

MORE THAN HAVING A VOICE: INFLUENCING POLICY IN POLAND

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How often do we hear policy makers and academics say, “*We need to listen to people in poverty*”? A lot of well-intentioned lip service is given to this idea. Sometimes people in poverty are actually invited to speak to lawmakers or academics. But this nod in their direction can sometimes end up being more for show than because others believe that they can genuinely provide helpful ideas.

However, in Poland, Ireland, and Spain, public officials are determined to go beyond superficiality or tokenism, in order to consult seriously with people in poverty. ATD Fourth World’s **Our Voices** project, funded by the European Commission, brings people experiencing poverty and social exclusion together with public officials and academics in order to establish in-depth dialogue. From January 2016 to June 2017, diverse groups are

meeting to discuss issues related to extreme poverty, to find common ground, and to develop recommendations for positive change in selected areas of public policy.

In Poland, the **Our Voices** project had its first meeting in Warsaw on 20 February 2016. As with all ATD's efforts, the first to speak in the meeting were people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Nine people from Kielce and Warsaw came together to discuss issues related to extreme poverty and to prepare for further discussions with public officials.

"We began work in two groups," said Jan Świątek, one of the ATD Volunteers facilitating the project. "One was made up of those who had come from Kielce. The other group was made up of participants from Warsaw. In these groups, we took the time to think about what often makes the participants feel bad or uncomfortable. The group from Kielce mainly pointed to a lack of basic resources and problems with contacting public institutions. The Warsaw group indicated a fear of losing stability and experiencing discrimination or a lack of tolerance in contacts with other people."

The two groups then met together to share ideas and choose one specific theme to discuss at future meetings. After a lively exchange, the group decided on this subject: Finding a balance between citizens and institutions represented by officials in order to guarantee basic rights and life without fear. At the next meeting, the group will address this topic further with public officials and others in order to refine questions for future discussion and research.

An additional element of **Our Voices** will enable project participants to get to know key European documents such as the European Social Charter and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. ATD Poland, ATD Ireland, ATD Spain, and Asociacion Andecha are responsible for implementing the project in their respective countries.

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