

EUROCITIES
SOCIAL WELFARE COMMITTEE

BARCELONA

22ND FEBRUARY 2002

Learning from the Excluded

Policy lessons from Youth Research in Sweden, Netherlands and UK.

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Draft Presentation to *Eurocities* Social Welfare Committee, Barcelona, Friday 22nd February 2002

Background

The term 'social exclusion' is invariably described by policy makers rather than excluded young people. These descriptions have a strong bias towards quantitative information in order to define and combat the forces and processes behind youth exclusion. Yet the definition of 'excluded' and the selection of indicators used to describe and explain the processes of exclusion traditionally remain within the editorial control of those who are detached from excluded groups. They are detached by profession and training, by their living environment, their age, experiential history, social networks and most significantly by social attitudes and personal motivations.

There is often a political, moral or ideological bias within decision-making individuals and organisations that can cause exclusion processes to be understood from such a limited perspective. This bias can be in the process of consultation, editorial control of the definitions and understanding of social exclusion and ultimately the political definition of problems and 'joined-up solutions' proposed by central and local government agencies.

This creates a partial and thematic understanding of the processes of exclusion (which are dominated by negative connotations) and the corresponding responses to be simplistic and generic. Many of the well-motivated policy responses are ineffective in dealing with the processes of exclusion, particularly with youth, because they are part of this culture of 'institutionalised exclusion'.

Yet, the starting point for addressing youth exclusion is to develop a holistic understanding of the process and experiences, both positive and negative, that (i) does not pass ethical judgement on these experiences; (ii) is open-ended in its approach to the scope of exclusion; and (iii) maintains the diversity and detail of individual experiences. In short, we should seek to better understand the processes of exclusion rather than seek simplified 'solutions' to politically defined problems.

Over the last fifteen months, Newcastle City Council, in partnership with *Eurocities* social welfare committee members Rotterdam, Malmö and our neighbouring council Gateshead, have been funded by the European Commission to undertake 'preparatory actions to combat social exclusion' to address some of these issues. This work has included the development and use of innovative methods to contact and engage with excluded youth within the three case-study cities.

One of the underlying ideas is that we should be able to learn from the experiences, attitudes and values of individuals whom governmental organisations have defined as 'excluded'. The presentation will describe the experiences of youth researchers who were recruited on the basis of their own personal background of exclusion, with individual experiences that include homelessness, drug addiction, poor education, teenage pregnancy, asylum seeking, unstable family backgrounds and involvement with the criminal justice system.

They are 'experts' who are able to provide a unique and complementary experience to academic social anthropological and policy perspectives. Their combined research experiences demonstrate the value and authenticity of personal youth networks. It also shows how trust and rapport with other youth can help gather detailed personal histories of social exclusion. The presentation will summarise the initial findings from the key areas of: (i) self-research; (ii) peer research; and (iii) professional perspectives.

Research Experiences

A short overview of the scope of open-ended and youth defined research material will be presented for the three main areas of activities in self-research, anthropological research and peer research.

The positive benefits from adopting this open-ended approach to social research is the level of emotional engagement and level of trust between the youth researchers and data subjects. This has resulted in a high degree of authenticity and associated detail in the understanding of youth views and attitudes. This has provided a unique perspective on the motivations underlying youth actions and experiences.

Throughout the work there are significant *cross-cutting* issues between research approaches and the associated understanding and perspective on the social situation of excluded youth. There is also a high degree of consistency between findings in the different case-study cities and groups, particularly when assessing underlying youth attitudes and motivations. The emphasis in cross-cutting issues is the relative importance on individual attitudes and ethics that illicit a response to their personal circumstances and events rather than the actual events. The combined effect of many of these issues is the perpetuation of a culture of exclusion characterised by youth and institutional attitudes such as;

- Motivation (apathy, self-interest and altruism)
- Paternalism and dependency (relating to housing and independent living, life skills), experiences with unemployment and (benefits trap, financial management and household budgeting) emotional.
- Lack of empathy (self esteem and self-awareness)
- Short-termism

(examples from the work of the social exclusion youth researchers will be provided through a range of audio-visual and text based data sets and presented by two of the youth researchers)

The presentation will also suggest how this approach to understanding the qualitative experiences of youth exclusion can inform approaches to youth participation and social exclusion policy locally and at the European level. Most importantly, it will illustrate the importance of young people's attitudes to learning from experience in defining 'social exclusion' for themselves and influencing their own personal transitions from 'excluded from society' towards 'active citizenship'.

Application

The overview of some of the 'cross-cutting' issues will form the basis for a discussion on the challenge to apply the research findings and 'mainstream' the processes described, aiming to shape social and institutional attitudes through learning material and processes. Suggestions will be made that revise the aims and objectives of neighbourhood renewal and tackling social exclusion with municipalities in response to lessons from working with 'exclusion experts'. Key objectives should be to address;

- Knowledge transfer and learning culture within municipalities and strategic organisations
- Rationalising strategy development and policy feedback and review processes
- Maintaining formal and informal research networks, both internal and external
- Following a broadened holistic research strategy
- Linking of qualitative and quantitative research and organisational approaches to participation and consultation

The application of research lessons and the suggested outline of revised policy objectives provides the basis for programme development. The design of new programmes to tackle social exclusion should become increasingly based upon attitudinal intervention within youth transitions where individuals are supported in 'learning their way out' of exclusion. Effectively breaking a viscous circle of exclusion where the social context, family background, peer pressure and often the activities of the municipality or other organisations involved in exclusion activities and social support. Suggested aims and activities of mainstream programme would be;

- Development of personal attributes cf. Skills / qualifications or funding
- Raising personal responsibility and balancing with individual rights or benefits
- Building personal confidence, levels of articulation, self-confidence and esteem to a level where youth are able to initiate activities and realise ideas
- Making individual transitions throughout the course of being involved in any specific programme that may be the equivalent to Child – parent, Learner – trainer / teacher, or mentored – mentor.
- Model for 'balanced' citizenship between rights and responsibilities.