

GIVING VOICE TO PEOPLE IN POVERTY IN BELGIAN SOCIAL POLICY MAKING SINCE THE 1990S: A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR A POLITICAL DEMARCHE?

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The *General Report on Poverty* (GRP, 1994) acquired a great symbolic value in the history of the fight against poverty in Belgium. It stands as a milestone of *giving voice to the poor* as a new paradigm in social policy making in Belgium and Europe. Although the GRP production process opened a window of opportunity for a political demarche, we aim to tease out whether the participatory rhetoric and exercise resulted in a real possibility towards social change and social justice. While unravelling the GRP production process, we tease out how and to what extent opportunities arose for people in poverty to speak for themselves.

I. Introduction

As a significant milestone in the pursuit of social justice by postwar policy makers in diverse European nation states, the publication of the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights* (UNDHR) by the United Nations (UN) in 1948 is of vital importance¹. The UNDHR formally incorporated the idea that not only civil and political rights, but also social, economic, and cultural rights should be guaranteed. After the atrocities of both world wars, rights were rhetorically understood as a “peaceful means of mitigating the unacceptable consequences of class inequality”, and as symbolic vehicles in social welfare states to compensate “for the diswelfares of the industrialized capitalist system”². Hence, welfare states increasingly focused on a politics of redistribution tackling the reproduction of social inequalities in favor of the realization of the equality of citizens, which required the redistribution of resources and power³.

While moving towards economic recovery and affluence, many European societies developed thriving post-war economies and experienced economic growth in the Golden Sixties, with ref-

erence to high employment rates, higher wages, mass production, mass consumerism, and an emerging new middle class⁴. In the aftermath of the UNDHR, this evolution was rooted in the ambition to eradicate poverty permanently and, as such, realize social justice and social equality as the normative orientation of the welfare state⁵. In the early 1970s, however, many European welfare states *rediscovered* poverty⁶. In Belgium and other European countries, the global economic crises of 1973 and 1979 made clear that the socially just welfare state was after all not so easily implemented. Following Harrington and Valentine in the USA and Townsend in the UK, Belgian academics such as Deleeck and Vranken therefore criticized the implementation of the welfare state⁷. Sharp critiques were directed at the discrepancy between the formal entitlement of people in poverty as citizens and their frequent experiences of not being fully recognized in social interactions as members of their particular community and society⁸. By doing so, poverty was not only rediscovered, but also redefined. Diverse scholars have argued that the rediscovery of poverty in Europe and Belgium was only possible as the focus on social rights broadened the

1. HARTLEY DEAN, *Social rights and human welfare*, Oxford, 2015; RUTH LISTER, *Poverty*, Cambridge, 2004; RUTH LISTER, “Inclusive citizenship: realizing the potential”, in *Citizenship Studies*, no. 1, 2007 (11), pp. 49-61.
2. HARTLEY DEAN, *Social rights and human welfare*, pp. 5.
3. NANCY FRASER, “From redistribution to recognition. Dilemmas of justice in a post-socialist age”, in *New Left Review*, 212, 1995, pp. 68-93; NANCY FRASER, *Justice interruptus*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997; NANCY FRASER, “Rethinking recognition”, in *New Left Review*, 3, 2000, pp. 107-120; NANCY FRASER, “Reframing justice in a globalizing world” in *New Left Review*, 36, 2005, pp. 69-88; NANCY FRASER, “Abnormal justice”, in *Critical Inquiry*, 34(3), 2000, pp. 393-422.
4. GOSTA ESPING-ANDERSEN, *Welfare states in transition: national adaptations in global economies*, London, 1996; HERMAN DELEECK, *De architectuur van de welvaartsstaat*, Leuven, 1992.
5. HERMAN DELEECK, *Inkomensverdeling, sociale zekerheid en sociaal beleid*, Antwerpen, 1972; THOMAS HUMPHREY MARSHALL, *Citizenship and social class and other essays*, Cambridge, 1950; DANIEL ZAMORA VARGA, “De l'égalité à la pauvreté: les reconfigurations de l'assistance et les transformations de l'Etat social Belge (1925-2015)”, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 3, 2016.
6. CHRISTIANE REINECKE, “Localising the social: The rediscovery of urban poverty in Western European “affluent societies””, in *Contemporary European History*, 24 (Special Issue 04), 2015, pp. 555-576.
7. MICHAEL HARRINGTON, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, New York, 1962; CHARLES VALENTINE, *Culture and poverty: Critique and Counter-proposals*, Chicago, 1968; PETER TOWNSEND, *The Concept of Poverty*, London, 1970; PETER TOWNSEND, *Poverty in the United Kingdom: a Survey of household resources and standards of living*, Harmondsworth, 1979; HERMAN DELEECK, *Ongelijkheden in de Welvaartstaat*, Antwerpen, 1977; HERMAN DELEECK, KAREL VAN DEN BOSCH, AND LIEVE DE LATHOUWER, *Poverty and the adequacy of social security in the EC. A comparative analysis*, Avebury, 1992; JAN VRANKEN, *Armoede in de welvaartstaat: een poging tot historische en structurele plaatsing*, doctoraatsverhandeling, Universiteit Antwerpen, 1977.
8. GRIET ROETS AND RUDI ROOSE, “Theorizing underlying notions of citizenship in dynamics of learning in public policy units”, in GERT BIESTA, MARIA BOUVIERNE-DE BIE, AND DANNY WILDEMEERSCH (EDS), *Civic learning, democratic citizenship, and the public sphere*, Dordrecht/Boston, 2014.

debate on absolute definitions of poverty in favor of more relative, non-materialistic and cultural definitions⁹. Attention more specifically focused on tackling the exclusionary tensions and contradictions in citizenship, called incidents of “second-class citizenship”¹⁰.

In that vein, different countries in Europe have developed particularly political path dependencies in how poverty and anti-poverty strategies have been defined and conceptualized, embodying what has been termed a politics of redistribution and/or a politics of recognition and respect¹¹. Scholars have described how in the last decades of the 20th century, a politics of recognition and respect arose focusing on relational, symbolic and cultural aspects of poverty¹². The discourse of social justice, once centered on redistribution, resulted in claims for redistribution but also in increasingly dominant claims for recognition.

This development derived partly from the political level of the welfare state due to emerging neo-liberal rationalities¹³, but was also complemented and supported by social movements¹⁴. The major redefinition of poverty informed the emphasis on voice, participation, recognition of life knowledge and respect, which started to function as central and dominant concepts in social policy rhetoric in diverse European countries since the 1990s¹⁵. The argument was that people in poverty “have the capacity to place, and indeed sometimes to force, life knowledge on the political, professional, academic and policy making-agenda”¹⁶. Projecting the voice and life knowledge of people in poverty into the public forum of political and democratic debate has been considered to be a pertinent anti-poverty strategy¹⁷. Some examples of participatory ventures of people in poverty in policy making are the *Wresinski Report* of the Economic and Social Council in France (1987); the

9. JEROEN BARREZ, “Voorbij het ‘goud’ van de jaren zestig. Armoedepercepties in de welvaartsstaat in België (1958-1973)”, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 4, 2018 (XLVIII), pp. 8-38; RUTH LISTER, *Poverty...*; GRIET ROETS, RUDI ROOSE, MARIA DE BIE, LIEN CLAES AND GEERT VAN HOVE, “Pawns or pioneers? The logic of user participation in anti-poverty policy-making in public policy units in Belgium”, in *Social Policy & Administration*, no. 7, 2012 (46), pp. 809-810.

10. RUTH LISTER, *Poverty*, p. 165.

11. PETER BERESFORD, “Service users, social policy and the future of welfare”, in *Critical Social Policy*, 21(4), 2001, pp. 494-512; PETER BERESFORD, “Participation and social policy: Transformation, liberation or regulation?”, in R. SYKES, C. BOCHTEL, AND N.E. ELLISON (EDS.), *Social Policy Review 14: Developments and Debates 2001-2002*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2002, pp. 265-287; ANNE PHILLIPS, “Identity politics: have we now had enough?”, in J. ANDERSEN AND B. SIM (EDS.), *The politics of inclusion and empowerment: gender, class and citizenship*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, pp. 36-48; PAUL MICHAEL GARRETT, “Recognizing the limitations of the political theory of recognition: Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser and social work”, in *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(5), 2010, pp. 1517-1533.

12. FRASER, *From redistribution to recognition...*; FRASER, *Justice interruptus*; RUTH LISTER, “A politics of recognition and respect: Involving people with experience of poverty in decision making that affects their lives”, in *Social Policy & Society*, 1(1), 2002, pp. 37-46

13. PAUL MICHAEL GARRETT, “What are we talking about when we talk about ‘Neoliberalism’?”, in *European Journal of Social Work*, 22(2), 2019, pp. 188-200; R. TURNER, *Neo-liberal ideology*, Edinburgh: University Press Edinburgh, 2008.

14. STEPHEN WEBB, “(Re)assembling the left. The politics of redistribution and recognition in social work”, in *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(8), 2010, pp. 2364-2379; KATRIEN BOONE, *Social work, poverty, and parity of participation: a search for social justice*. PhD dissertation, Ghent University, Belgium, 2018.

15. HARTLEY DEAN, “Poverty discourse and the disempowerment of the poor”, in *Critical Social Policy*, no. 35, 1992 (12), pp. 79-88; PETER BERESFORD, DAVID GREEN, RUTH LISTER AND KATHERINE WOODARD, *Poverty first hand: poor people speak for themselves*, London, 1999. RUTH LISTER, “A politics of recognition and respect ...”; RUTH LISTER, “From object to subject: including marginalised citizens in policy making”, in *Policy & Politics*, no. 3, 2007 (35), pp. 437-455; MARIA BOUVERNE-DE BIE, ANJA CLAEYS, ANDRÉ DE COCK AND JAN VANHEE, *Armoede en participatie*, Gent, 2003; MICHAL KRUMER-NEVO, “Listening to ‘life knowledge’: a new research direction in poverty studies”, in *International Journal of Social Welfare*, no. 2, 2005 (14), pp. 99-106; MICHAL KRUMER-NEVO, “From noise to voice - how social work can benefit from the knowledge of people living in poverty”, in *International Social Work*, no. 4, 2008 (51), pp. 556-565; CHRISTIANE REINECKE, “Localising the social: the rediscovery of urban poverty in Western European ‘affluent societies’”, in *Contemporary European History*, 24 (Special Issue 04), 2015, pp. 555-576.

16. PETER BERESFORD, “Service users’ knowledges and social work theory: conflict or collaboration?”, in *British Journal of Social Work*, no. 4, 2000 (30), p. 493.

17. DEAN, *Social Rights*.

work of the Child Poverty Action Network in the UK and especially the process leading up to the *Children Act* (1989); the work of the Poverty Alliance in Scotland (1999); the participation set up by the Welfare Alliance in Norway (1997) and the *General report on Poverty* in Belgium (the GRP, published in 1994)¹⁸.

In this article, we accordingly focus more in particular on the production process of the GRP, a white paper that promoted a politics of recognition and respect as a new paradigm in social policy making in Belgium, a paradigm that was also reflected in the European project¹⁹. In Belgium, a half century of social policy making after the Second World War and the rediscovery of poverty in the mid-1960s culminated in a report that is considered a significant milestone in Belgium's poverty policy as well as a public recognition of "the real interests and concerns of poor people"²⁰. It was presented as a joint venture of people in poverty, social workers and other actors aiming at recognition of the standpoints of people in poverty in a structural dialogue with representative policy makers²¹.

We would like to draw attention to how at several occasions both people in poverty *and* their representatives, as well as other stakeholders, were involved in the GRP production process. As such, this was an experimental collaborative attempt between a variety of poverty stakehold-

ers stemming from politics, scientific research, professional social work and private (self-)advocacy organizations. Although the GRP production process opened a window of opportunity for a political demarche, we aim to tease out whether the participatory rhetoric and exercise during the GRP production process resulted in both recognition and redistribution, representing a real possibility towards social change and social justice. Krumer-Nevo has indicated that, although many actors in European societies explicitly endorsed the pertinence of these so-called participatory and democratic ventures with people in poverty, they "do not specify the process through which they had produced it (...) and the role that people in poverty took in them is not clear"²². This process deserves a closer look, as Reinecke rightly argues²³. We therefore focus on the production process of the GRP, and aim to understand how and to what extent changes in balances of power during that production process evolved and may have opened up opportunities for people in poverty to speak for themselves.

This study is based on an analysis of archival records of two key stakeholders: the archives of ATD Belgium (AATD) and the archives of King Baudouin Foundation (AKBF), a philanthropic high society organization which had already published several poverty reports since 1983 and would become the formal leader of the GRP pro-

18. BERESFORD ET AL, *Poverty first hand*; ROSENFELD AND TARDIEU, *Artisans of democracy. How ordinary people, families in extreme poverty, and social institutions become allies to overcome social exclusion*, Lanham-New York-Oxford: University Press of America, 2000; SISSEL SEIM, "Collective action and social movement of poor people: a road to participation and power?" in C. MATTHIES & L. AILA-LEENA UGGERHØJ (Eds.), *Participation, marginalization and welfare services. concepts, politics and practices across European countries*, Ashgate, 2014, pp. 167-182; HILLARY SILVER AND STEPHEN MIKE MILLER, "Social Exclusion. The European Approach to Social Disadvantage", in *Indicators* (Spring 2003), 2003.

19. The production of the GRP aligned with the European focus on poverty as social exclusion, which was reflected in the publication of the green paper "the EU on social policy" in November 1993, followed by diverse European policy documents since then, e.g. the Lisbon Treaty (2000 - 2010), Europe 2020 (2010 - 2020), the Social Open method for Coordination (OMC), as well as the Social Investment Plan (SIP). See ERIC MARLIER AND DAVID NATALI, *Europe 2020: towards a more social EU?*, Brussels, 2010.

20. JAN VRANKEN, "Van moderne armoede naar sociale uitsluiting", in *20 jaar OCMW: Naar een actualisering van het maatschappijproject*, JAN VRANKEN, BART VANHERCKE, LUC CARTON & GERARD VAN MENXEL (Eds.), Leuven, 1998, p. 68.

21. ROETS ET AL., *Pawns or pioneers ...*

22. KRUMER-NEVO, *From voice to knowledge...*, p. 282.

23. REINECKE, *Localising the social...*, p. 559.

ject²⁴. We also interviewed 17 key figures who were all closely involved from the different stakeholder perspectives and able to reflect on the GRP construction process, such as politicians, academics, representatives of (self-)advocacy organizations of people in poverty, social workers and the project leaders of the GRP²⁵.

In the next sections, we discuss the making of the GRP by analyzing the different ways in which the idea of giving voice to the poor materialized in various conceptualizations of the political demarche, particularly touching on consultative and dialogical approaches. In the concluding section, we discuss how the idea of *participation of people in poverty* was processed by non-poor allies and GRP stakeholders.

II. Setting the scene

In Belgium, the renewed political willingness to act on poverty would be translated into the commissioning of the GRP after the federal election

of 24 November 1991. This day went down in Belgian history as Black Sunday and is remembered as the day on which the extreme-right political party *Vlaams Blok* successfully profiled itself with an explicit anti-immigrant discourse under the motto “our own people first”²⁶. Subsequently, the Prime Minister of Belgium indicated, in his state of the union address of 1992, that ATD and the Union for Belgian Cities and Municipalities had been tasked with the mission to produce “a general report on poverty”²⁷. As the traditional political parties had lost a considerable number of votes to the ‘*Vlaams Blok*’, the search for an explanation commenced²⁸. This ‘shift to the right’ phenomenon was dominantly interpreted as votes from lower-class families inhabiting the impoverished areas of the bigger cities of Flanders due to long-term neglect of housing, mobility and quality of life. This was combined with the effects of cutbacks in social security spending during the 1980s, which had made these families even more vulnerable²⁹. In response, the development of a program to give a political answer to new societal needs and challenges became a high priority on

24. The two reports were: Koning Boudewijnstichting, *Voorstellen voor een beleid tegen armoede en bestaansonzekerheid in België*, Brussel, 1983 and Koning Boudewijnstichting, *Het armoededeбат: benaderingen, begrippen, metingen*, Brussel, 1987. The two other major stakeholders were the Belgian government, which commissioned the GRP, and the Belgian Union of Cities and Municipalities, which was representing the local public welfare agencies. As the GRP was a federal, thus bilingual project, both archives contain a mix of French and Dutch documents. All formal invitations, minutes of meetings etc., are mostly found in both languages in the archives. Furthermore, we included personal notes of key actors in both languages, especially from the ATD archive. Consequently, all the quotes from archival sources in this article are translated from either Dutch or French.

25. Two politicians and their two chefs de cabinet (Minister Miet Smet and Michel Van Holder; Minister Jan Peeters and Magda De Meyer); two academics (Prof. Jan Vranken and Prof. Maria Bouverne-De Bie); six representatives of two (self-)advocacy organizations (Ides Nicaise, Herman Van Breen, Jean Tonglet and Claude Mormont of ATD Fourth World; Jan Vanhee and Rudy De Cock of BMLIK, which is the Dutch acronym of “Beweging van Mensen met een Laag Inkomen en Kinderen”); three professional social workers (Ludo Fret, from a private social work agency, and Alexandre Lesiw and Mark Vermaerke, who represented the local public welfare agencies), and finally two GRP project leaders employed by the KBF (Frieda Lampaert and Pierre Martin Neirinckx).

26. MARC SWYNGEDOUW AND KOEN ABTS, “Our own people first in a Europe of peoples: the international policy of the Vlaams Blok”, in C. SCHORI LIANG (Ed.), *Europe for the Europeans: the foreign and security policy of the populist radical right*, London and New York, 2007, pp. 81-102.

27. JEAN-LUC DEHAENE, *Regeringsverklaring, uitgesproken voor het parlement op 9 maart 1992 door eerste minister Jean-Luc Dehaene en Regeerakkoord*, Brussel, 1992, pp. 13.

28. MARC SWYNGEDOUW, “National elections in Belgium: the breakthrough of the extreme Right in Flanders,” in *Regional Politics and Policy*, no. 3, 1992 (2), pp. 62-75; MARC SWYNGEDOUW, “The extreme Right in Belgium - of a Non-existing Front National and an Omnipresent Vlaams Blok,” in HANS-GEORG BETZ AND STEFAN IMMERFALL (Eds.), *New party politics of the right. Neo-populist parties and movements in established democracies*, USA, 1998, pp. 59-75.

29. JAAK BILLIET, MARC SWYNGEDOUW AND ANN CARTON, *Stemmen voor Vlaams Blok of Rossem. De kiezer zelf aan het woord*, Leuven, 1992; PASCALE DE DECKER AND CHRISTIANE KESTELOOT, “Revitalizing the city in an anti-urban context: extreme right and the rise of urban policies in Flanders, Belgium”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29 no.1 (March 2005), pp. 152-171.

the policy agenda³⁰. It is, however, vital to evaluate how effectively promising policy rhetoric is implemented in practice, in order to “separate the reality from the rhetoric of welfare reform”³¹.

The GRP stakeholders³²

ATD Fourth World

ATD Fourth World (ATD) was a key advocate for the interests of the poor as an NGO established in 1957 by Father Joseph Wresinski (1917-1988) in Noisy-le-grand near Paris and exported to Belgium in 1971³³. It is the oldest (self-)advocacy movement of people in poverty and their non-poor allies in Europe and owed its privileged position to the combination of its activism in the outskirts of Paris and its international strategy and research center³⁴. ATD was particularly known for the so-called *Wresinski Report*, which was published in 1987 and based on testimonies of people in poverty³⁵. ATD also introduced the description “fourth world”, defining it as people in poverty who lack “fundamental possibilities to participate

in social life and have little or no opportunity to participate in movements or changing processes that strive for more equal opportunities to participate”³⁶. The aim of the allies of people in poverty was to represent them. Some of ATD’s first permanent volunteers were linked to upper-class society and opened the doors of dominant powers in society. In Belgium, for example, King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola both attended public and private events of ATD during the 1980s³⁷. After the GRP production process, the Flemish Poverty Decree (2003) recognized ATD Fourth World together with 58 other NGOs as an organization “where people in poverty take the floor”³⁸.

ATD in Paris attached great importance to the GRP project and the French headquarters engaged in following up the process from a European point of view³⁹. Especially Jean Tonglet, a trained social worker who became a permanent volunteer of ATD Belgium, played a crucial role therein. Inspired by the *Wresinski report*, he lobbied politically from 1987 onwards and offered to write a general report on poverty wherein first and fore-

30. It proved to be very difficult to form a new government. Jean-Luc Dehaene only succeeded after three months in getting an agreement between the Catholic and Socialist parties on a limited program, and as such they formed an “emergency government” to tackle the most urgent societal challenges within a short time frame. Source: JEAN-LUC DEHAENE, *Regeringsverklaring*, p. 11. For more information on this see MICHIEL NUYTEMANS, *Het vertrouwen in de regering. Verklaringen voor het verschil in vertrouwen tussen de regeringen Dehaene I en Verhofstadt I*, Antwerpen, 2001.

31. KEITH KILTY AND ELIZABETH SEGAL, *The promise of welfare reform: political rhetoric and the reality of poverty in the 21st century*, London, 2008, p. 2.

32. A list with the names of the diverse representatives of the different key GRP stakeholders is added at the end of the article.

33. ATD stood originally for the French “*Aide a Toute Détresse*” [Help for all Distress], but since 2009 it has stood for “*Agir Tous ensemble pour la Dignité*” [All Together in Dignity]. ATD is a global movement emphasizing solidarity with those living in persistent poverty. ATD’s initiatives and projects are always developed in cooperation with people in poverty, in response to their aspirations in their communities and society. In 1974, ATD got consultative status as an international non-governmental organisation with the UN and UNESCO; followed in 1977 with UNICEF, ILO and the EU (Council of Europe). In 1971, ATD was officially acknowledged as an organization in Wallonia, followed by a Dutch-speaking branch in Flanders since 1981.

34. FRAN BENNETT AND MOREANE ROBERTS, *From input to influence: participatory approaches to research and inquiry into poverty*, York, 2004; KRUMER-NEVO, *From voice to knowledge...*, pp. 279-295; REINECKE, *Localising the social...*, pp. 558-559.

35. JOSEPH WRESINSKI, *Grande pauvreté et précarité économique et sociale. Journal officiel de République Française. Avis et Rapports du Conseil Economique et Social. Session de 1987. Séances des 10 et 11, février 1987*, France, 1987.

36. ALWINE DE VOS-VAN STEENWIJK, *The Fourth World, Touchstone of European Democracy*, Den Haag, 1977, p. 2.

37. In 1979, children of the Fourth World were invited into the Royal Palace in relation to ATD’s international photographic exhibition “30 years history of the child in the fourth world”, embedded within the “International Year of the Child” by the UN. On 15 May 1982, both King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola attended the international gathering of 10,000 ATD members worldwide in Brussels to celebrate the 25th anniversary of ATD (1957 – 1982). Interview with Herman Van Breen (ATD), 18 November, 2015; Jean Tonglet (ATD), 8 January, 2016; Claude Mormont (ATD), 3 December, 2015.

38. Decreet betreffende de armoedebestrijding, Vlaamse overheid, 2003. Retrieved on 3 July 2018 from <http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/decreet/2003/03/21/2003035552/justel>.

39. Fax from Jean Tonglet to Eugen Brand, International Chairman of ATD, May 1992, p. 1 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

most people in poverty “would have their say”⁴⁰. At the same time, ATD was also challenged by their international configuration: Tonglet, who had done the major part of the successful political lobbying between 1987 and 1992, had to leave the project in July 1992 to fulfil a European representative function for ATD. Claude Mormont, another fulltime voluntary ATD activist, would become his successor. He could also count on the support of Georges De Kerckhove and Ides Nicaise, both ATD allies, who combined their voluntary work with fulltime jobs, respectively as a lawyer and as an academic specialized in poverty research.

The Belgian Government

After the implementation of the minimum subsistence law (1974) and the law on local public welfare agencies (1976), politicians’ attention to poverty issues waned, reappearing quickly, however, in the mid-1980s as a group of ‘new poor’ emerged owing to job losses and structural unemployment within a worldwide economic crisis⁴¹. The Catholic Prime Minister Wilfried Martens stated in his governmental declaration of 24 November 1985 that the protection of subsistence security of the most deprived was an absolute priority for the government⁴². This renewed political interest became apparent in the appointment of Miet Smet, the first State Secretary of Social Emancipation. Smet emphasized that this was an audacious assignment as “everything was new” and social emancipation not only enclosed the attention for the poor and their organisations, but even so meant attention for the equal oppor-

tunities of women, the overall functioning of local public welfare agencies and also dealing with the first refugee crisis in 1986⁴³. Minister Smet remembers how she had contacts with the allies of ATD Fourth World and also had direct contact with people in poverty on specific occasions. This was a new strategy processed by ATD to give voice to the poor themselves.

Smet acknowledged ATD’s specific expertise and included it as a member of the experimental “Interdepartmental Working Group to protect the subsistence security of the most deprived” (IDWG) in May 1986, chaired by Prof. Herman Deleeck. This working group was installed because of the firm belief of Miet Smet – and driving force Herman Deleeck – that “a comprehensive policy in combatting poverty” needed “a multidimensional approach”, as not only income but also many other issues, such as work, education, health, family, and so on, were imperative to act on⁴⁴. Consequently, the IDWG had a twofold assignment, namely to formulate “coordinated propositions to enhance the living circumstances of certain groups within the population” and “to evaluate the effects of governmental decisions on vulnerable groups within society”⁴⁵. What made the IDWG interesting was its “horizontal approach” as civil servants of fifteen federal administrations convened with three external actors – which would become the central GRP stakeholders – namely the Belgian Union of Cities and Municipalities (representing the local public welfare agencies), the King Baudouin Foundation (KBF) and ATD

40. The first time ATD was asked to give their input during the formation process of a government was in December 1987, the year the *Wresinki Report* was discussed with the King and the responsible ministers. It was the Walloon Socialist Guy Spitaels who was the informer (leading up to the government Martens VIII) and consulted Tonglet on the issue of poverty. Tonglet asked then for the first time for the production of a general report on poverty, “infused from the experiences and knowledge of people in poverty themselves”. Interview with Jean Tonglet, 8 January 2016.

41. BEA CANTILLON, MARK ANDRIES, BERT MEULEMANS AND BARBARA TAN, *Twintig jaar armoede en beleid inzake armoedebestrijding*, Berichten/UFSIA. Centrum voor Sociaal Beleid, no.3, Antwerpen, 1996.

42. WILFRIED MARTENS, *Regeerakkoord, goedgekeurd door alle politieke partijen op 24 November 1985*, Belgium, 1985, p. 13.

43. Interview with Miet Smet (Belgian State Secretary for Environmental Affairs and Social Emancipation, 1985-1992 and Minister of Employment and Labour, 1992 – 1999), 19 November 2015.

44. Miet Smet in: HERMAN DELEECK, *Eerste verslag aan de staatssecretaris voor maatschappelijke emancipatie* (D/4747/1987/22), Brussel, 1987, p. 192.

45. Idem, p. 193.

Fourth World (ATD)⁴⁶. Prof. Deleecq asserted that this conjunction of stakeholders was original and challenging but also necessary for an integrated poverty reduction policy⁴⁷. The IDWG was active between 1986 and 1992 and produced three policy reports with recommendations⁴⁸. Smet's chef de cabinet, Michel Van Holder, asserted that these IDWG reports were innovative, notwithstanding the fact that the IDWG “was perhaps not an ideal construction because of the sometimes bureaucratic culture of civil servants” and “the lack of political commitment from the responsible ministers”, but it had nonetheless “a pioneering quality”, he concluded⁴⁹.

After Black Sunday, a new attempt was made and the Minister of Social Integration, Laurette Onkelinx, was put in charge of producing the GRP⁵⁰. By inviting ATD to participate in the GRP production process, the organization was recognized by Onkelinx as a “representative of people in persistent poverty”⁵¹. Chef de cabinet was Jean-Marie Berger, who was the former Secretary of the local public welfare agency of Charleroi, one of the poorest cities in Belgium⁵². In that respect, he was familiar with poverty issues and knew ATD and its non-poor activists since 1983, for they had collaborated in

several anti-poverty think tanks on both a regional and a federal level⁵³. As such, ATD had high hopes for him as the chairperson of the GRP project⁵⁴.

Local Public Welfare Agencies

In addition, the commissioning of the GRP appealed to the local public welfare agencies, which employed professional social workers as civil servants responsible for implementing social policy and guaranteeing the right to social services. These public agencies had two professional representatives at the table, Alexandre Lesiw for the French-speaking community and Mark Vermaerke for the Dutch-speaking community. These municipal agencies had not asked for the GRP project and considered the idea of a nation-wide dialogue with the (self-)advocacy organizations “out of the ordinary” and even somewhat threatening, because the professional social workers “knew their jobs”⁵⁵. Nevertheless, both men underlined their constructive attitude towards the project, as they also perceived it as “a serious opportunity to address the poverty problem profoundly”, which was required as the local public welfare agencies “were swamped by the rising numbers of welfare claimants”⁵⁶. The financial needs and debts of these agencies in the cities were increas-

46. HERMAN DELEECK, *Eerste Verslag aan ...*, p. 199. Frieda Lampaert was the representative of the KBF and coordinated the KBF reports on poverty in 1983 and 1987 and eventually also the GRP. Ides Nicaise was the representative of ATD Fourth World, co-authored also the first Dutch publication on poverty of ATD Fourth World Belgium in 1981, and later on was also a representative of ATD in the GRP production process.

47. HERMAN DELEECK, *Eerste Verslag aan ...*, p. 199.

48. HERMAN DELEECK, *Eerste verslag aan de staatssecretaris voor maatschappelijke emancipatie (D/4747/1987/22)*, Brussel, 1987; HERMAN DELEECK, *Voorstellen inzake armoedebestrijding 1986-1988, (D/4757/1989/29)*, Brussel, 1989; HERMAN DELEECK, *Aanbevelingen voor het armoedebestrijdingsbeleid 1990-1991. Derde Verslag. (D/4747/1991/31)*, Brussel, 1991.

49. Interview Michel Van Holder (KBF until 1986, cabineteer 1986-1992), 21 December 2015 and interview Frieda Lampaert (KBF), 8 December 2015.

50. Note the change in title from “state secretary of social emancipation” (Miet Smet, 1986) to “minister of social integration” (Laurette Onkelinx, 1992), which signifies that poverty was not only elevated in the political agenda but also reconceptualized in a more conservative way as a problem of people in poverty “lacking integration” instead of having “opportunities to emancipate”.

51. Personal (handwritten) note of Xavier Godinot, Head of the ATD Fourth World Research Centre in France, to Claude Mormont, Secretary General ATD Belgium (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1). Godinot reflects on the proceedings of the negotiations to support Mormont in deciding whether ATD should stay “on board” – and if so in what role – or refuse to participate in the GRP project. No date is mentioned, but this content can be situated in September 1992.

52. Interview with Alexandre Lesiw (representant for the Local Public Welfare Agencies), 19 November 2015.

53. Interview with Jean Tonglet (ATD), 8 January 2016.

54. Personal notes of Jean Tonglet, 26 March 1992, p. 2 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

55. Interview with Mark Vermaerke, 19 January 2016.

56. Respectively taken from: interview with Alexandre Lesiw, 19 November 2015 and interview with Mark Vermaerke, 19 January 2016.

ing rapidly and they were in need of a considerable financial transfer from the federal to the local level. These agencies therefore thought of the GRP project as a way to make themselves heard more loudly on the federal level.

In what follows, we chronologically describe the GRP production process and flesh out how the idea of 'giving voice' was realized in multiple ways as interactions and power balances between stakeholders progressed.

III. Giving voice to people in poverty through the General Report on Poverty (1992 – 1995)

Giving voice ... a political demarche

On 26 March 1992, only three weeks after the government was formed, a first GRP meeting was organized by Chef de cabinet, Jean-Marie Berger. Immediately after the meeting, ATD representative Tonglet almost literally wrote down the conversation in an extensive note:

"I replied [to Berger] that it seemed important to me to elaborate first of all on the 'what' – before the 'who' – thus on the content and possible ambitions of such a report. I explained how this report is demarche, completely different than all former poverty reports (and) has to be about the opportunity for the affected people to publicly take the floor about their ideas, their aspirations and their struggles"⁵⁷.

The quote illustrates how ATD underlined the importance of the GRP as an instrument wherein,

first and foremost, people in poverty should speak for themselves. It wanted a commitment from both other stakeholders on this principle. The meeting was held in French and the word *démarche* was used frequently by ATD to stress that *giving voice* to the poor was the central issue at stake and that this had to be understood as a *political act* of recognizing people in poverty as full citizens rather than as a charitable or operational act. As such, ATD's non-poor volunteers functioned as 'diplomats' of the poor in these preliminary negotiations, emphasizing the political character of the poverty problem and framing it as an injustice and a violation of human rights. For ATD, the GRP had to become an instrument of profound social change and, as such, poor as well as non-poor had to be mobilized⁵⁸. It envisaged an in-depth process of four years with thematic dialogue groups, intermediate reports and the gathering of the experiences of the poorest from all over the country⁵⁹.

This standpoint challenged Dehaene I, which was conceptualized as an emergency government with a fixed and specific agenda and as such was pressured to act swiftly on "new (sic) societal problems" such as poverty⁶⁰. The government also subscribed to a human rights perspective; however, the cabinet aimed to avoid "a demarche that gave a monopoly position to ATD Fourth World"⁶¹. Chef de cabinet Berger argued that there were also a lot of places where ATD was not present and therefore opened up the debate to the local public welfare agencies, which were not only present in every municipality, but also had a legitimate voice from the standpoint of professional social work⁶².

In an effort to bridge the differences, ATD introduced two crucial and entangled concepts: *par-*

57. Jean Tonglet quotes himself in his notes, written in French. Personal notes of Jean Tonglet, 26 March 1992, p. 2 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

58. Idem, p. 2-3. See also the interviews with Ides Nicaise, 2 December 2015 and with Herman Van Breen, 18 November 2015.

59. First draft of the GRP project proposal written by Jean Tonglet, 6 April 1992 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

60. DEHAENE, *Regeringsverklaring...*, p. 13.

61. Jean Tonglet quotes Jean-Marie Berger. Personal notes of Jean Tonglet, 26 March 1992, p. 3 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

62. Idem, p. 3. ATD had fifteen local groups spread over the country, ten of them in Wallonia and five in Flanders. ATD also collaborated intensively with four other independent (self)-advocacy NGOs of people in poverty: Kauwenberg (Antwerp), BMLIK (Beweging van Mensen met een Laag Inkomen en Kinderen, Ghent), De Cirkel (Antwerp) and LST (Lutte Solidarité Travail, Namur). PIERRE-MARTIN NEIRINCKX (KBF), GRP Newsletter, April 1993, (AATD).

ticipation of the poor and partnership with the poor. First, Tonglet referred to a recent trade union seminar with the title “No combat on exclusion without the participation of the concerned people themselves” in an attempt to normalize ATD’s plea for more political power for people in poverty, which they reframed (and renamed) as “participation of the poor”⁶³. Second, Tonglet introduced the idea of “partnership with the poor” in an effort to encompass the objections of the cabinet and include the voice of the local public welfare agencies’ social workers, tied up, however, with the voice of people in poverty. He emphasized that “people in poverty, AND [original capitals] those engaged at their side, had to be given voice” and thereby ATD explicitly referred to social workers and the local public welfare agencies, but also to such groups as teachers, policemen, and private organizations – in sum, “everyone who can move things forward from a standpoint of partnership”⁶⁴.

However, this required a long-term and fundamental process of social change “that stood at odds with the logic of concrete and short-term solutions”⁶⁵. Therefore, ATD suggested the delivery of interim thematic reports rather than concrete policy proposals, since ATD believed that concrete anti-poverty measures were counterproductive in relation to the general approach that was needed⁶⁶. In contrast, Alexandre Lesiw of the local public welfare agencies stated that he held a more institutional mind-set, as he perceived the GRP commission as expressing “a political momentum” because “the political class was very much willing to mobilize themselves against poverty”. Therefore it was “of utmost importance to write very concrete policy proposals” into the GRP in order to enable the development of future anti-poverty policies⁶⁷. Con-

sequently, ATD considered it hazardous to collaborate with the local public welfare agencies, especially because of the danger that the voice of the poor would be suppressed by the more articulate voices of professional social work, welfare institutions, academia, and so on, arguing that this had happened in all former poverty reports, explicitly referring to the poverty reports made in 1983 and 1987 by the King Baudouin Foundation⁶⁸. All the more reason for ATD to emphasize in the GRP project the importance of the *direct participation of people in poverty*.

In sum, both partners differed fundamentally in opinion. The lingering negotiations broke down quite suddenly in May 1992 when Minister Onkelinx launched a proposal for legislation, called “an urgent program for a solidary society”, in which she presented a range of policy measures to reinforce the local public welfare agencies’ abilities to combat poverty⁶⁹. Most controversial was the introduction of obligatory inclusion contracts to activate young welfare claimants in the local public welfare agencies to enter the labor market. ATD, as well as other NGOs and private social work organizations, actively campaigned against these compulsory contracts, which were a concrete materialization of the so-called “third way” politics that also became the leading policy rhetoric in Belgium⁷⁰. Indeed, Prime Minister Dehaene had declared in his state of the union that the government had to take on the responsibility and focus on the needs of citizens, however, this had to be balanced out and needed a “new contract” with the citizen in which “rights were balanced with duties”⁷¹. As such the GRP command and the focus on participation of people in poverty were not only grounded within a human

63. Personal notes of Jean Tonglet, 26 March 1992, p. 3 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1). Jean Tonglet quotes himself.

64. *Idem*, p. 3.

65. Interview with Claude Mormont, 3 December 2015.

66. Interview with Claude Mormont, 3 December 2015.

67. Interview with Alexandre Lesiw, 19 November 2015.

68. Interview with Ides Nicaise, 2 December 2015.

69. LAURETTE ONKELINX, *Wetsontwerp houdende een Urgentieprogramma voor ene meer solidaire samenleving*, draft discussed in the cabinet of Ministers, 8 May 1992.

70. ANTHONY GIDDENS, 1998 in LISTER, *Poverty ...*, p. 166.

71. DEHAENE, *Regeringsverklaring...*, p. 4.

rights discourse, but equally in a neoliberal discourse with renewed focus on individual responsibility and accountability.

Although ATD did not succeed in subverting the new policy measure, their protest was widely picked up in the mainstream media and, as a consequence, the Minister of Social Integration and the cabinet were not amused⁷². In those weeks of protest, all communication on the GRP project was blocked and by the end of June 1992 the consequences were significant and tangible. The cabinet scheduled a new meeting on 30 June 1992. Chef de Cabinet Berger took control and announced major changes in the construction process of the GRP project⁷³. The first change was the cabinet's demand that the GRP should consist of a series of thematic reports, each addressing specific topics (e.g. labor, justice, and housing) which were all federal policy matters. This was in place of a general report on poverty addressing all life domains, including, for example, education and culture, which were regional policy matters⁷⁴. Secondly, the cabinet reduced the "global" dialogue with society to the "local and welfare" spheres, meaning that a process of dialogue between the poor and the social workers of the local public welfare agencies had to be set up. Additionally, the cabinet demanded an output of concrete policy proposals, as the Minister wanted to act upon these proposals as soon as possible. To top it off, the cabinet announced that the project budget was curtailed from 25 million francs to a maximum of 9 million francs. ATD experienced a complete gridlock and considered quitting the whole project before it had even started, especially because they feared being used as an alibi by policy makers concerning the participatory approach⁷⁵.

Giving voice ...a consultative demarche

On 1 July 1992, one day after the meeting with the cabinet, Tonglet and Mormont (both ATD) sat down with Lesiw, the representative of the local public welfare agencies. For the first time, Lesiw took the lead in the negotiations in an attempt to convince ATD of the importance of concrete policy proposals. At the same time, he acknowledged the power of testimonies from people in poverty. Eventually, both partners agreed that the Interdepartmental Commission on Poverty could play a mediating role. Lesiw prepared a letter for the cabinet in the name of both partners, suggesting that this report should be included in the work of the Interdepartmental Commission on Poverty, which was responsible for the formulation of concrete policy proposals. The Belgian Union for Cities and Municipalities and ATD Fourth World could collaborate in harvesting testimonies of people in poverty and privileged social stakeholders. These testimonies would then foster the translation into policy proposals in the Commission on Poverty⁷⁶.

The idea of giving voice to people in poverty was reduced to the harvesting of testimonies. ATD did not agree with this sharp derogation and did not sign the letter. Instead, they regrouped and changed course. Without prior communication with the local public welfare agencies, ATD communicated a letter to the cabinet on 15 July, formulating their two most basic claims as conditions for further commitment. First, that a global and coherent approach be retained, which implied the inclusion of all the rights that were challenged by the experience of poverty, regardless of whatever government (federal, regional, or local) held authority or instruments to guaran-

72. Interview with Ides Nicaise, 2 December 2015.

73. Personal notes of Claude Mormont on the meeting with the cabinet and the local public welfare agencies, 30 June 1992 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1). Such detailed notes were typically for ATD volunteers, who shared and collaborated with other volunteers – also internationally – to further their strategies.

74. At the same time, important topics such as education and culture were excluded, as they concerned regional authorities.

75. Personal notes of Claude Mormont on the meeting with the cabinet and the local public welfare agencies, 30 June 1992 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

76. Letter of Alexandre Lesiw, 8 July 1992 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1). Letter on the GRP drafted by Alexandre Lesiw and faxed to Jean Tonglet for approval. ATD did not approve and in handwritten capital letters there is written "NON ENVOYE" – thus "NOT SENT" – on Lesiw's letter.

tee them⁷⁷. Secondly, ATD expected a consultation and dialogue process wider than a dialogue with social workers and people in poverty, thus a dialogue with the whole of society, including teachers, police officers, lawyers, employers, and so forth. Moreover, ATD underlined that a budget of 12 million francs – as mentioned before, the original budget of 25 million francs was suddenly dropped to 9 million francs – was the minimum acceptable budget for such an endeavor, in order to recruit two full-time coordinators, a Dutch- and a French-speaking, for the overall organization, consultation and editorial production of the GRP for three years.

The stakes were high for ATD. However, Berger confirmed that Minister Onkelinx would meet their minimum demands. In his letter of 6 August, he agreed that it fundamentally was about “a general report on poverty [original underscore], even when the report was built up around concrete topics”, and that “of course other actors than ATD and the local public welfare agencies had to be included in the dialogue”⁷⁸. This message kept ATD on board. However, as ATD sat down with Vermaerke and Lesiw, representatives of the local public welfare agencies, on September 1, the latter mentioned the idea of creating a link between the two GRP coordinators and the KBF team and perhaps “to locate the front office of the GRP project in the lap of the KBF”⁷⁹. ATD, in search of a compromise, did not really oppose to this proposal, as they still thought they were going to run the project and saw this as a practicality.

Nonetheless, on 15 September, the power balance shifted as the cabinet announced that the decision

had been made to implement the GRP project under the auspices of the King Baudouin Foundation⁸⁰. This revealing notification was done in the presence of three important representatives of the KBF: adjunct CEO Jacques Debulpaep, director Paul Maréchal and Frieda Lampaert, who was the project manager of both former KBF poverty reports. According to KBF, the cabinet had asked for their help as the cabinet wanted one report instead of two reports, thus neither a Wresinski report from ATD nor a report from the local public welfare agencies⁸¹. Pierre-Martin Neirinckx, the later Dutch-speaking KBF coordinator also affirmed the cabinet’s choice for the KBF as a neutral and overarching partner⁸².

As such, the KBF became the GRP coordinator and both ATD and the local public welfare agencies became subordinate partners. Surprisingly, the project budget was raised again to the original amount of 25 million francs, of which almost 20 million francs were reserved for the KBF personnel and publication costs. It was argued that the KBF needed two coordinators with a master’s degree, a half-time secretary and a considerable budget for professional translations, layout and printing of the GRP. As a result, only 5 million francs remained to be spent “as needed” – by the KBF – to pay for specific tasks by other partners in the project, for instance the organization of the participation of the poor by ATD (and the other NGOs) and the input of the local public welfare agencies’ social workers⁸³. ATD protested that there was no structural budget left for them to employ somebody to support people in poverty in the participation process. The cabinet answered that the minister would not pay ATD’s “habitual

77. Letter from Jean Tonglet, 15 July 1992 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

78. Letter from Jean-Marie Berger, 6 August 1992 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

79. Personal (handwritten) notes of Claude Mormont on the meeting with Lesiw and Vermaerke, 1 September 1992 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

80. Personal notes of Claude Mormont on the meeting with the Cabinet, the local public welfare agencies and the KBF, 15 September 1992, p. 1 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

81. Interview with Frieda Lampaert, 8 December 2015.

82. Interview with Pierre-Martin Neirinckx, 18 December 2015.

83. Notes of Claude Mormont (ATD) on the meeting with the Cabinet, the local public welfare agencies and the KBF, 15 September 1992, p. 1 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1). Claude Mormont is citing Jean-Marie Berger.

activities”, as they already had a long tradition of bringing people in poverty together to speak up⁸⁴. The fact that ATD and the other NGOs were almost completely reliant on volunteers and worked with small local groups, which were spread all over the country, was ignored. What complicated things even more was the attitude of the KBF’s adjunct CEO at this first meeting as he immediately virtually dismissed the role of ATD and the local public welfare agencies, as well as the central idea of giving voice: “What do you want this report to be, a scientific work or a journalistic work? I think it is not that interesting to consult again a lot of people, neither the poor, nor social workers”⁸⁵.

In a reaction to this misappraisal, the local public welfare agencies backed up ATD’s claim for participation and asserted that this consultation of both the poor and social workers was the only novelty in the demarche and thus had to be retained⁸⁶. Eventually, ATD won the power struggle and the local public welfare agencies and the cabinet explicitly supported the idea of “direct consultation” of the poor as well as social workers. They underlined the importance of what they called “the consultative demarche” and insisted on the production of raw material that did not deform the voice of the involved people⁸⁷. After months of difficult negotiations (from March until September 1992), the cabinet insisted that the GRP project had to start no later than 1 November 1992 and to result in a report at the latest by 31 December 1994. The initial draft of the formal project agreement conceptualized the GRP and the participation of people in poverty as a consultative demarche. The report had to be understood as a dynamic process wherein a large harvest of testimonies was needed and which had to result in a final report including

concrete proposals that could be operationalized by public authorities⁸⁸.

The local public welfare agencies aligned with this understanding because of the explicit focus on policy proposals. ATD, however, felt robbed of ‘their’ project, not only because of the reduction of giving voice to consultation but also symbolically, as ATD was not acknowledged as a formal partner in the project agreement, which was solely concluded between the government and the KBF. ATD considered – for the second time – withdrawing from the whole endeavor. However, they were aware that it was a unique possibility for people in poverty to participate in social policy-making, an opportunity that would not easily come again⁸⁹. Finally, ATD stayed on board as the government did symbolically important emendations in the final project agreement on ATD’s demand:

“The demarche can only be finished through the involvement of the most disadvantaged in every step of the process, up to the elaboration of the conclusions and proposals”⁹⁰.

Subsequently, the government opened the way again to a wider understanding of giving voice, affording ample opportunities to ATD and people in poverty to intervene throughout the full GRP production process, instead of merely at the beginning through giving testimony.

Giving voice ...a dialogical demarche

The GRP project made a formal start in November 1992. Jean Cornil of the cabinet was appointed president of the newly formed management com-

84. *Idem*, p. 1.

85. *Idem*, p. 1. Claude Mormont citing Jacques Debulpaep.

86. *Idem*, p. 1. Claude Mormont citing Alexandre Lesiv.

87. *Idem*, p. 2. Claude Mormont citing Jean-Marie Berger and Jean Cornil.

88. Draft of the formal GRP project agreement between Minister Laurette Onkelinx and the KBF, faxed to ATD, 18 September 1992, p. 2 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

89. Letter from Ides Nicaise with comments on the proposed GRP agreement of the cabinet, faxed to Claude Mormont, 18 September 1992, p. 1 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

90. Final version of GRP project agreement between Minister Laurette Onkelinx and the KBF, faxed to ATD by the Cabinet, 2 October 1992, p. 3 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

mittee, which further included representatives of the KBF, ATD and the local public welfare agencies. First, these four stakeholders engaged anew in trying to find a middle ground on the procedure, timing, budget, end product, and underlying rationale of the GRP. In that sense, Cornil explicitly advocated that the construction of the GRP could kill two birds with one stone, arguing that the participation of the poorest in anti-poverty policies could also enable their social inclusion⁹¹. ATD repeated its earlier standpoint that partnership with the poorest was the key issue at stake, as the GRP had to become “a report of mobilization”⁹². The local public welfare agencies responded that mobilization also entailed “confrontation” and thus emphasized that this partnership also encompassed listening to diverse views and opinions. They stated that a direct dialogue process with all involved social stakeholders, including people in poverty, would be the best way to proceed⁹³.

ATD openly expressed their fear about this direct dialogue between the poor and social workers as people in poverty were often dependent on local public welfare agencies’ financial support and thus could not speak freely⁹⁴. In this way, ATD took up a protective position towards people in poverty. Some of the other stakeholders even blamed them for being paternalistic⁹⁵. ATD’s reluctance was quickly surpassed as the other stakeholders proposed to organize the dialogue process thematically on a regional (Flemish and Walloon) level, thus avoiding the local welfare dependencies. The central idea of the GRP was increasingly taking shape in terms of organizing a process of dialogue with specific emphasis on the direct participation of people in poverty and all other relevant

stakeholders close to the problem. In this way, the idea of ‘giving voice’ became the shared and central term of all involved GRP stakeholders but remained a tricky issue in terms of organization.

The KBF and its two newly employed GRP coordinators were very well aware of the sensitivities of ATD and asserted in the project outline that it was of the utmost importance to involve the target group from the beginning intensively in the construction of “their” Report⁹⁶. Nonetheless, they aimed to limit the participation of the poor and their representational NGOs in time and scope to the end of 1993. This provided up to one year, as they wanted to guarantee enough time and space in 1994 for the production of periodic, thematic reports that would precede the overall general report, as this was a “great marketing strategy” to bring the issue into the public and political debate⁹⁷. This proposed timing and strategy made sense for the government, as Belgium was to chair the European Union during the second half of 1993. The Minister of Social Integration therefore aimed to organize a colloquium in December 1993 around the issue of social participation and considered it very desirable to present the GRP then – thus a year before the final deadline⁹⁸.

As expected, ATD firmly disagreed, raising objections about the reduction of the participation process of people in poverty to delivering testimonies. Finding themselves on the defensive, they teamed up with the four other smaller NGOs of the poor and established a bilingual steering group of NGOs representing people in poverty, led by Claude Mormont of ATD. Mormont, whose mother tongue was French, also mastered

91. Minutes of the 2nd management committee, KBF, 20 November 1992, p. 1 (AKBF).

92. Handwritten notes of Pierre-Martin Neirinckx on the 2nd meeting of the management committee, 20 November 1992, p. 1-2 (AKBF).

93. *Idem*, 2-3.

94. GRP project proposal, 2nd draft, Pierre-Martin Neirinckx, 22 December 1993, p. 11 (AKBF) This document was discussed at the 3rd management committee, 22 December 1992, p. 3 (AKBF).

95. Interviews with Prof. Jan Vranken, 19 November 2015 and with Pierre-Martin Neirinckx, 18 December 2015.

96. GRP project proposal, 2nd draft, Pierre-Martin Neirinckx, 22 December 1993, p. 11 (AKBF).

97. Minutes of the 3rd management committee, KBF, 22 December 1992, p. 3 (AKBF).

98. Minutes of the 4th management committee, KBF, 23 February 1993, p. 2 (AKBF).

the Dutch language, which made him the right man for the job⁹⁹. Ides Nicaise then drafted a letter, which was discussed and signed by all NGOs of the steering group in order to put more pressure on the KBF to prolong the participation process:

“One cannot forget that the ‘process’ of the report, the participation of the poorest themselves and dialogue with them is equally important as the ‘product’. The work (...) has to respect and enable the individual and collective self-esteem of the poorest, offer social education (legislation and knowledge of societal structures), provide support to overcome individual life experiences, stimulate their creativity in the production of proposals, and enable their emancipation process and the actual political dialogue”¹⁰⁰.

The quote illustrates how the NGOs stressed that an educational, emancipatory process of people in poverty should precede the political process of participation, which was seen as the ultimate goal. Accordingly, ATD voiced the collective’s wish for a project timing that was flexible enough “to adapt to the pace of people in poverty” during the process, a timing which would offer a guarantee for families in poverty “to hold ownership” of their testimonies and texts, up to the most final phase, and even afterwards¹⁰¹. Although they did not receive any substantial financial means, ATD and the other NGOs suggested that they would operate as bridging organizations between the poor and the government, thus facilitating the process of giving voice. At the same time, they kept on protesting for months, demanding a budget to organize this

support. A decisive moment came in April 1993 when the KBF was willing to rearrange the budget allocations in such a way that 5.25 million francs were made available to ATD and the three smaller NGOs¹⁰². However, when it came down to it, the cabinet forbade the KBF from giving this amount of financial means to ATD¹⁰³. The NGOs altogether received 1.6 million francs of which 1 million was for ATD, covering almost three years¹⁰⁴. Nevertheless, they decided to go ahead with the GRP project almost on a voluntary basis and with their own means, claiming that this opportunity to give power and voice to people in poverty was more vital.

The ongoing protest of NGOs and ATD did succeed in convincing the KBF to adopt an approach wherein the people of the fourth world would stay involved in the construction process of the GRP as long as possible¹⁰⁵. With that goal in mind, the KBF conceived three project phases in which the political demarche took shape in two consecutive phases along the lines in which the demarche had been discussed so far: first as a consultative and then as a dialogical demarche. The first phase was a three-month mobilization phase of welfare agents and people in poverty, which targeted especially the collection of testimonies. The second phase was a nine-month dialogical phase wherein the dialogue between people in poverty and civil society took center stage. The third phase of six months encompassed the editorial process of writing the report and formulating policy proposals.

The mobilization phase

From March to June 1993, the project focused on a broad mobilization of welfare agents and peo-

99. Minutes of the GRP steering group of representational NGOs of the poor, chaired by Claude Mormont and attended by the GRP coordinators, Pierre-Martin Neirinckx and Bruno Carton (KBF), meetings from 5 February 1993 to 30 November 1994 (AATD, 12/7/Box RGP/AVA n°14). Interview with Claude Mormont, 3 December 2015.

100. Draft of collective standpoint, written by Ides Nicaise, on behalf of ATD and the NGO’s collective, to alter the work plan and protocol between KBF and the third parties, faxed to Claude Mormont, ATD headquarters, 22 February 1993, p. 1 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

101. *Idem*, p. 2.

102. Letter from Ides Nicaise to Frieda Lampaert as a written confirmation of their negotiated compromise, faxed to ATD headquarters, 12 March 1993 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

103. Extensive handwritten memo by an anonymous ATD volunteer reporting an oral message from Ides Nicaise to inform ATD headquarters, 18 March 1993 (AATD, 16/5/Box RGP/AVA n°1).

104. Minutes of the 5th management committee, KBF, 19 March 1993, p. 5 (AKBF).

105. Minutes of the 4th management committee, KBF, 23 February 1993, p. 2 (AKBF).

ple in poverty. A GRP newsletter was prepared in Dutch and French to mobilize as many people as possible and sent to all 589 local public welfare agencies in Belgium and to more than 2,000 welfare organizations and people active in the struggle against poverty¹⁰⁶. In the newsletter, the GRP was framed as an attempt by the government “to include the voice of the most closely involved”¹⁰⁷. On 28 April 1993, the GRP project was also communicated at a press conference at which the four main stakeholders (the minister, KBF, local public welfare agencies and ATD) presented themselves as a collective to the public. People in poverty were also invited directly to speak up: “We want to deliver a trustworthy document to the minister in December 1994 wherein your testimonies concerning problems related to poverty and exclusion are included, and propositions are made to protect your rights”¹⁰⁸.

A month after this public call, the KBF was receiving many phone calls, personal letters with testimonies, reports, and concrete propositions for collaboration. Welfare organizations, universities, local authorities, public and private social work organizations as well as individual citizens proposed to contribute to topics such as family, well-being and health, labor and social security, housing, and education¹⁰⁹. This overwhelming enthusiasm of civil society made ATD put on the brakes in the management committee, arguing that “the voice of people in poverty could become overshadowed”¹¹⁰. ATD feared that giving voice to people in poverty would become only a rhetorical symbol and therefore advocated that the final report would treat the knowledge of the fourth world and that of others separately. However, the representatives of the local public welfare agencies rejected this idea, as the final result had to be “the fruit of the dialogue”. Moreover,

they mentioned that some local public welfare agencies had also had “cold feet” about participating in a direct dialogue process, yet there were already some local public welfare agencies that tried to do things differently by making new connections to the lifeworld of people in poverty¹¹¹.

In sum, both the poor and the social work professionals had to break out of their comfort zone. During this phase, both groups were indeed mobilized and gathered – however, still separately – in what was considered a preparatory phase for the dialogue, allowing both groups to elaborate on their collective knowledge and experience. During the summer months of 1993, the KBF coordinators tried to integrate the many reports, recommendations, minutes of meetings, testimonies, and proposals. This resulted in an intermediate report by the end of October that expressed, so it was argued, the point of view of the different actors as well as the fundamental principles for the dialogue¹¹².

The dialogue phase

In the slipstream of these developments, a direct dialogue between people in poverty and social work and welfare agents was initiated from September 1993 until June 1994. The KBF proposed to organize four bilingual and thus simultaneously translated seminars; each seminar consisting of four parallel workgroups to facilitate thematic dialogues in the morning, followed by a plenum to make analytical connections across the workgroups and topics in the afternoon. The management committee decided that a maximum of 120 persons would be allowed for each seminar, divided equally between advocates and people in poverty from the NGOs on the one hand, and social workers and/or other relevant societal actors (such as teachers, lawyers, and civil serv-

106. Minutes of the 7th management committee, KBF, 19 May 1993, p. 2 (AKBF).

107. *Idem*, p. 1.

108. GRP newsletter, April 1993, p. 1 (AATD).

109. Minutes of the 7th management committee, KBF, 19 May 1993, p. 2 (AKBF).

110. Minutes of the 8th management committee, KBF, 21 June 1993, p. 2 (AKBF).

111. Interview with Mark Vermaerke, 16 January 2016.

112. Minutes of the 9th management committee, KBF, 2 September 1993, p. 3 (AKBF).

ants) on the other. This strict division was a precondition for enhancing the opportunity for a “real” dialogue, as ATD called it¹¹³. One ATD representative complained that not everyone seemed to believe that people in poverty had to have a voice¹¹⁴. As they encountered this disbelief, ATD and the NGOs became even more determined to prove to political and public opinion that people in poverty had a clear vision of society and that they wanted to claim their role as citizens¹¹⁵.

However, the different experiences of the first seminar, held on 27 November 1993, exposed the friction between the different actors involved in relation to how they perceived and organized the dialogue with, and participation of, people in poverty. Notably, advocates (mainly volunteers such as priests, nuns, and non-religious volunteers with professional educational backgrounds) from ATD and the other NGOs framed their role as facilitators of an educational and emancipatory process for preparing people in poverty for the dialogues with social workers of the local public welfare agencies. A fragment of a letter written by volunteers of one of the involved NGOs is, in that sense, illuminating:

“The work on the GRP has brought a great dynamic for the families. They have felt that it is possible to have a dialogue on this subject matter and that this dialogue also changes their views and ways of thinking. Furthermore, they have also experienced that this dialogue (...) is new to them and is felt as a victory for themselves”¹¹⁶.

Giving voice by the poor was apparently also an emancipatory process for the involved people

themselves. On the side of the local public welfare agencies’ social workers, the experiences reflected the complexity of the so-called “real dialogue”, as one of the workgroup facilitators that day recalled:

“The tension in my workgroup was very present as the poor were very harsh in their criticism of the local public welfare agencies. They spoke in unpolished ways, full of emotion. (...) At the time, the social workers stayed calm but once outside, there was discontent. I heard paternalistic quotes like ‘they had better be grateful for the services they get’ or ‘we know best how to handle certain problems’”¹¹⁷.

These barriers concerning the principle of giving voice were also reinforced by friction in terms of language use, and consequently resulted in disappointment on the side of both people in poverty and their allies and the social workers involved. As volunteers from one of the NGOs expressed it:

“The families were fairly disappointed, mainly felt they were purely decorative, being only spectators. Moreover, the reading of the French document was confusing and they did not recognize their own [Dutch] preparation. As a consequence, they could not follow every intervention that was made. (...) In the afternoon they eventually gave up, only one of them kept on trying to follow the translations. (...) The cause was the language, the speed and the wide range of subjects”¹¹⁸.

The NGOs also criticized the role of the workgroup facilitators, arguing that they had to guard

113. Idem.

114. Interview with Claude Mormont, 3 December 2015.

115. Interview with Ides Nicaise, 2 December 2015.

116. Letter of both Lieve De Cleen and Jan Hillaert (BMLIK) to Claude Mormont, 1 December 1993, p. 2 (AATD, 12/7/Box RGP/AVA n°14).

117. Interview with Ludo Fret (representative of POW, a pluralistic network of private social work organizations, but also facilitator of a GRP dialogue workgroup), 8 December 2015.

118. Letter from both Lieve De Cleen and Jan Hillaert (BMLIK) to Claude Mormont, 1 December 1993, p. 1 (AATD, 12/7/Box RGP/AVA n°14).

the fact that self-advocates and advocates had a maximum space to speak because “only when the facilitators principally chose the side of the poorest would those be accepted and listened to by the other stakeholders”¹¹⁹.

Taking the difficulties on both sides seriously, the GRP management committee decided to replace the three remaining whole day seminars with twenty-six thematic and monolingual workgroups (13 in Dutch and 13 in French), each of which gathered approximately three times between February and June 1994 to advance an in-depth dialogue¹²⁰. As the two KBF coordinators could not supervise this whole endeavor alone, they received help from social work professionals, experts, academics, and advocates to guide these processes and to report on the content of the workgroups¹²¹. As such, the GRP became a massive dialogical process on all aspects of the life of people in poverty, including cross-connections and debate on cross-cutting themes. This resulted in a vast collection of intermediate reports, data, and contributions for the final report.

The editorial phase

Due to the massive investment in the participatory dialogue, time was quickly running out and, indeed, only six months remained to write the overall report, as the Minister formally required the delivery of the GRP no later than 31 December 1994¹²². Delay was non-negotiable, so the KBF decided to look for ghostwriters perceived as experts on the diverse matters, who were asked to write the first drafts of the GRP chapters based on all the collected data. The KBF aimed to keep the overview. However, ATD did not agree with this line of decision, arguing that the final GRP would be overpowered by the more dominant groups

in the poverty debate, regardless their often good intentions¹²³. The representatives of the local public welfare agencies, on the contrary, did agree with the idea of having ghost writers involved, yet proposed three important conditions in order to find a consensus: they had to speak both languages, were also participants in the dialogue workgroups and had to be able to reflect on the different opinions and standpoints¹²⁴. Eventually, the cabinet also concluded that this collaboration was the best compromise and ATD’s objections were put aside.

However, ATD consulted the other NGOs and they all agreed that the other GRP partners were missing the point. Together, they wrote a protest letter, demanding that people in poverty would be involved in the writing and rereading of the final report and that every involved NGO would receive the complete drafts of the chapters of the GRP¹²⁵. Moreover, they urged that they have at least a full month to reread and comment on the chapters in their local groups with people in poverty, followed by a joint dialogue on all the comments of every partner in order to finish off the editing process all together. After extensive deliberation in the management committee on 20 May 1994, the proposal of ATD and the NGOs was accepted.

IV. Conclusion

In this article, we have scrutinized the different ways in which the idea of *giving voice to people in poverty in Belgian social policy making* materialized throughout the three-year GRP production process, asking the central question whether this effort can be seen as a window of opportunity for a political demarche. Focusing on how Belgium developed embodied anti-poverty strategies in

119. Minutes of the GRP steering group of representational NGOs, 24 September 1993, p. 2 (AATD, 12/7/Box RGP/AVA n°14).

120. Minutes of the 12th management committee, KBF, 21 January 1994, p. 2 (AKBF).

121. Minutes of the 16th management committee, KBF, 20 May 1994, pp. 2-4 (AKBF).

122. Minutes of the 14th management committee, KBF, 10 March 1994, p. 2 (AKBF).

123. Memo from Ides Nicaise to the management committee, 17 January 1994, p. 2 (AKBF).

124. Minutes of the 15th management committee, KBF, 15 April 1994, p. 3 (AKBF).

125. Letter from ATD and all the other NGOs to the GRP management committee, 11 May 1994, p. 1 (AKBF).

terms of a politics of recognition and respect, the participatory exercise during the GRP production process should be seen as a complex power struggle between non-poor allies of the poor, professional social workers, politicians and other societal stakeholders rather than as a truly political demarche of people in poverty themselves.

As a key finding, our analysis shows that this complex power struggle is an inherent and vital aspect of participatory ventures that might lead to social justice and change rather than as an indirect issue to hide or dismiss. In a sense, it might be a myth to expect that people in poverty could radically challenge and change socially unjust and often evident power relationships in societies on their own. However, our analysis is also an illustration of the vital complexity of such participatory ventures. During the GRP construction process, the emphasis on voice, participation, recognition of life knowledge and respect has led to heated discussions about the 'correct' ways in which people in poverty should participate and represent themselves, ranging from mobilization to consultation, social inclusion and confrontation.

With its plea for participation as a political demarche, ATD wanted to make the poor visible and accounted for, as well as to make society accountable for the poverty problem. As Tardieu, a prominent member of the international ATD Fourth World Movement, expressed it: "We discovered that the main thing was not to give the poor the chance to make their voice heard, but to open our own ears"¹²⁶. According to ATD, it was not a matter of empowering the poor, but of "humanizing citizens and institutions"¹²⁷. This demonstrates the underlying assumption that poverty was not seen as a problem of the poor but as a social problem that denied people in pov-

erty full citizenship. ATD argued that the struggle against poverty thus required an overall *mobilization* process wherein the poor themselves became visible and were offered the opportunity to raise their voice as equal citizens¹²⁸.

This reasoning challenged the local public welfare agencies' as well as KBF's and the government's understanding of participation as *consultation*, with its focus on the harvesting of testimonies. Within the consultative demarche, the poor were perceived as knowledgeable about their problems, but ignorant of the solutions. The local public welfare agencies and the KBF were convinced that, after the consultation, it was up to the professionals to translate the problems into solutions and policy proposals. The heated discussion about how to guarantee enough time for people in poverty in the analytical and editing phase of the GRP was emblematic. It illustrated the underlying assumption that the poor were not capable of engaging in every phase of such a long-term project as the GRP. This discussion refers to the contested idea that people in poverty not only have a voice, but also specific knowledge. Throughout the GRP production process, ATD therefore feared that the KBF, the local public welfare agencies and the government would reduce the voice of people in poverty to offering testimonies, on the suspicion that the participatory rhetoric would become tokenistic and that policy makers would use the involvement of their organization as an alibi¹²⁹.

However, ATD emphasized that giving voice was also a process of personal emancipation of people in poverty, and as such connected to an interpretation of participation as *social inclusion*. Participation as social inclusion, which would remain the dominant meaning of participation in Belgian and European policy making, opened the door to extending

126. Bruno Tardieu (ATD) quoted in KRUMER-NEVO, *Listening to life knowledge ...*, p. 99.

127. ATD Year Report 1981, p.11 (AATD).

128. KRUMER-NEVO, *Listening to life knowledge ...*, pp. 99-106.

129. See also PETER BERESFORD, "Public partnerships, governance and user involvement: a service user perspective", in *International Journal of Consumer Studies* no. 5, 2010 (34), p. 499.

the definition of participation as a right towards participation as a duty¹³⁰. This interpretation was an expression of the underlying reasoning that, unlike others, the poor fail to integrate themselves in productive ways, echoing a binary and pre-welfare state distinction between “good” and deserving versus “bad” and undeserving citizens¹³¹. Paradoxically, people in poverty were (and are) frequently granted political agency and voice as a means of subtly exercising social control¹³². In the decades after the production of the GRP, many efforts in Belgian anti-poverty policy making became “preoccupied with empowering people in poverty so that they can engage in self-advocacy and participation and claim their full citizenship”¹³³.

While revisiting the diverse interpretations of participation that emerged during the GRP production process, one could argue that participation may thus be no more than a buzzword in policy rhetoric¹³⁴. Yet, participation also entailed *confron-*

tation, as the local public welfare agencies argued during the GRP production process. Although ATD’s non-poor advocates at first openly feared this idea, by the end of the GRP production process the stakeholders embraced this understanding as it might give people in poverty more opportunities and power to speak up – to *gain voice*, as it were. It opened up a more political understanding of participation as a political demarche, as dissension and debate were appreciated in order to further the democratic process about how a socially just society might be imagined and realized. Our detailed account of the GRP production process thus reveals how the GRP stakeholders have decentered claims for both recognition and redistribution, decoupling the cultural politics of recognition from a social politics of redistribution. At the same time however they also aspired to go beyond this through aiming at a political participation of the poor, striving for and contributing to both redistribution and recognition¹³⁵.

List of abbreviations

AATD: Archives ATD Fourth World Belgium
 AKBf: Archives King Baudouin Foundation
 ATD: ATD Fourth World
 GRP: The General Report on Poverty
 IDWG: Interdepartmental Working Group to protect the subsistence security of the most deprived
 KBF: The King Baudouin Foundation
 UN: United Nations
 UNDHR: United Nations Declaration of Human Rights

List of representatives of GRP stakeholders

ATD Fourth World: Jean Tonglet, Claude Mormont, Ides Nicaise, Herman Van Breen
 BMLIK: Jan Vanhee, Rudy De Cock
 Belgian Government: Miet Smet, Michel Van Holder, Laurette Onkelinx, Jean-Marie Berger, Jean Cornil, Jacques Santkin
 King Baudouin Foundation: Michel Didisheim, Jacques Debulpaep, Frieda Lampaert, Pierre Martin Neirinckx

130. ERIC MARLIER AND DAVID NATALI, *Europe 2020: Towards a More Social EU?*, Brussel, 2010; HILLARY SILVER AND STEPHEN MIKE MILLER, “Social Exclusion. The European Approach to Social Disadvantage”, in *Indicators*, Spring 2003.

131. On the re-emergence of this binary between the good and bad poor, the deserving and undeserving, see e.g. KASPAR VILLADSEN, “The emergence of ‘Neo Philanthropy’. A new discursive space in welfare policy?”, in *Acta Sociologica*, no. 3, 2007 (50), pp. 309-323.

132. ANDREA CORNWALL AND KAREN BROCK, “What do buzzwords do for development policy? A critical look at participation, empowerment and poverty reduction,” *Third World Quarterly* 26, 2005, pp. 1043-1060.

133. ROETS AND ROOSE, *Theorizing underlying notions of citizenship ...*, p. 185.

134. KATRIEN BOONE, GRIET ROETS, AND RUDI ROOSE, “Social Work, Poverty, and Anti-poverty Strategies: Creating Cultural Forums”, in *British Journal of Social Work*, Vol 48, Issue 8, December 2018, pp. 2382–2383.

135. FRASER, *From redistribution to recognition...*; FRASER, *Reframing justice in a globalizing world...*

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