

## Account of the European People's Fourth World University of 05/12/09 in Pierrelaye

During 2008 – 2009, the 14 Fourth World People's Universities in Europe worked on themes linked to the rights of the child. To give weight to individuals' work in this the 20th anniversary of the international Convention on the Rights of the Child, a European People's University took place in Pierrelaye on 5th December, having as its theme:

### 'Who and what does a child need to grow?'



This Fourth World People's University gathered delegates from Belgium, Great Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, France as well as Bolivia and Burkina Faso and representatives of European authorities.

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Delegates: Mrs *Verena Taylor*, Head of the Social Policies Service at the Council of Europe; Mrs *Jana Hainsworth*, General Secretary of the European organisation Eurochild; Mrs *Anna Egorova*, representative of 'The Russian Union of social workers'; Mrs *Martine Brousse*, Director of La Voix de L'Enfant (The child's voice) and vice president of The French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights; and Mr *Richard K Yameogo*, District Inspector at Meguet in Burkina Faso.

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## 1 The workshops to exchange contributions prepared by the different delegations on:

### Living conditions

- ✓ We are worried about families being evicted (from their home) or deported (out of the country). We read in the press this week that many families have been evicted: 60 families per day in Flanders (Belgium) alone for financial reasons. The majority of the debts arise from energy bills.
- ✓ Some have to leave school early because they have to help at home (Netherlands).



- ✓ What is unbearable, is being humiliated or feeling humiliated, judged when you're trying to get somewhere to live (to find housing), resources, some help or a right (Champagne-Ardenne – France and Belgium).
- ✓ What is important, is daring to disagree with someone who has power over you, like in school for example and daring to accept that we have to ask again ourselves to seek support. Each time it's a gamble. (Switzerland).

### Education and School

- ✓ One of my sons left primary school without being able to read or write. He found himself outside of the school system for 18 months. Nobody at the Ministry of Education was worried about it. I didn't know what to do or who to turn to. In Dublin (Ireland), lots of children from poor communities and especially Travellers don't learn at school and leave it very young. Who defends their rights?
- ✓ When a situation isn't legal, you have to fight; we took our son to see professionals, sought support from an association, we sent letters to the Education Managers, to the school, and we finally got a meeting between everyone so that my son could get support. (Great Britain).





- ✓ They didn't listen to me at the school when I said my son was hyperactive. You have to find solutions together (Champagne-Ardenne, France).
- ✓ One child exposed an injustice done to a friend who wasn't allowed to eat in the canteen anymore because of a missing document. His mum rallied with other parents. (Alsace, France).

## Education and the Right to live in a family

- ✓ A child grows up with what the parents demonstrate. It's the parents' courage which helps them to grow up. Courage is inherited from the parents. (Burkina Faso).
- ✓ It's a child's right that their parents are spoken about respectfully (Rhône-Alpes, France).
- ✓ It took 2 years and 3 suicide attempts for one young girl to be heard by a Juvenile Court in the presence of her mother. The length of support from a professional is important in helping a family to bring up children, as well as the solidarity of the neighbourhood. (Ile de France, France).
- ✓ It's harsh being considered incapable of bringing up your children (Switzerland).



- ✓ Of the 15 years living with my partner, 10 were spent on the streets. The day we found ourselves on the street, I was terrified because we were separated, him to a hostel for men, me and the 3 children to another hostel. An exceptional social worker helped me and my partner, although it wasn't in their job description. (Ireland).
- ✓ Life on the streets continues to separate lots of families. It's scandalous. (Great Britain).

- ✓ In Luxemburg, children are put into care abroad, even as far as Portugal. The children don't speak their mother tongue anymore. The parents have a right to visit once a year.
- ✓ In Great Britain, social services tend to favour adoption because this way the child is no longer a cost to society as he or she would be if he or she were put into care.

✓ A professional said to the parents in front of the child: 'Your daughter is uncontrollable; she's a bomb waiting to go off. She is anti-social. She should be in a psychiatric hospital'. A child's right is to hear adults, professionals or parents apologise to them and ask forgiveness if they have hurt them. (Rhône Alps, France).

✓ A social worker shouldn't criticise parents in front of their children. (Alsace, France).

✓ We don't want our children brought up like we were, we want them to dare to express themselves. Children can teach us. Just because you're a mum, doesn't mean you're always right. (Bolivia).

✓ In Bolivia, women need to be aware that they can change, that they can react when faced with violent situations; to do that, they need to be trained, know their rights to dare to talk out.

✓ Mrs B lives in 2 rooms at her mother's; her 5 children are in care. She would like to get them back. She is taking steps to find housing and a job. But she is only being offered a small apartment in a residence (Social Housing). Thanks to her mother's support, group access to the law thanks to ATD Fourth World, doors are opening for her (Grand-Ouest, France).



✓ You don't know what to do when you get children back, out of care; they go into care as babies, and come out as teenagers (Normandy, France).

✓ What courage parents must need to go and find and bring their children home when they've been in care! (Switzerland).



## 2 Proposals for a school which excludes no child:



**Example given by the Netherlands:** at primary school, in the playground, a child finds herself alone and rejected by the other children. Her behaviour changes. Her school marks drop. Her mum worries about it and meets the teacher several times but nothing changes.

### What could professionals do so that this situation changes?

- ✓ Go and watch what happens in the playground and encourage the children to play together using co-operative games.
- ✓ Take time to listen to the child and their parents; believe in them .
- ✓ Put in place an observation plan and creative actions and evaluate them with the children; for example suggest the children write a poem to express their feelings.
- ✓ Allow parents and teachers time to get to know each other better, not simply time to deal with a problem. Work together with respect and without blame.
- ✓ It's important that professionals are taught to be attentive to children, to what goes on between them, to spot difficulties and harassment, that they are sensitive to the difference and that they are taught to act by empowering all these differences.



### What could parents do so that this situation changes?

- ✓ Teach their children the difference, take time to listen to them.
- ✓ Dare to talk to the teacher, alone or accompanied, to reflect together on why their child's behaviour has changed. Look for solutions together, and suggest ideas to them, for example:
  - ✓ Work on respect and tolerance with the class.
  - ✓ Initiate a debate on difference using a book based on an excluded animal.
  - ✓ Couldn't there be one or two children who could be their friend?
  - ✓ At parents evening talk about the isolation of certain children.

*VERENA TAYLOR* puts emphasis on parent child contact before a problem arises and we share her disappointment in relation to teacher training in France.

*BRIGITTE JABOURECK* : All adults, professionals as well as parents, have an essential responsibility vis a vis children, that of teaching them values: respect, justice and solidarity.

*JANA HAINSWORTH* : What is important is respecting and giving value to a child's viewpoint, give them the power to act, so that they can influence their own future and improve their situation. The child itself has part of the solution in them if we listen to them. I think it is very important to emphasise the child's own experience.

After all the family's fighting for their child, the parents changed school. The new school has an empowering teaching style and the child had found it's place.

*JEAN-MARIE ANGLADE* : The child is now in another school and everything is going well. It's a great victory for the family but a defeat for our society: to think that a child that is being made fun of has to leave his school to regain his honour, it's a great defeat for all of us.

*BRUNO TARDIEU* : This morning, in my group, we talked about children's courage, in particular about a child who has denounced a situation as unfair. How do we bring up our children to take on responsibility learning that bullying a child is very serious. That a child has to leave a school to regain it's honour is very serious. We have to have confidence in children to learn themselves, to respect the rights of children.

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### 3 Proposals for guaranteeing the fundamental rights to enable living as a family:



**Example from Belgium:** a family unable to pay their rent is frightened, leaves their accommodation and loses their rights one after another until their children are put into care. With the support of their friends, the family sorts out some accommodation and their benefits but doesn't get back the right to live as a family, their children are still in care.

## What can parents do to change this situation?

- ✓ Take a friend with you and dare to go and see the landlord, ask him about spreading the rent and the possibility of staying in the accommodation.
- ✓ Meet up with other parents to share experiences, to find solutions together, to be understood, to demand the right to live as a family and have a suitable home.
- ✓ Get an independent opinion through an organisation, association or find a professional.
- ✓ Contact the press to denounce the fact that children can no longer live with their parents because they have lost their home.
- ✓ Don't be alone! Join an association.

## What could the professionals do to change the situation?

- ✓ Professionals should accompany the family from the start, respecting article 9 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child to keep the family together.
- ✓ Change the law so that families without accommodation continue to get benefits and keep their rights.
- ✓ There should be more Emergency Accommodation Centres for the whole family.
- ✓ All professionals should work together with the parents to support all members of the family in its entirety.
- ✓ Being housed by social services/friends shouldn't create problems for people.

**PASCAL PERCQ** : As a journalist, I know that resorting to the press can be useful but is not without its dangers. The media love a sob story but does it really change anything? The press can be a tool but don't go on your own. You have to learn to work with the press. After the report you'll be on your own again dealing with the usual representatives.

**MARTINE BROUSSE** : I want to make a commitment in front of you and relate it to you. I am, myself, going to refer the question of removing children from families because of a loss of housing, to the National Commission on Human Rights, of which I am the Vice President. The Commission also exists in Belgium, Norway and elsewhere. I will submit to them a draft of our discussions.



**BRIGITTE JABOURECK** : There are families who lose their homes but also those that don't have access to housing, so they can't lose their home and it's this displacement that they sometimes live for several years, which destroys family life.



**VERENA TAYLOR** : All the European countries represented here by you, have ratified the European Social Charter of which article 32 stipulates the right to housing for all citizens. Your governments have made a commitment. If the Commission on Human Rights takes responsibility for this question, there is already a legal basis.

**RÉGIS DE MUYLDER** : Belgium hasn't ratified article 32 but it's in article 23 of its constitution. I would like to go back to the example, because it's one of the characteristics of extreme poverty that can be seen in Belgium. Why did this family leave their home? The trigger for this was this fear that it could mean that their children would be put into care. To avoid this, they do things which backfire on them and put them in danger.

**BRIGITTE JABOURECK** : Being together at the People's University should help us to confront our fears. We know that alone we can't beat them because it's our own childhood that has given us these fears.

**ANA EGOROVA** : It is important that we have the same standards for all where social services for people in difficulty are concerned. These standards should assure a response to the needs of these people.

**MARIE-CÉCILE RENOUX** : The European Convention on Human Rights is a tool for use in respecting rights and as a judge said: a tool only wears out when it is not used.

**JANA HAINSWORTH** : The year 2010 is very important in Europe, it's the European year against poverty and social exclusion. It's the time to get out there and change things.

Further to what I've heard here, I would like to say that the happiness of children is living with love and the support of their parents, in a family; emotional support, social, cultural, and families should be supported to do all that, not just through material support.



**Mr. RICHARD K. YAMÉOGO** : We have learnt a lot. A proverb where I'm from: 'Alone you can go fast, but with someone you can go further'. An eminent person from Burkina Faso once said 'School should be a matter for the whole village, and vice versa'. The school and the village should act together so that all the children enjoy their rights.

**THE DELEGATES FROM BOLIVIA AND BURKINA FASO** were disturbed at hearing about the system of separation of children from their parents in Europe, which they don't know in their countries.

**CLAUDIO MAMANI FLORES** : That shouldn't exist, it's unbelievable. It should be denounced at an international level, we should all have the right to live as a family. I find it horrible that the parents are separated from their children for such a long time. Thankfully this law doesn't exist in Bolivia.

And the Bolivian delegates offered the People's Universities a superb embroidered drape to spur on and give hope to everyone.



**EUGEN BRAND**, Director General of the ATD Fourth World Movement, gathered the delegation which was leaving that evening for the international meeting in Geneva. He closed with these words: ' In your name and with everything you have reflected on this year, this delegation, enriched by all the contributions from today, will have a dialogue with Mrs Kyung-wa Kang, Deputy High Commissioner of Human Rights at the UN, and also with members of your governments at an international level'.