

# (Not) Speaking Out; Areas of Tension in the Participation of Organisations of the Poor in Poverty Policy.

## Extensive Summary.

*Bea Van Robaeys  
Danielle Dierckx  
Jan Vranken*

---

### **1. Introduction**

An important paradox in relation to poverty and poverty policy today is that between, on the one hand, the theoretical observation that the poor are not or only minimally able to improve their own situation and, on the other, policy discourse, in which participation of the poor has come to occupy a rather central position.

In Belgium, there are about a hundred associations where poor persons meet for the purpose of influencing policymaking. At the same time, various policy instruments have been created in Belgium and Flanders to allow the poor to participate in poverty policy. Examples that come to mind are the “Service for the fight against poverty, insecurity and social exclusion”, the approval of the Poverty Decree and hence the structural recognition of so-called “Organisations in which the poor speak out”. Nevertheless, in theory, a ‘powerless’ and deprived group is not in an ideal position to get organised and exert influence.

So how should this paradox be understood? Do the poor possess the necessary resources to be able to mobilise themselves and affect policymaking? Or is it rather the evolution of policy itself that has resulted in the emergence, the growth and the activities of these groups?

In this explorative qualitative research, we intend to gain insight into the practice of policy participation on the part of associations of the poor. We wish to acquire an understanding of these organisations which present themselves as important partners in the shaping of poverty policy. We shall consider the practice of policy influencing and ask what these associations wish to achieve with their actions and whether or not they succeed. Which resources have they had to mobilise in order to be able to accept the invitations by the authorities to participate in decision-making? Which initiatives have they taken themselves to attract the authorities’ attention so their concerns could be put on the political agenda? In order to better understand the phenomenon of participation by an excluded group, we shall also set out in search of the key elements that determine whether participation takes place and whether it is a success or a failure. How have the associations of the poor experienced their participation in policymaking? Which factors play a positive role in –their own perception of– successful participation and which others hamper participation? By gaining insight into the factors of failure and success, we hope to enhance the dialogue on the conditions for a qualitative cooperation

between associations of the poor and the authorities. In part for this reason, we have also examined the pitfalls that policy participation has already experienced.

In order to achieve our objectives and formulate an answer to the above research questions, we have opted for a qualitative research approach. In the first phase, some 127 associations of the poor were presented with a written survey. 80 of these associations responded. In the second phase, 34 interviews were conducted with members of as many associations, selected on the basis of various criteria.

In this summary, we present the results of the study in accordance with the structure of the extensive research report. We shall consecutively deal with 1) the nature of the associations of the poor; 2) their role in poverty policy; 3) their financial structure; 4) their activities and strategies; 5) the actors involved; 6) internal and external effects; 7) factors of failure and success; and 8) pitfalls and areas of tension. The policy recommendations that we formulate on the basis of this material have been incorporated in the text.

## **2. Better insight into who they are and what they do**

Our conceptual framework ties in with the literature on social movements. From this perspective, poverty organisations may be regarded as a new social movement in development. The organisations that belong to this movement have a single common goal that is the focus of the present research, namely to influence government policy to such an extent that a more effective poverty policy is attained.

On the basis of elements that we borrow from theories on social movements, combined with our own (prior) knowledge of (some of) these poverty organisations, we first formulate a number of hypotheses regarding their nature. The associations in question are often assumed to be diverse in nature, with varying (financial) resources, and operating at a rather small scale and in a decentralised fashion. Can we confirm these assumptions?

We gauged the associations for the following characteristics: their initiators and emergence, their operational field and territorial dispersion, the size and nature of their membership, and their financial resources. The assumed diversity was reflected in the responses. The information obtained about their operational field confirms the hypothesis that the associations are mostly small-scale organisations that operate locally. The combination of the three other organisational characteristics (finance, presence of professionals and period of establishment) allowed us to distinguish between two types of associations, which we shall refer to as neutrally as possible as 'type 1' and 'type 2'. Associations belonging to 'type 1' are organisations that have very likely been established relatively recently and have limited financial means at their disposal (under €25,000). Associations which we refer to as 'type 2' are usually older, with an annual budget exceeding €25,000, and with professional involvement.

As far as the activities of the organisations are concerned, our research confirms the hypothesis that they combine identity-oriented and instrumental activities. The *identity-oriented* component relates to the construction and enhancement of the individual and group identity of the poor within the association. The types of activity that are organised for this purpose are an objective in themselves. For instance, they organise meetings for the sake of meeting itself, rather than for another, external purpose. This is not the case in the *instrumental* component of the activities range. All policy-influencing activities of the organisations are part of the latter component. One third of the organisations surveyed spend up to 10% of their time on trying to affect policy. Another thirty percent of the associations devote up to 30% of their time to this purpose. And 29% spend up to half of their time on influencing policy. Moreover, we ascertained that greater effort is put in policy influencing in Flanders than in Wallonia. In other words, a greater presence of professionals does not lead automatically to more policy influencing. However, their presence is used as an extra resource if one wants to affect policymaking (see *infra*).

Apparently, then, most of the activities of the organisations are (still) identity-oriented. Through meetings, training and individual assistance, ideas are exchanged, skills are taught, and people are assisted in gaining greater control over their lives. All of the organisations attach great significance to these activities. Some even regard them as a necessary condition for being able to influence policy. However important these identity-oriented activities may be to the organisations of the poor, they are not the object of analysis in the present research. This study focuses on the aspect of policy influencing. Still, the significance of identity enhancement should not be ignored.

<p><i>Policy recommendation – The identity-oriented dimension should be sufficiently recognised and incorporated into the criteria for recognition of organisations of the poor.</i></p>
--

### **3. Is there room for organisations of the poor in poverty policy?**

In order to better understand the participation of the poor in Belgian poverty policy, insight is required not only into the organisations of the poor, but also into poverty policy itself. It constitutes indispensable background information for studying the attempts at policy influencing on the part of the poverty organisations. In our research, we outline the contours and the history of poverty policy and the manner in which the poor have become involved in the shaping of this policy. Our brief reconstruction of poverty policy indicates that the organisations of the poor have become increasingly involved in policymaking in recent decades. Without wanting to suggest that there is a causal relationship, we note that the policy vision and the normative basis of policymaking have also changed. The definition of poverty as a multidimensional issue has become established. Poverty policy, as a response to this issue, has in turn become more complex as “charity” is no longer regarded

as the (sole) basis for anti-poverty measures. The authorities have increasingly come to recognise that first-hand knowledge and information from the field are crucial for enhancing policymaking.

The fact that organisations of the poor have become increasingly present on the policy stage, and that today various participation structures are at their disposal, also confirms that the authorities are prepared to create room for their participation. Indeed, our literature study suggests that poverty organisations possess few if any (traditional) power resources to force themselves onto the policy stage. Thus, support from allies within the authorities and the existence of structural participation structures were identified in the research as external resources.

*Policy recommendation – As the organisations of the poor possess little political power and are not important electoral players, willingness on the part of politicians and civil servants is of essential importance. Policymakers should also demonstrate their commitment by attending activities of these organisations and by inviting them to their own, particularly formal activities that may influence policy.*

#### **4. The accumulation of social and cultural capital in preparation of policy participation**

Openness and willingness on the part of the authorities is an important external resource in relation to policy participation. However, it does not suffice. An organisation of the poor can only contribute to policymaking if it has at its disposal the necessary internal resources, which in the present research we shall refer to as economic, social and cultural capital. The economic capital of the organisations, besides consisting of gifts from private persons and other organisations, is made up primarily of subsidies from the authorities. Social capital, for its part, is accumulated by developing internal (i.e. between organisations of the poor) and external social networks. The organisations invest substantially in this. Almost all are members of regional networks of associations. The development of cooperative structures at provincial or local level is also very noticeable. Such external networks encompass, among others, organisations providing social assistance and services, housing information centres, renters' associations and neighbourhood associations. At the same time, such cooperative structures are a source of external social support.

*Recommendation to the organisations – Developing cooperative structures among the organisations of the poor enhances their ability to affect policymaking. Cooperation with external partners generates the necessary external social support to compensate for a lack of power.*

*Policy recommendation – External cooperation should be encouraged through regulation. More in particular, it is government's task to make actors who do not regard poverty alleviation as their prime objective, but who can nevertheless play a role, more aware of their responsibility in this respect.*

Another important element is the accumulation of cultural capital. In this context, we stress the significance of the aforementioned identity-oriented activities, whereby experiences and knowledge about poverty are exchanged and insight is developed. Problem analysis and formulation of solutions are central in this regard and they can constitute a basis for policy participation. This cultural capital is indispensable for any contribution to the policy process. Just about all of the organisations surveyed formulate policy recommendations on the basis of this capital of experiential knowledge. Only, the accumulation of this knowledge requires so much energy and investment on the part of the organisations that they sometimes lack the time to engage in policy-influencing activities, which they are consequently obliged to put on the backburner.

*Policy recommendation – Recognise that experiential knowledge constitutes an important source of assistance for developing an effective poverty policy –as well as social policy- and make enough time and subsidies available for the accumulation of this capital.*

## **5. Activities and strategies for policy participation**

Although the relationship between new social movements and the authorities are often marked by conflict and confrontation, social movements are increasingly adopting the position of a partner rather than an adversary of the authorities. It appears from our analysis that poverty organisations, too, tend to play the role of a partner. They focus mainly on setting up activities aimed at stimulating dialogue and awareness. Save for a few exceptions, the strategies adopted are not confrontational. Protest actions are much rarer than dialogue activities.

This choice for dialogue ties in with the contemporary societal framework and a specific political and institutional context. As we have previously pointed out, the various authorities today display a considerable willingness to enter into dialogue. Moreover, this approach motivates the members of the target group to continue to commit themselves, an observation which illustrates the identity-oriented nature of the social movement. The activities that are developed are not necessarily a guarantee for the most efficient deployment of resources in order to achieve a specific goal, but importantly the activities may be meaningful for the poor within the organisations participating. However, some organisations have voiced reservations about this strategy of dialogue. They suggest that better results could perhaps be achieved if dialogue was not presented as the one and only approach.

*Recommendation to the organisations – It may be worthwhile to think about and experiment with a diversity of strategies to influence policy.*

Another observation is that the organisations of the poor focus mostly on influencing local and regional policymakers. Locally, this is achieved directly through the activities of the organisation. At the regional level, this happens largely through the networks. However, it also appears that the

strongly formalised dialogue structures, where organisations of the poor and the authorities meet, exist mostly at the regional and federal levels.

*Policy recommendation – At the local level, guidelines are lacking to enhance or structure participation. The federal authorities could –in consultation with the regional authorities- encourage local authorities to organise the dialogue with the poverty organisations within a more structured framework.*

## **6. The actors: poor and non-poor**

Both the poor and the non-poor participate in the poverty organisations, but they fulfil different tasks. The poor take centre stage in the content-related activities. The non-poor make this possible by providing methodical, practical and administrative support. They fulfil an essential role in driving the organisation and, even more so, in policy influencing.

Cooperation between individuals from different backgrounds is not always self-evident: it can be like ‘balancing on a slack rope’. Is it possible to tilt the balance between the ‘powerful non-poor’ and the ‘non-powerful poor’? And if it is, then how?

In some of the organisations, the poor and their opinions are central, while the other members play a supporting role. In others, greater emphasis is placed on the contributions of as many possible parties in the struggle against poverty. In Wallonia, *relatively* greater significance is attached to the joint struggle of ‘citizens’, while in Flanders, the approach seems to be dominated by the poor and their experiential knowledge alone.

Irrespective of the role that the poor may or may not play within the organisation, we cannot but conclude that the organisations of the poor can only exist thanks to the commitment on the part of the non-poor, who can deploy additional (organisational and emotionally supportive) competencies.

*Recommendation to the organisations – One should be very aware of the role that the non-poor play within the organisation, because of their own social background, cultural values, competencies and political skills. What are the consequences? Is there a genuine danger that the demands of the poor will be watered down or that less effective forms of protest will be employed? Are there indications of paternalism? Honest and conscious reflection on these issues can only benefit the functioning of the organisation.*

It appears that the organisations of the poor also establish contacts with other civil society organisations. As a consequence, the latter also become actors in the process of policy participation. We have previously referred to this as part of the social capital. Organisations from civil society have at their disposal specific expertise in relation to one or several content-related or methodical aspects of the poverty issue. They complement the experiential knowledge of the organisations of the poor with

their own (rather more technical) knowledge about, for example, how to try and influence regulations in order to alleviate existing bottlenecks.

## **7. Internal and external effects**

The organisations of the poor aim at achieving both internal and external effects, which explains the singularity of their approach and methods. Through their policy-influencing activities, they strive for a substantial policy impact. At the same time, however, these activities are intended to enhance the own identity and, if possible, the emancipation of the poor. By offering a voice to the poor, they also strive for a democratising effect: they introduce the viewpoints of a(n affected) section of the population into the societal and political debate on poverty. They often succeed in making politicians and other problem-solvers more aware of the poverty issue. This is necessary in order to create a willingness among these actors to enter into a dialogue and to attain the desired policy measures. Certainly as far as willingness is concerned, a number of organisations say that progress has been made. The most memorable achievement in this respect is undoubtedly the Flemish poverty decree, which provides for a very clear role on the part of the organisations of the poor. The greatest disappointment is that substantial effects have remained elusive.

Although there are now various formalised and semi-formalised participation structures, whereby guarantees are provided for effective participation and follow-up on the output of these processes, the outcomes are not assessed entirely positively by the organisations. The creation of participative structures alone clearly does not suffice.

*Policy recommendation – It is important that people within the various authorities and departments should be given an opportunity to work on changes within government and to thus effectively realise anti-poverty measures (and an integrated approach). In other words, willingness should be translated into meaningful action.*

*Policy recommendation – Given the specific constellation of the poverty organisations, the formulas of formal policy participation must be reconsidered, in cooperation with the organisations. Important items are undoubtedly language, time and feedback.*

We might add that the organisations surveyed did not mention all dialogue initiatives taken by the various authorities. On reading this research report, those authorities may get the impression that they are not given due credit; that their efforts are not appreciated. However, the question remains why the respondents failed to mention these initiatives. Essentially, we must ascertain whether there has been sufficient communication about them and efficient feedback on the results achieved.

*Policy recommendation – The authorities should pay due attention to communication and the dissemination of information on the dialogue initiatives which they take and the results achieved*

*through them.*

## **8. Factors of success and failure in policy participation**

The purpose of the present study was, first and foremost, to identify which factors enhance or hamper policy participation on the part of the organisations of the poor. It is clear by now that the poverty movement represents a special case that resembles very few other social movements. For example, the power of numbers -which carries some weight in our democratic system- is relatively insignificant compared to other social movements. The organisations of the poor try to compensate for this factor of failure by developing cooperative networks amongst themselves. Other internal factors of success are: the deployment of remunerated professionals, the development of high-quality documents that give expression to the cultural capital (i.e. the experiential knowledge) of the movement, maintenance of policy contacts, the strength of a single-issue demand, and the strategy of generating awareness through testimonies.

Among the external factors of success, we again refer to the development of cooperative networks, though this time with external allies: in civil society, among the authorities and the media. Success is also dependent on the factor of sustainability. This holds in particular for the available participatory structures. In this context, it is clearly a drawback that contacts with and efforts to raise the awareness of policymakers, in particular elected politicians, sometimes need to be rekindled after elections. Closer relationships between the organisations of the poor and political parties could resolve the negative impact of elections, but according to our analyses such relationships are virtually non-existent at the present moment.

*Recommendation to the organisations – As we have previously asserted, the success of policy participation can be enhanced by forging alliances with individuals within the administration, civil society, the media and with political parties.*

*Policy recommendation – If the authorities genuinely wish to achieve effective policy participation, they should do all they possibly can to establish sustainable initiatives.*

As the organisations surveyed are, to a large extent, made up of poor persons, our analysis also identified factors relating specifically to their participation. Here, success or failure depends on language, time and feedback.

*Policy recommendation – Time should be made available for feedback to the poor and this should happen in an understandable language. As it concerns such a specific societal group, it is particularly important that the authorities should attach great significance to this aspect. What's more, if this condition is unfulfilled, participation by the poor is bound increasingly to have a*



*negative rather than a positive impact.*

## **9. Pitfalls, areas of tension and challenges**

In the previous paragraphs, we have identified a number of factors of success, contrary to theoretical expectations. However, we would also like to draw attention to a number of pitfalls, paradoxes and possibly negative effects which have come to the fore in our analyses. After all, participation without insight cannot possibly work. So which potential problem areas deserve attention?

### **9.1 Too much pressure?**

Policy participation can result in the poorest being excluded by the organisations of the poor. The more decisively the poverty movement steps forward into the policy arena, the greater the pressure to perform on the poor and their organisations.

On the other hand, there is a danger that a strong orientation on identity development, for instance by exchanging experiences, will result in the poor becoming locked up in the protective cocoon of the organisation.

By 'too much pressure', we also refer to the paradox that the organisations of the poor want to be involved as much as possible in the policy process, while on the other hand they claim to be over-asked.

*Policy recommendation – In regulating and during the dialogue, the authorities should take into consideration the weight of the identity-oriented component. The acquisition of the necessary experiential knowledge requires much effort and time.*

### **9.2 Tension between organised and non-organised poor?**

A related issue is whether policy participation by the poor should only be possible through organisations of the poor? One of the strongest arguments in favour of enhancing policy participation on the part of the poor is that they can contribute exceptional (experiential) knowledge to the policy process. However, if this is the case, should one not consider increasing the variety of methods by which this information is gathered? Is the method of dialogue between organisations of the poor and the authorities the one and only approach for an effective poverty policy? How do these methods relate to the contribution from experiential experts in poverty? Are other approaches conceivable?

The relevance of these questions is enhanced by the fact that this empirical research does not confirm one of the theoretical obstacles for mobilisation of the excluded. We refer to the assertion by Ruud Vlek that the excluded population is heterogeneous and that the stakes therefore vary, so that their impact is minimal. We find no evidence in this study of divergent interests. Therefore, the

question arises whether the organisations of the poor surveyed perhaps primarily represent one subgroup of poor persons. Further research on the profiles of the membership of the organisations of the poor is required in order to answer this question adequately.

*Policy recommendation – The authorities should encourage further experimentation in respect of data gathering on experiential knowledge. The actors who are active in this area today should be given an explicit assignment in this context. However, sectors that lean towards the so-called ‘poverty sector’ may also be able to offer value added (e.g. community building, general welfare work, trade unions).*

### **9.3 Does incorporation threaten the identity of the movement?**

Our research indicates that the authorities have an open attitude towards dialogue with organisations of the poor. A possible pitfall in this respect is that the dialogue may be used by politicians as a means of shutting up the organisations. A one-off consultation may be used further along the line in the policymaking process to legitimate measures on the basis of the fact that the organisations of the poor have participated, so that further dissent should be considered irrelevant or obsolete. There is also a danger that formal policy participation may become a ‘habit’, so that there is no question of influencing policy: dialogue could become an excuse for policymakers not to take substantial anti-poverty measures. Questions also arise in relation to the independent position of the organisations vis-à-vis the authorities.

*Policy recommendation – The authorities must, in regulations and actions, respect and guarantee the independence of organisations of the poor.*

### **9.4 A golden rule for the immediate future**

These areas of tension are essentially paradoxes of participation for which there are no ready answers: it is up to the organisations, civil society and the authorities –separately and ultimately together- to respond to these challenges.