CONTRIBUTION TO THE EUROPEAN ROUND TABLE ON SOCIAL EXCLUSION
WORKSHOP 2

The instruments for the governance of multilevel welfare systems (European, national, regional and local) and for the promotion of the mobilisation of the actors.

Euronet, the European Children’s Network, would like to participate in the Round Table on Social Exclusion to be held in Turin on 16 and 17 October 2003 and contribute to Workshop 2. In the draft programme of the Round Table of 06-06-'03 Workshop 2 is intending to deal with among others the participation and self-expression of people suffering exclusion. In this respect Euronet would like to present its position on Social Exclusion and Poverty through Children’s Eyes.

In 2002 Euronet published a report ‘Including Children? Developing a coherent approach to Child Poverty and Social Exclusion across Europe’. One of the key recommendations of this report is to re-examine poverty and social exclusion through children’s eyes. The lack of “voice” is a core element of the powerlessness involved in living in poverty. It is often assumed that children facing poverty and social exclusion are unable or unwilling to participate; but the evidence suggests that this is largely false. Instead, awareness and understanding about the obstacles they face in making their views heard should be improved, and appropriate methodologies should be developed to respond to their needs.

In practice there are significant obstacles for children’s participation in general, such as lack of self-esteem and confidence, few opportunities to engage with decision-makers, the assumption that their views are unimportant; literacy problems, etc. These problems are multiplied for children who face poverty and social exclusion. They are frequently unwilling to define themselves as being “in poverty” (as are adults), owing largely to the shame which is often attached to this label. And researchers have sometimes shied away from this topic, for fear of further labelling or stigmatising individual children. Furthermore, many children appear to believe that “poverty” affects children in other countries, rather than in their own country – or indeed themselves. Rather than talk about poverty many children in low income families simply cope with the circumstances that face them. Their real feelings about their lives may be more clearly revealed by their reduced expectations in the present, and their low aspirations for the future.

Children’s views of poverty and social exclusion have received relatively little attention and only recently some initiatives have begun to explore this area.
Euronet has also engaged in a consultation with children on social exclusion. This consultation identified a number of recurring themes, which include: the stigma and shame associated with poverty; poor quality of housing; problems at school; poor environment; high levels of violence and bullying; concerns about drugs; fears of racism and harassment; discrimination; and missing out on material possessions, leisure activities and holidays. The children taking part in Euronet’s consultation also came up with practical suggestions for policy change at EU level. For example, “to support children and young people with difficulties in school, and those who are thinking of dropping out, so that they get help and encouragement to keep attending school…”

Recently Euronet has organised a consultation with children (aged 11-18 years old) on their views on the future of Europe. After national consultations representatives of each country came to Brussels for a conference and to meet with members of the European Convention drafting the new EU Constitution. One of the themes the children came up with was poverty and social exclusion and they had a whole set of recommendations on this subject, such as “the EU should force governments to have more funding schemes. The governments could help poorer families more” and “free education” and “minimum wages for young workers”.

Apart from the encouragement of active participation of children living in poverty or being socially excluded a more coherent child perspective could be brought to the analysis of figures and statistics available on poverty and social exclusion. This would together with the participation of children give a more informative picture of children’s poverty and social exclusion.

In this respect we need to go into the assumptions we make when looking at figures on child poverty and social exclusion.

One of these assumptions is that there is a fair sharing of resources within households/families, whether poor or not. But this may not be accurate. We cannot assume that all children living in non-poor households receive a fair share of the household’s income. We do know from research that the majority of parents in low income families attempt to protect their children from the full impact of the household’s poverty, and so often go without themselves. But also the opposite happens: children try to protect their parents from worrying about the impact of poverty on them and therefore reduce what they ask for out of the household budget (For example, pretending to be ill on the day of a school trip that needs to be paid for).

Another assumption is made in official figures about the varying needs of different household members. For example in the ECHP weighing an adult as 1 and each additional adult or child above 14 as 0.5 and children under 14 as 0.3. This weighing scale could under-estimate the “weight” of children in the household.

Very important is that the framework in the EU to examine social exclusion in the EU has not be designated with children in mind. Indeed, the questions which investigate subjective experiences of poverty and social exclusion (such as meeting other people

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1 More examples can be found in the “Agenda 2000 for Children in the EU” published by Euronet and the Euronet report ‘Including Children?’ of 2002.

regularly, satisfaction with your main activity) are not posed to the under –16s at all. And there are no equivalent questions for children, either.

To ensure that child poverty and social exclusion is examined from a children's perspective and to examine the impact of poverty and social exclusion on them several measures could be taken. One of them is the measures of input such as the duration of periods spend in poverty and the age period when this takes place, because poverty in young childhood can have a worse impact on life-time opportunities. Another measure is to include a range of outcome measures, such as health and education; and other mediating factors which may influence outcomes such as household composition and parenting practices.

To conclude, a range of measures will be necessary to incorporate a view of poverty and social exclusion through children's eyes. Firstly, a children's rights perspective needs to be brought into the collection of figures and data on poverty and social exclusion. Secondly, in-depth participation of children experiencing poverty and social exclusion, including their exclusion from the world of other children, needs to be explored and developed.

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