

1.2 Research, action and training: construction of indicators with people living in poverty

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The *General Report on Poverty* (RGP), published in January 1995, introduced a veritable watershed in the understanding of poverty in Belgium. For the first time, people living in extreme poverty were involved in drafting it, through associations which bring them together. This work made it possible to show poverty in a new dimension. Poverty does not just mean low incomes. It is, fundamentally, vulnerability and powerlessness to exercise your rights and carry out your responsibilities.

The "indicators of poverty" group, which brought together the RGP partner associations, highlighted the inadequacies and dangers of traditional indicators, which can make the poorest invisible in the statistics, contribute to silencing them or deprive them of their own knowledge. There are four main reasons for the inadequacy of data on poverty and extreme poverty.



Firstly, the poorest people are not covered when the statistics are produced, even though they are the "hard core" of the problem. We are thinking, for example, of people living in institutions, the homeless and permanent campsite residents.

Secondly, the parameters used are not suited to the poorest populations. The indicators which follow therefrom most often reflect the norm of what is most widespread socially or judged acceptable, rather than the real needs and aspirations of those living in poverty.

Thirdly, these deficiencies very often bear witness to a lack of interest and consideration with regard to the poorest population. It is unacceptable that we do not seek to count people in institutions, the homeless and permanent campsite residents in the surveys on poverty in Belgium.

Finally, statistical data can be manipulated for political, economic and other reasons, as we see, for example, for unemployment figures.

Another great danger of current indicators of poverty is that of contributing to silencing the most underprivileged populations, particularly by adding to a bureaucracy claiming to fight against poverty without having a dialogue with poor people. Even qualitative surveys carried out with underprivileged people to give them a say can lead to exploitation of the knowledge of poor people. They allow "experts" to develop knowledge, from what the poor people say, over which these poor people no longer have any control.

These observations resulted in a research, action and training project, the aim of which is to start a process which makes it possible to cross the different forms of knowledge about poverty and to end up developing new indicators that make it possible to target and measure poverty better.

The different forms of knowledge about poverty would come from those living in poverty, the scientific community, authorities and institutions, management and labour. The two anchors of the project would be the people living in poverty and the associations bringing them together.

In the context of this research, it will be necessary to ensure that a balance is preserved between the participating groups. A teaching team must be provided for to govern the relations between the groups. Each of these groups will have leaders playing the role of trainer. We must also be attentive to the pace of work: people living in instability need more time. Finally, regular syntheses and assessments will be carried out.

The dialogue approach and bringing together various types of knowledge, as implemented in the *General Report on Poverty*, the perpetuation of which is called for by the Co-operation Agreement on continuing to combat poverty in Belgium, is innovative both in terms of method and in terms of content. It is this double innovation that the RGP partner associations would like to give concrete expression to in this project. ■