that should be highlighted?

Are the ways of tackling the seven key issues the most appropriate? Can working session participants provide examples of good policy practice?

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