

The framework for representation of Socially Excluded Groups

A positive climate of change

The present government is to be congratulated in its efforts to put into place policies to underpin social inclusion. In the near future, there will be an explosion of opportunities for socially excluded groups to participate in policy and decision-making structures. We need to address emergent problems now so that these groups can reap the full benefit of the opportunities.

A framework to enable the representation of socially excluded groups

The demand for representatives to come forward to take the first seats on significant committees and task forces have already begun. At the same time, the effect of a missing framework that will enable such representatives to play a full role is already obvious.

The characteristics of socially excluded groups

- Socially excluded groups are as a whole by their nature not organised.
- The organisations which aim to represent their issues and interests have been 'unfashionable' causes, chronically under-funded, overworked, under-staffed, and under-resourced.
- The organisations which represent socially excluded groups are in constant touch with their clientele, have developed long term working relationships and are trusted. They are aware of current issues and opportunities for development.
- The organisations which represent socially excluded groups are however mostly outstanding. If they were not, they would not have survived. The individuals heading them and their staff are in the main highly motivated, idealistic, talented, and visionary.
- The organisations which represent socially excluded groups are strategically small, and very focused in their aims and their delivery usually stretches their staff to their limits.
- Many socially excluded groups are minorities. The organisations which represent them are in even smaller numbers.

Issues arise out of the characteristics of organisations representing socially excluded groups

- They are the key, the essential partners, to developments regarding socially excluded groups.
- They have particular developmental needs to begin to play an extensively resourced role re socially excluded groups because they are modelled in the survival mode.
- They are so small and tightly staffed that to remove any member of staff consistently, say two to three days a month, has implications on the delivery of their normal programme of work.
- The arrival among social groups who are used to participating in power structures is intimidating, and involves a huge cultural learning curve. The experience of being newly included is one of social exclusion.
- The small numbers of organisations are asked over and over again to spread themselves across an overwhelming number of demands for their input.

The characteristics of the present unsatisfactory framework for representation of socially excluded groups

Persons are invited with the status of individuals onto committees and task forces. There is a denial of the fact that they have been invited because of their work within their associated organisations. Positioned within these organisations, they are able to draw on their structures and their contacts with socially excluded groups. There are constant requests to input views which depend on consultation with socially excluded groups. The associated organisations are expected to assist in the identification of participants for consultation exercises. These are demanded with breakneck deadlines, a scenario within which an organisation is expected to drop everything it is doing in order to deliver. Of course, organisations representing socially excluded groups are held to ransom. Have they not worked for long years hoping to arrive at the corridors of power and influence? Are they going to give up these invitations to play a role to change the lives of their client groups for the better? Of course, under such

circumstances, there is initially a huge effort made to accommodate but as the longer term effects set in, individuals and organisations cannot cope with the consequences of overload. They are destined to drop away.

A call to address an enabling framework for the representation of socially excluded groups

This paper is a call to address the resourcing of individuals and organisations to represent socially excluded groups.

The essential elements are:

- Beyond bare expenses, to move towards resourcing which covers the value of the work delivered by individuals and organisations representing socially excluded groups in policy and decision-making structures.
- The development of support and mentoring systems to bring forward the nurturing of individuals and organisations representing socially excluded groups in policy and decision-making structures.

There is a resistance against recognising the above facts. Individuals are offered mere expenses of travel and subsistence and nothing else. Under-resourced organisations are constantly picking up the bill for the well-resourced institutions of power. Without considering supportive framework to enable and maintain participation in representation of socially excluded groups, the explosion we expect in the near future in the demand for representation is destined to fail. For a relatively small investment, a huge prize for social inclusion is waiting to be won.

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