



by Bea Roberts  
Personal experience of exclusion

# FIGHTING FOR INCLUSION



This pair of articles explores some of the issues around being disadvantaged and being heard. First Bea Roberts describes her own experience of poverty and of the difficulties she encountered when representing the interests of young people at a European Youth Convention. Tom Croft then explores some of the wider issues of enabling and encouraging young people to have a voice.

## ► Personal experience of exclusion

**My name is Bea Roberts, I am 24 and I live on a housing estate in north London, England.** I grew up in a single parent family with two younger brothers, one of whom had educational and behavioural difficulties. We lived in poverty and faced its effects on a daily basis. We were raised on state benefits and never had enough money to make ends meet. That meant that my mother often had to choose between paying bills and buying food and clothing, which often left her with lots of debts. My brothers and I could never go on school trips or attend after school clubs as these weren't free and my mum couldn't afford it. All of our school clothes and shoes were second hand and we were often bullied and teased because of how we looked. My mother found it very hard to cope and in the end suffered a nervous breakdown.

Because of this my brother was taken into care and not returned till he was 18. A concerned neighbour put us in contact with ATD Fourth World.

**ATD Fourth World is an anti-poverty NGO with a human rights ethos and provides support to families, young people and individuals living in poverty and facing social exclusion.** It provides a much needed support network and carries out projects and events so people of different backgrounds can come together and learn about the problems faced by those in very difficult and often drastic situations. As an organisation we want to better understand the hopes, dreams and aspirations of people living in poverty, and use this understanding to challenge perceptions of poverty and to bring about change.

## ► Getting involved

**I have been involved with ATD for 14 years now and my family and I have received a lot of support.** When I first came to ATD I wasn't accustomed to being around groups or speaking to people, as I'd only ever been with my family. A long time was spent just helping me to get to know the other families in the network and then I gradually got involved in some of the projects ATD was running. The National Co-ordinator at the time thought I'd be good with youth related issues and encouraged me to take part in ATD's Youth Movement where I was able to use the skills I already had, learn new skills and meet other young people like myself. I really enjoyed it and found that I was really interested in issues relating to poverty and social exclusion, as I had faced them all my life. My family supported and encouraged me, as did other members of ATD, particularly some of the volunteers who seemed to always have time for me.

**Because I was interested in the political work of the organisation I started participating in discussion groups** in order to develop my public speaking skills and using these skills at local events for ATD as well as some other organisations. I was really scared at the time but also very excited and always had support if I felt I needed it. Soon after, I was asked to be part of a delegation the team in London was sending to a European conference organised by ATD. I really enjoyed this challenge and during the preparation I began to realise that for any real change to happen you not only have to change policy but the way policy is made; it takes a lot for some one like me to stand up in front of



politicians in their environment and tell them how their policies really affect people. It is extremely intimidating as the language and the pace of work is so removed from my day to day reality. It is also because when you have felt ignored or unimportant in certain situations before, like for example going to the doctor, speaking to a social worker or dealing with the social security office, it can be terrifying to speak about your personal experiences and share your opinions in front of people who are so powerful and have so much control over people's lives.

### ► **The biggest challenge**

**In July of 2002, I faced my greatest challenge yet when I took part in the European Youth Convention**, held over 4 days at the European Parliament building in Brussels. I was one of four young women from different youth NGO's selected by the European Commission to represent the interests of their young members at the event, which brought together 210 young people to discuss "the future of Europe".

The aim was to produce a document that would provide fresh views on the mission, governance and priorities for a new enlarged European Union from a youth perspective. This document was then to be presented to the "adult" Constitutional Convention on the future of Europe chaired by Mr Valery Giscard d'Estaing.

**On hearing I'd been selected I began a 3-week preparation with young people in London and Glasgow in Scotland**, using e-mail, telephone and small meetings.

I prepared a general questionnaire on the EU and met with small groups of 6-12 young people who lived on housing estates in some of the poorest and most disadvantaged areas. Most had had experience of social service intervention and the institutional care system as children. Many were very excluded in their community, had little access to support services and hadn't completed their basic education and with no prospect of returning to it. At first they were reluctant to participate but once I had explained my own circumstances and motivations they recognised that I was like them and understood their experiences. When we first went through the questionnaire together they felt the EU had nothing to do with them. But once they began to consider the idea that the EU should improve Europe for the better they saw that their own lives should be a question for Europe and they became more concerned and wanted to be involved.

**I also spent a lot of time myself researching the EU and related information.** I was both proud and shocked at being given such an unbelievable opportunity: to get the voices of all

the young people involved with ATD, as well as all those who face the same battles, into a document that would be seen by those deciding on things that would effect the whole of Europe for generations. This was quite a responsibility and one I took seriously. However, despite all my experience and preparation with ATD, taking part in the Youth Convention was far more difficult than I had expected and has left me feeling that youth events at this level have a long way to go before they become genuinely inclusive.

### ► **A new kind of exclusion**

**Despite the organisers' attempts at creating a diverse group of young Europeans, other than in terms of geography, participants were depressingly similar in their background and outlook.** An overwhelming majority of them were members of or affiliated to political parties and organisations. Most had studied or were studying politics, political sciences or similar subjects at degree level. This was even noted by a speaker who addressed the lack of diversity among participants and their overly political attitudes and approach. Those of us who were not "politicals" often felt ostracised and ignored.

It sometimes seemed that in their eyes our opinions and ideas had no place at this type of event.

**One reason was that educational and political achievement seemed to be essential.** I, however, do not have much formal education although I am proud to say I have 24 years experience of living in poverty, and fighting against exclusion. Although a number of participants, who seemed to understand what it had taken for me to be there, made every effort to make me feel included, I was left with the impression that all the work I had done to gather the views of very vulnerable young people counted for little if you could not talk like a student. I still believe, though, that a person can learn a lot more through living life than studying it.

**Part of the problem was that I seemed to be speaking another language.** In order for the other participants to understand my background and experience, I spoke about the true story of a young woman I know who lives near my home. Most found it really hard to understand how this - a young woman's story - was important at European level. I had to explain that it's not just her, she's not the only person in Europe that experiences this kind of exclusion. If we want to improve things for all young people in Europe we have to take their lives and experience into consideration. To make Europe more inclusive, true stories like these should really be paid attention to and not dismissed as

marginalized or extraordinary cases. And in order for others to begin to understand what people like me go through, young people like myself need to attend these sorts of events and be listened to.

**However at this particular event, I felt it impossible to get my point across because it felt like no-one was listening or wanted to listen.** The result was that I felt very hurt and often humiliated. In many ways I have never felt so excluded, which coming from my background says a lot.

If I had the opportunity to go to a similar event in the future I would only attend it if I could get some guarantee that I wouldn't be the only one present from a background like mine. I would want to take other young people with me, but only if their stories and hopes could be truly heard and not ignored or dismissed.

**The way in which the event was organised didn't help either as in copying the working methods of the main Convention it favoured young people accustomed to the traditional party political way of doing things.** By placing its emphasis on creating a product, a text, in a very short space of time it totally alienated people like me who were accustomed to a more nurturing working environment. The big plenary meetings and smaller working groups were highly pressurised, encouraging competitive tit for tat voting and amendment making.

I personally felt intimidated to speak or participate fully due to all the political posturing and manoeuvring of the party activists which made meetings feel like verbal boxing matches with each corner trying to beat the other into submission while the chair refereed all the action. This way of organising things created an atmosphere where it was impossible to reach a common goal through understanding and solidarity.

- **Understand the barriers – there is another way** If such political youth events are to be produced in the future, those organising them must try and better understand the barriers young people face in coming to these events by consulting with them and those close to them. Together they could jointly find ways to support the participation of those who never normally attend. In doing this they could create a truly diverse event with both a variety of life experience as well as political involvement and understanding present among participants.

Those organising these types of event should try and work hard with people active at the grass roots to create smaller steps to

big meetings like these, where smaller numbers of young people could meet one another and be consulted in a friendly and more intimate atmosphere. This could be done in a similar way to how I tried to prepare for the Youth Convention by getting together with young people from some very disadvantaged areas.

**Finally, organisers must discard traditional and old fashioned political working methods.** For example, they could replace a lot of big plenary sessions with more and smaller working groups where participants can meet and discover each other's experience, motivations and reasoning well before getting started on any more formal paper or document. At the Youth Convention, the fact that we started in our small groups with a ready prepared working document killed the possibility for some people to express themselves because the style and wording of the text was so alien to them or they found that their concerns were completely missing. If you are already doubting yourself and your place in this kind of meeting this could all too easily be the final straw that condemns you to silence. If everyone is working hard to create an open forum where each young person feels able to speak and take part and where people listen and try to understand one another it would be easier to handle this kind of self doubt. There are many imaginative and non-formal ways that this can be done as readers of Coyote know well.

**At the end of it all I am left thinking that you can not build tower blocks from the roof down, they need strong foundations. Why is it so difficult for people to understand that the same applies if we want to build an inclusive and progressive Europe? We have to start with the poorest and most excluded if we really want everyone to have a better tomorrow.** ■

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• Coyote Theme