



# Responding Together

Citizens engagement  
in reducing poverty and inequalities



Funded  
by the European Union  
and the Council of Europe



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## GENERAL CONCLUSIONS OF THE CONFERENCE

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The Council of Europe held the final conference for the program “Responding Together”. It took place on the 4-5 November 2013 in Strasbourg, France. The joint program implemented by the Council of Europe and co-financed by the European Commission was first launched in 2012. It aimed at enhancing and promoting the multiplication of citizens’ initiatives which propose innovative mechanisms to gain access to resources based on sharing and avoiding waste. The conference aimed at opening dialogue between citizens engaged in promising projects and policy makers at different levels-local, regional, national and international level who are interested in the transformative capacity of these initiatives. It provided an occasion for more than 150 European actors to meet and exchange their projects.

The meeting highlighted that:

- Material and immaterial resources are unequally distributed, wasted and under-utilized, resulting in the violation of human, social as well as civil and political rights throughout Europe.
- Europe is currently facing a crisis of confidence in institutions and of democracy, where the majority rules these may fringe human rights and the respect for the dignity of minority groups such as Roma.
- Citizens’ initiatives contribute to the fight against poverty as they facilitate access to human rights and resources for a larger people, promote the construction of social ties and trust, and contribute to the implementation of participatory management resources.
- Citizens' initiatives and projects within the sharing economy and the reuse of resources do create jobs and stimulate the local economy.
- Citizens' initiatives that promote human rights and access to resources may have different relations with public authorities, varying from being supported by them, to challenging them.

It was stated that:

- The economic and political crisis that Europe currently faces should be considered as an opportunity to review the policy priorities and implement effective policies to fight poverty and inequality. These policies should aim to ensure human rights and the respect of human dignity;
- Rather than austerity policy measures that increase inequality and concentration of wealth, other economic and political models to ensure human rights and dignity can be developed. These could be based on the exchange, sharing and reuse of resources;

- In the case of serious violations of human rights, including for example the restriction of access to health care in Greece, citizens' initiatives must be accompanied by a political declaration. Actions of citizens should not replace obligations of institutions concerning the protection of human rights. States have a direct responsibility for these violations, and therefore an obligation for prompt intervention.

It has been proposed to support citizens' initiatives involved in the fight against poverty and inequality, and in particular to:

- Give priority in the managing resources to the proposals made by citizens when they promote a shared access to resources and human rights. For example, give priority to citizens' initiatives in calls for public tenders that involve under-used resources and give priority to experiences that promote access to housing rights rather than bank speculation.
- Remove legal barriers and laws that block the collaborative economy and decriminalize citizens' initiatives that allow people to have access to resources and ensure their human rights.
- Implement legal instruments that require owners of resources not to abandoned resources when the provision of these can help to ensure compliance with human rights. By, for example, limiting the period during which a space or building can be left empty.
- Encourage and promote local and non-monetary exchanges that facilitate access to resources and guarantee human rights, for example by promoting the development of time banks.
- Support the development of social and technological innovation when it can reduce poverty and inequality and facilitate the construction of social ties.
- Promote food sovereignty, by encouraging the development of local production partnerships, that are environmentally friendly, and by enhancing participatory product quality control systems.
- Promote a system of social housing where the rent is adapted to the families' ability to pay.
- Develop "hybrid" models of management of resources which combine both public and private actors acting in the interest of the community that are concerned by the guaranteeing human rights,
- Develop community service contracts and tax incentives to encourage the development and proliferation of citizen initiatives.
- Develop experiments of participatory democracy which take into consideration the proposals put forth by citizens groups with a higher level of challenge and

debate.

It was clarified that the strengthening and support of citizens' initiatives does not justify the withdrawal of the state and public authorities who have obligations to comply with their responsibilities. In contrast it takes place in a context where each player takes its social responsibilities depending on its power and contributes to ensuring the human rights and well-being of all.

As follow-up to the conference, it was proposed to create the "**Responding Together**" **network** in order to connect the initiatives presented at the event. It was suggested that this network could also make it possible to advance the interests of stakeholders, to develop relationships and strengthen citizens initiatives of that facilitate access to resources and contribute to the fight against inequality in Europe.

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## CONCLUSIONS OF THE WORKSHOPS

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### First session of Workshops Monday 4 November, 14h30-16h30

#### A) Avoiding waste and reusing resources

By Kath Rosen

The projects presented were:

- a *Bicycle Repair Shop* in Croatia
- the project *DariAcordar* in Portugal
- the project *Lutherie Urbaine* in France
- the *London Orchard Project* in the UK

General theme that emerged:

- The idea of waste as an asset rather than a liability eg. bicycles recycled; using waste space in urban areas as productive planting spaces; using waste materials to create instruments; reusing food waste by recycling it.

The discussion in smaller groups stressed that:

- Replication is a good idea and some of these projects do already exist in other forms in other settings.
- Replication often needs resourcing to be viable.
- The particular context of each case and its degree of streetwise-ness are very important – there was a discussion about how replication of projects may present challenges. For example, in Portugal, bureaucracy would make planting orchards very difficult. In London, finding groups to help distribute food would be challenging.
- The challenge of resourcing projects – both financial and through human capital- was felt around Europe and can be a constraint.
- Bottom-up approach is most useful and all of the projects presented were created like this.

We discussed the ethics of funding and whether we would take support from unethical sources. One example was one from Croatia where the local mafia wanted to support the bike project which chose to reject the offer.

## **B) Sharing and access to resources**

By Anne-Iris Romens

Three different projects were presented in the workshop:

- *Bikesurf Berlin* has developed a system of bikesharing, in which bikes are accessible for free. By doing so the project facilitates access to mobility in the city.
- The *timebank of Athens* was set up in the Syntagma square in 2011 as a response to the ongoing crises in Greece. Today, it brings together over 3.000 inhabitants that exchange objects and services on a non-monetary base.
- The *Street nurses* promote the access to health in Belgium for persons that are homeless, by sharing their expertise and knowledge.
- The *Teje* network ("weave" in Spanish) implements projects that aim at creating links between people, promote multiculturalism and fight against discrimination. Some of its actions are based on the sharing of material and immaterial resources, as in the case of "gratiferias" where people can drop off and pick items for free.

These three experiences facilitate access to human rights by the sharing of material and immaterial resources, such as objects, services and knowledge. In all cases, speakers stressed the importance of building a community and developing trust between participants.

The group discussions that took place after the presentations stressed that:

- Sharing contributes to the fight against poverty because it facilitates access to resources.
- Sharing is a tool for empowerment, particularly when resources are managed by a community on an equal footing, giving to each sharer the possibility to participate to the decision making process. It was considered crucial to overcome the stigmatisation that underlines the « beneficiaries »/ « service provider » dichotomy, by promoting communities of sharers that have horizontal relations.
- Sharing promotes a different model of society in which the dignity of every person is being respected.

Concerning the context in which the sharing experiences are taking place, participants recall that:

- The development of sharing experiences does not justify the withdrawal of the state on social policies, but in contrast, it goes hand in hand with the idea of shared social responsibilities in which the State complies with its obligations.
- These practices should not be imposed but they should bring together people that wish to create community and share resources.

Participants affirmed the need to:

- Support the development of these experiences, including by fiscal incentives and legal adjustments;
- Create inclusive communities of sharers that encourage the participation of groups in society that are often excluded such as homeless people or migrants;
- Mobilise public and private entities and individuals that have resources that are

being abandoned or misused, in order to ensure these can be accessed by a larger of people;

- Develop models of sharing with long term perspective.

### **C) Creating employment and building community**

by Gilda Farrell (and moderated by Denis Stokkink)

Three projects were presented in the workshop:

- *Rejuce* is a small enterprise based in the UK that produces juices and smoothies out of fruits and vegetables otherwise directed to the garbage by the distribution systems (see: <http://hackneycitizen.co.uk/2013/10/04/rejuce-tom-fletcher-reducing-food-waste/>;  
[http://www.sustainweb.org/ethicaleats/thomas\\_fletcher/](http://www.sustainweb.org/ethicaleats/thomas_fletcher/))
- *Prinzessinnengarten* is an organic garden set in an abandoned land in the heart of Berlin-Germany whose dynamic has resulted in employment creation and in a tool for integration and multicultural exchange (see: <http://prinzessinnengarten.net/>)
- *The Association St. Martyr George* based in Lukovit, Bulgaria, aims at renewing the interest for their territory by the means of enhancing their cultural heritage ( see: <http://www.lukovit.com/en/administration/non-governmental-organizations>)

The three experiences enable employment creation by reactivating waste or abandoned knowledge and resources. The oral presentations of these innovative activities while introducing different contexts and processes, converged on several points:

- The initiators did not counted on significant support from existing legal and administrative structures and entities; on the opposite, they have been facing difficulties and hostilities especially when the resources (as abandoned urban land) are coveted by financial investors.
- There aren't pertinent fiscal and regulation policies and schemes for initiatives that combine commercial and social activities or reuse of waste in a small scale; this is the case for instance of *Prinzessinnengarten* that's a clear example of resources, organisation of labour and rules' hybrid.
- There are not clear incentives and facilitation schemes for those who wish to access waste resources at a small scale; thus, forms of cooperation between those generating waste and those willing to reuse, recycle or transform this waste at small scale should flourish;
- Besides providing a sense of belonging, reactivation of cultural heritage or dismissed knowledge or any other local traditional resource might create employment and has an impact on the attractiveness of an area, thus producing positive external effects;
- Most of the innovative experiences based on the recovering of resources have started without public support and depend to a large extend on voluntary work,

especially when such initiatives combine social and commercial activities; thus, public authorities do not dispose so far of tools to support these “hybrids” even if the sustainability of social or environmental friendly enterprises depend as well on accessing markets and customers;

- In future, local employment might very much depend on changes regarding resources' property, access and distribution.

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## **Second session of Workshops Tuesday 5 November, 11h-13h**

### **A) How to recognise the value of citizens' initiatives?**

By Vanessa Sousa

The following projects were presented:

- *Corrala la Utopia*: is a group from Seville (Spain) that fights to have the right to have access to housing. They are living in a building that belongs to a bank and they are not supported by the local government
- *International Renaissance Foundation* (Ukraine): A support group for people to have their rights guaranteed.
- *Genuino Clandestino*: An Italian experience, where local producers promote a participatory certification of the quality of their products due to the difficulties created by the national government for local transformation and direct selling of agricultural products.

Conclusions:

#### *At the level of politics*

- Certain local authorities support citizens initiatives whilst others do not
- There is a contradiction between European and national policies: on the one hand there is strong political will to combat poverty and exclusion whilst on the other hand new laws are being passed that increase the level of poverty and exclusion

Two examples:

- Governments are providing money to support banks, but when people use houses from the banks the government doesn't support people.
- EU and national governments must compromise more with local production. Some national laws regarding the production and transformation of food create many difficulties for small-scale initiatives to survive

#### *At the level of methodology*

- Need for empowering people for action - putting people together is central so they can understand they are not in an isolated condition.
- If we want to make changes we should start at the bottom. The national politics should not have any impact if there is not a bottom-up approach.
- The need to work first to guarantee the basic rights of citizenship (eg. Access to housing, land)

#### *At the conceptual level*

- Poverty is not just a problem about money, but a problem about justice. If we want to fight against poverty we also need policies that allow people to access their rights.
- We should also talk about corruption when we talk about poverty.

#### Proposals:

- Governments have to recognize that housing is a basic social need and not an asset to speculate on markets
- Promote a public housing system where the rent due takes into consideration the families ability to pay it
- Empty buildings should be made part of social policy or be in the hands of citizens initiatives
- National governments should believe in citizens
- Comply with new regulations on food processing and sales for small farms with the social recognition of peasant agriculture
- Promote less taxes or more incentives to the local and biological producers.
- Promote and create incentives for food sovereignty.

### **B) How to create incentives to reduce waste and promote a better use of resources?**

By Fausto Pascali

**Abstract:** where resources are badly managed, there are deprivations and exclusions that inhibit the community from enjoying fundamental social and economic rights such as health, housing, work, the ability to lead a dignifying life. These situations should be denounced with force. The European Union should also be in charge of such complaints by ensuring that member states enable real access to these rights.

In the working group very varied experiences were introduced:

- The Greek initiative of the *Metropolitan Social Clinic's* volunteers promote access to health care for people without medical insurance, and seek for a national system that guarantees everyone the right to health care.
- The project *Remix* in Portugal, born at the heart of a municipal project for the redevelopment of various areas of the city, which showed how to turn waste into valuable items.
- The Belgian experience of *Soft Requisition*, which facilitates recovery of private buildings that are abandoned to promote the right to housing.
- The experience of the *Pisa former paint factory Liberati*, which has recovered an abandoned factory, transforming it into a center of social production which stimulates and enhances human resources.

Different approaches with different solutions and different relationships with the institutions. All respond to a specific need of a community of citizens which self-organises offers and promotes solutions. The comparison of these various experiences has lead to the following guidelines to be proposed to all participants at the conference:

- 1) In all cases in which a non-use of a resource results in a lack of respect for fundamental human rights, good practice must be combined with a strong and



steady complaint process.

2) Arrange and promote legislative instruments that oblige the owner of a property not to let it become idle, as well as facilitating access to resources.

3) Invite public authorities to recognise and support those experiences that result from spontaneous self-managed and active citizenship in response to needs and requirements.

4) Identify new ways of interaction for which local governments are propelling the development and support projects that result from communities of citizens.

### **C) How to create incentives for sharing?**

By Dave van Ooijen

After an introduction by Dave van Ooijen (Platform31, The Netherlands) there were three presentations of good practices of bottom-up citizens' initiatives that contribute to the fight against poverty and inequality:

- First, Angelo Meuleman (*Taxistop, Belgium*) talked about a Belgian peer-to-peer sharing service that influenced the modal split and facilitate access to mobility.

- Second, Matthias Ansorg (*Economy App, Germany*) presented the Economy App, a technical innovation to support social innovation and sharing. It is a business model in the sharing economy. It was first made available for the internet, and later also for the iPhone and in different languages. The development of this app won the European Social Innovation Award 2013.

- The third presentation was given by Elizabeth Mills (*Homeshare International, United Kingdom*). With her service Homeshare she is promoting access to housing worldwide. Her initiative promotes intergenerational relations between younger generations that live in the homes of the elderly and provide them support with daily tasks such as shopping etc.

The main questions and conclusions that were raised during the workshop are the following:

- Support the social and technological innovations that do not focus on making profit for owners or their technical ingenuity, but support public interest in reducing poverty and inequality, and stimulate community building.

- Local and national governments should recognise that the sharing economy is not only very important to combat poverty and inequality, but can also play an important role in creating jobs and giving a boost to local and regional economies. Governments should accept the importance of the movement, both from citizens' initiatives and social enterprises in this respect.

- Local and national governments should remove all kinds of legal and financial barriers and make new regulations (financial, taxes, juridical) that stimulate the sharing economy.

- Non-governmental and governmental organisations should promote and spread, both inside their own country and to other countries, the fine examples that were presented during the conference. Special attention should be given to the development and dissemination of new business models that are giving the initiatives a strong and solid basis for the years to come.