

What directions should we take as part of combating poverty within the International Network of **Street Social Workers**?

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In our previous evaluation, “Life of the network and the meaning behind its work”, we focused on the importance of a common, clear explanation of the type of work undertaken by each person since this kind of specific explanation could represent a determining factor in expanding or stabilising the network, **without watering down the strength of belonging**.

Given the importance the Network places on combating poverty, we believed it important to provide Network members with a framework for thought that could support a common clarification of the directions the network is taking in this area and, at the same time, help draw up joint strategies.

This framework has been structured by trying to identify the controversial issues that players have come across as part of their work combating poverty. We believe that finding one’s standpoint in relation to these controversial issues is essential both in order to understand the real meaning of one’s work and to see what alliances are possible or desirable for building up sufficient influence in the field.

We have identified the following five issues¹.

Global (re)politicised approach or specific depoliticised approach?

For some people, poverty is viewed as a natural disaster which afflicts or can afflict “target groups” that should be helped (or “encouraged”, as though they were passive and stricken because of this passivity): no link is made with other aspects of community life.

On the contrary, for other people poverty needs to be considered in connection with other aspects. Pierre Bourdieu was part of this camp when he pointed out, for example:

“(…) the undeniable relationship between unemployment rates and profit rates. The two phenomena - frenzied consumption on the one hand and misery on the other – do not just happen at the same time – while one group gets richer in their sleep, the other group get a little bit poorer each day-, they are interdependent: when the Stock Market is rejoicing, the unemployed pay the price, the gain in wealth of one group goes hand in hand with the impoverishment of the other.”²

Recent events even lead us to wonder if, when stock markets are doing badly, the unemployed don’t feel the brunt even more.

¹ These controversial issues were part of an analysis published by RTA in the publication that in 2010 the Ministry of the French Community in Belgium devoted to combating poverty: Jean Blairon, Jacqueline Fastrès and Quentin Mortier, « *Controverses dans le champ social : comment prendre en compte la question de la pauvreté ?* » (Controversial issues in the social field: how do we consider the issue of poverty?), in *La pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale. Regards du monde associatif et d'institutions culturelles*, (Poverty and social exclusion. Views from the non-profit sector and cultural institutions) Department for Youth and continued Education, Division for Culture, Permanent Culture and Education collection, no.14, Brussels, 2010.

² P. Bourdieu, « Les actions des chômeurs flambent » (Action from the unemployed soars) [1998], in *Interventions, Science sociale et action politique*, (Interventions, social science and political action) Marseille, Agone, 2002, p. 358.

According to the choices made about this issue, we will either be compelled to help specific groups (including advocating a return to charitable attitudes) or try to link up social poverty to its structural causes and try to curb policies that allow or reinforce social dominance.

The *community projects* that the Network proposes to examine will be a good way of analysing the real choices made.

Is poverty a matter of individual or collective responsibility?

This controversial issue divides the proponents of an “Active Welfare State” and those who defend the progress made through social struggles and victories of workers’ movements.

The first proclaim that social protection has become priceless and that, in fact, it can have adverse effects: it could lead to people relying on hand-outs and a **lethargy amongst beneficiaries**; to their mind, it would be better for the Welfare State to be replaced with an Active Welfare State (which is, above all, active in terms of control and exclusion), which “encourages” individuals to get themselves back on track. This is a meritocratic approach which is individualised and conditioned.

Others point out the right to a secure existence, collective responsibility and unconditional commitment. Since both approaches, as different as they may be, frequently claim to each implement a “modern” “support” approach, it compels us to take as clear a stance as possible on this issue. Moreover, perhaps it is necessary, following Robert Castel’s suggestion, to combine an individualised approach and build collective support (extensive social protection, access to the working world, access to interactions which forge links) enabling each individual to effectively build a life trajectory.

What paradigm should we use to define the struggle?

Opinions on this matter diverge dramatically: for some, the issue of poverty comes down to money, (and is therefore exclusively considered as part of a social paradigm); for others, it is multi-dimensional and includes, for example, a strong cultural aspect (this reasoning reveals, for example, the significance of stigma or gender). A trend has also come to light, within the tradition of theorists on “recognition”, for whom the focus should be turned solely to the cultural aspect, which can be combined with the philanthropic version of “new” (conservative) social policies.

There are therefore at least three different directions to take: one which gives priority to the social paradigm, one which tends to give priority to the cultural paradigm, and another which considers that both points of view should be heard.

How do we consider the cultural aspect of poverty?

This last controversial issue is the cause of often quite significant conflict between the protagonists themselves of the combat against poverty.

Let’s put it as follows.

For some (often from the middle classes, incidentally), the culture of a poor person is essentially a matter that must be respected/maintained/affirmed. For this group, clearly, only the poor themselves can legitimately speak about poverty. We will come back to that point. The same goes for what is considered as “street culture”, for that matter.

For others, the cultural issue is not dealt with in terms of a matter, but rather in terms of relationships: “the” culture in this case is viewed as a result **(that we hope is subject to change as with everything)** of the cultural work opportunities that could have been offered to these groups and people.

On the one hand, for some, respect is confined to building a protective sanctuary; others are looking for the overlap between social groups and “sub-cultures”.

How should we ensure that these issues are heard at a political level?

This issue depends on whether or not, in the eyes of the protagonists of the combat against poverty,

there is a hierarchy (or indeed one exclusive level) between the different types of democracy (direct, representative or dialogic democracy).

Some believe that no political action in the area is possible without direct democracy (in other words without direct participation or consultation with the poor people themselves); this stance can go as far as rejecting the representative mechanism and is often clearly based on a perception of culture as a “matter”. This is probably the stance of movements such as ATD Fourth World, which, paradoxically, can lead to a confinement approach.

For others, there is no hierarchy between these types of democracy, but rather different combinations of them that have varying degrees of relevance and coherence.

Dialogic democracy, for example, tries to allow the people concerned to come up with their own analysis of their situation, but by equipping them with the knowledge required for this kind of assessment, whilst holding discussions and exchanging points of view.

As for representative democracy, it involves taking action in order to put the spotlight on the issues that the subordinated groups wish to see included on the political agenda.

If the network has definitely chosen the combination option, it should investigate how it can appropriately and firmly combine the different types of democracy.

Conclusion

It seems clear that the choices made on each of these controversial issues could grow stronger and create clusters of meaning which are more or less progressive or conservative. However we must be careful not to adopt a Manichean standpoint, given that “zigzag” or changeable situations will probably be the most common.

The framework that we put forward here therefore involves two courses of action: an analysis of the way in which the positions on the various issues are distributed; and, in particular, a strategic analysis of how each stance is connected to the others, creating varying degrees of coherence and strength.