

USER INVOLVEMENT IN POVERTY POLICY STRUCTURES. AN APPROACH TO GIVE A VOICE TO PEOPLE LIVING IN POVERTY, TO ACHIEVE EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS AND TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL COHESION

Emanuela Chiapparini <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1796-088X>

Dr. Sci. (paed.), Head of the Institute of Childhood, Youth and Family, School of Social Work, Berne University of Applied Sciences, Bern, Switzerland.

Email: emanuela.chiapparini@bfh.ch

Abstract: Solidarity and social inclusion, which are often used as synonyms in professional discourse on social work, are understood to date with too little focus on the structural level in politics, economics and social services. Furthermore, in the implementation of projects to promote social cohesion, marginalized groups such as people affected by poverty have so far been insufficiently involved in identifying commonalities between groups of people and in joint activities. Therefore, following the user involvement approach and on a structural level, I argue that political, economic and social conditions as well commitment must be in place. In the case of people affected by poverty, who are a very heterogeneous group, at least in Switzerland, mechanisms are needed to enable these groups to identify and voice their concerns and bring them to the attention of the appropriate political, economic or social decision-makers in a targeted manner. Using two research-based projects from poverty policy in Switzerland, I follow to answer the research question: How can people affected by poverty be given a voice in the structures and decision-making processes of poverty policy? The theoretical framework is based on the user involvement approach. Using participative, qualitative and quantitative research methods I answer the question with the potential impact, challenges and conditions of an implementable platform and training courses for professionals from politics, economics and social services, as well as for people affected by poverty. This differentiated knowledge of people affected by poverty and the fulfillment of the requirements of all those involved, a structure of exchange supported by social policy and led by external professionals, willingness to learn and work together, clear communication, or reimbursement of travel expenses, are necessary to strive for a truly sustainable and inclusive society, rather than one that merely appears to be so. However, it should be noted that potential impact has been identified and that further long-term impact and international comparative analyses are necessary to gain comprehensive knowledge.

Keywords: *User involvement, poverty, politics, effective solutions, economy of social services, innovative projects, participative, qualitative, and quantitative research.*



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Received: 25.01.2025

Revised: 22.02.2025

Accepted: 02.04.2025

© The Author(s) 2025

Introduction

Solidarity is often understood in professionals' discourse of social work as closely linked to the promotion of social cohesion (Dierckx et al., 2024, Hill et al., 2024). In addition to this, Tuğba Sevinç (2019) introduces the concept of social unity. In doing so, she focuses not only on "what members might already share in common, but also on what they do together in society." (ibid., p. 460).

Furthermore, in the implementation of projects to promote social cohesion, marginalized groups such as people affected by poverty have so far been insufficiently involved in identifying commonalities between groups of people and in joint activities.¹

Further, these mentioned approaches focus heavily on the civilian population and strengthening the individual. However, political, economic and social conditions determined possibilities for shaping solidarity and the achievement of social cohesion.

Therefore, following the user involvement approach and on a structural level, I advocate that the political, economic and social conditions and commitment must be in place to achieve social cohesion. In the following article, I explore the question:

How can people affected by poverty be given a voice in the structures and decision-making processes of poverty policy?

The theoretical framework is based on the user involvement approach. Using participative, qualitative and quantitative research methods I answer the question with the potential impact, challenges and conditions of an implementable platforms and training courses for professionals from politics, economics and social services, as well as for people affected by poverty.

The User Involvement Approach

The "user involvement" approach (Beresford & Carr, 2016: 4) is a theoretical orientation for participation processes. It is well established in practice and research as well as in training projects in social work and health care in Switzerland and internationally (Beresford, Branfield, 2006). Authors referring to the "user involvement" approach all give weight to theoretical concepts such as empowerment (Herriger, 2014), participation (e.g. Zask, 2011, Chiapparini, Eicher, 2019), co-design (Thallmaier, 2014) or the capability approach (Sen, 2000), although with certain differences. A clear definition of the "user involvement" approach is hindered by the fact that clarification as to whether it is a theoretical approach, a method or a goal, is still pending in the professional discourse. The voice of those affected and their view on social issues moves to center stage, with parallels to social movements (Kern, 2008, Herriger, 2014). The user involvement approach can be defined by five central aspects (Schön, 2016, Chiapparini, 2016, McLaughlin, 2009) which interact with each other to varying degrees:

- understanding a case in a more differentiated way
- valorization of the reflected experiential knowledge of the person concerned
- focus on the cooperation between addressees and professionals

¹ e.g. in citizen science projects ([Citizen-Science-Projekte - Schweiz forscht](#)) or in digitization and the resulting digital divide (Chiapparini et al, 2023)

- reducing the power imbalance between the two groups of people
- developing longer-term projects

Innovation in project development is only possible through the participation of those affected. To summarize, it can be said that "user involvement" revolves around the cooperation of the people concerned (i.e., using a service, a tool, a space) and the professionals (from different disciplines). In addition, the shift of power relations between the two groups of people (professionals and users with experiential knowledge) is a central aspect of the "user involvement" approach. Additionally, the strengthening of resources is important in the "user involvement" approach, as it is also emphasized in the capability approach (Sen, 2000) or regarding empowerment (Herriger, 2014). The "user involvement" approach, however, goes a step further: it emphasizes the close connection of resource strengthening with structural change, such as the possibility of participation in the processes and measures of social institutions or universities, as well as the training of professionals in the social, health and political sectors as framework conditions. Strengthening individual and community resources is central and, based on the numerous theoretical points linked to social movements (Kern, 2008), recognizes the actor-centered view of civil society as being of particular importance. Finally, theoretical and conceptual foundations of participation flow with varying intensity into all the approaches mentioned. A special feature of the "user involvement" approach is that both the framework conditions and the forms of participation and involvement are relevant.

So, the "user involvement" approach (Beresford, Carr, 2016) as well as the Poverty-Aware Paradigm (Bray et al., 2019) assume both that people in poverty must be supported in fighting their unjust living conditions by developing their ability to exercise their rights (Chiapparini, 2016). At the same time, private and public support services must recognize their needs and make support accessible (Bray et al., 2019, Chiapparini, 2016, Chiapparini et al., 2020) so that people in poverty can be reached and supported effectively and their health does not deteriorate so drastically. The poverty-aware paradigm and user involvement approach include both participative methods, to refer to both the individual and structural levels in projects, and thus to the empowerment of the people in poverty and the social mission of those working with them from private and public institutions and stake holder in poverty policy. The latter includes political, economic and social decision-makers.

Poverty and the experiential and professional knowledge in poverty policy in Switzerland

International poverty analyses indicate that the combination of financial, material, health-related, cultural, social and participatory elements influence the experience of poverty on individual, community, institutional and state levels (Bray et al., 2019, Chiapparini et al., 2020). There are almost no stakeholder organizations or lobbying activities for people in poverty (ibid.). The topic is considered a taboo in Switzerland and the heterogeneous nature of people in poverty makes it difficult to identify them statistically as a group (ibid.). These characteristics of poverty in combination with different life situations and personal or financial resources lead to varying consequences of poverty, which must be considered when addressing poverty. Basic typologies of people living in poverty include 1. young adults with no career prospects,

2. single parents, 3. migrant families in the low-wage sector, 4. unemployed people over 50, 5. self-employed people (Federal Statistical Office, 2023). Health impairment and lack of social contact increase the complexity of identifying and collecting data on people in poverty, making it more difficult to reach them with information and support services. They are often socially excluded, have reduced self-efficacy or an increased sense of shame (Chiapparini et al., 2020) and are deprived of the ability to lead the lives they want (cf. Amartya Sen's capability approach (Sen, 2000)).

It is undisputed in professional discourse that people experiencing poverty and the user organizations with an advocacy mandate should be involved as a collective. In particular, the user organizations play a central role, as they represent the interests and concerns of people experiencing poverty and support as well as promote people experiencing poverty in participation processes. Compared to Germany and Northern European countries, Switzerland has a high percentage of people living in poverty and it is a large population group in Switzerland in terms of numbers: 745,000 people affected by poverty (Federal Statistical Office, 2024a) and 1,244,112 people at risk of poverty (Federal Statistical Office, 2024b).

State of research based on the user involvement approach

The international findings on the positive impact of projects based on user involvement focus on evidence of good practice, i.e. that it works, rather than on rigorous empirical testing. The few studies that have been conducted suggest that the involvement of experiential knowledge of users of social services optimizes the collaboration between professionals (front line workers and managers) and people living in poverty and increases access to social benefits (De Corte, Kerstenne, 2015, Boxall, 2012).

In Switzerland, user organizations promote peer networking for people living in poverty (e.g., Planet 13, ATD, Surprise or Caritas), and several research projects on processes and measures of poverty policy (structural political level) are being conducted, drawing on the experiential knowledge of people affected by poverty, e.g., mandated by the National Platform for Preventing and Combating Poverty².

Evaluations of previous implementations and forms of participation commissioned by the National Platform for Preventing and Combating Poverty (2019-2024) (Stern, 2024) have shown that although there are projects and initiatives in Switzerland that promote the participation of people affected poverty in poverty policy, these are primarily one-off individual projects (Müller, Chiapparini, 2021). Through permanent participation structures and training for people involved, however, the positive effects of participation of people affected poverty in social policy can also be realized in the long term. This includes the improvement of processes and structures in organizations, more targeted measures and interventions or better cooperation between professionals and people affected by poverty. It is therefore necessary and sensible for Switzerland to establish a permanent structure of participation and training for those involved in the near future, also in view of the proven and positive developments of permanent participation structures in other countries.

Permanent shareholding structures and training developed in different European countries and Canada. They have different names and are organized in different ways.

² National Platform for Preventing and Combating Poverty <https://www.gegenarmut.ch/beteiligung>.

Further, previous projects involving user involvement have shown that it is not enough for all participants to be familiar with these approaches to achieve genuine participation rather than pseudo-participation. Rather, it is important to apply the principles of the user involvement approach in specific projects and to work together with people affected by poverty (experts with advanced knowledge based on their experience of poverty) and professionals from social services, politics and business (professional knowledge) on a specific project, to reflect on one's own actions and to facilitate learning processes for all participants.

Methodology

To answer the research question *How can people affected by poverty be given a voice in the structures and decision-making processes of poverty policy, based on the user involvement approach?* I include results from two project, because they both relate to the user involvement approach at a structural level and the processes have already been evaluated:

a) The research-based development and concept of the implementable platforms on the national level of poverty policy: **Council for Poverty Issues in Switzerland** (Chiapparini et al., 2025):

An interdisciplinary team from the Department of Social Work at the Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH) and the University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland Fribourg (HESSO/FR) was commissioned by the National Platform for Preventing and Combating Poverty to develop a concept for establishing a permanent participation structure for people experiencing poverty and their organizations in Switzerland, with the involvement of the relevant stakeholders.

b) The evaluation of the **training** on cantonal and regional level of poverty policy: **Think tank for the sharing of experiential and professional knowledge and developing innovative projects** (Chiapparini, Bitsch, 2024):

The training sessions for involved people in the project were based on the user involvement approach and were developed by a team from the Department of Social Work at the Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH).

Both projects were financially supported by the National Platform for Preventing and Combating Poverty, and the training was financially supported by the Canton of Glarus and the Glarus Social Fund during its second implementation.

Both projects follow the same methodological approach of three steps:

1) *Internet and literature research and use of prior knowledge:*

Identifying and analyzing existing permanent participation structures and trainings in other countries: As a first step, the research team drew on its own existing expertise and international networks and systematically various examples of functioning, sustainability-based participation structures in an international context on the internet and in literature databases based on specific criteria. In addition, specialized and research-based literature on the topic of participation processes and their potential impact in poverty policy was included. Six condensed and empirically substantiated basic elements (e.g. objectives, members or addressees) emerged from the subsequently analyzed data material, which was used as orientation for the next step.

2) *Participatory development process for the proposal*

People affected by poverty and relevant organizations as well as, in an advisory capacity, professionals from various poverty-related areas of administration and social work were involved in the participatory process.

Specifically for the Council for Poverty Issues in Switzerland (a), this meant the following: The basic elements were developed in a multi-stage participatory development process with people experienced in poverty and professionals from various poverty related areas of administration and social work.

The participation process comprised various working formats: a kick-off event, two consecutive workshops, an information event for specialists and four half-day sessions with a feedback group consisting of people affected by poverty. The feedback group advised the research team on the implementation of the participation process and in the writing of the final report. In total, around 50 people affected by poverty from French- and German-speaking Switzerland took part in the participation process and around 15 professionals participated in an advisory capacity. This number of participants meant that over 50 organizations, NGOs and cantonal or national administrations were involved in the development process.

The individual events were organized in a variety of ways: smaller and larger group work (groups of three to ten), working in plenary, discussing and recording the advantages and disadvantages of an aspect or weighting positions by giving points, as well as adopting decisions with a veto right (with consent procedure).³ Consent describes a group format for decision-making. In contrast to consensus procedure, it is also possible to allow contradictions to remain in the process and decisions can still be made. This happens as soon as there are no more serious and justified objections (Grüttler, Bruse, 2022).

The process designed in this way enabled the people experiencing poverty to position themselves collectively, considering the feedback from the professionals mentioned above, on the most important basic elements of a permanent participation structure in Switzerland.

3) Development of a well-founded and realizable proposal

Based on the preliminary work in step one and two, the research team drafted a concrete proposal for a permanent participation structure: the "Council for Poverty Issues in Switzerland" (a).

The Council consists of decision-making members (people affected by poverty), advisory members (experienced and well-connected professionals in poverty policy) and a permanent secretariat comprising methodological, strategic and administrative support staff (people affected by poverty and professionals in poverty policy and academia).

The Council maintains regular contact with 1. Decision-makers in politics, administration and civil society at national, cantonal and municipal level, 2. People experiencing poverty and organizations representing those affected, 3. Professionals in poverty policy, the public, the media and other individuals from politics, administration, social work, business and academia and meets once a month.

³ The methods are documented in more detail in the respective programmes in the appendix, as well as in the sub-chapters "Brief information on the implementation of the methodological approach of the workshops" (see Sections 7.2, 8.2, 9.2, 10.2, 11.2 and 12.2 in: Chiapparini et. al., 2025).

At the beginning of the writing process, the idea behind the proposal and the table of contents were discussed with the feedback group consisting of seven people affected by poverty. In addition, the final product and specific questions about it were discussed with the feedback group in an additional meeting.

The think tank and project development (b) are based on proven teaching units at Lund University, each lasting one semester (Kristiansen, Heule, 2016). These fundamentals have been condensed into six course units (including a public evening event) lasting three hours each.

The different work steps and contents of the think tank and training were continuously evaluated with the participants and within the project team in the form of a reflective assessment (Chiapparini, Bitsch, 2024). The evaluations focused primarily on the participants' insights and were collected and recorded through open dialogue and an open-ended written questionnaire. At the end of the project, comprehensive written, graphical (a cross can be placed in a graph on a specific topic) and anonymized feedback was obtained from the participants. The entire evaluation results were evaluated and analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, Rädiker, 2022) and summarized in evaluation results.

Results

In the following chapter, I present the findings from both studies, which include the potential effects, challenges and conditions of the implementable Council for Poverty Issues in Switzerland (cf. 6.1.) and the training in and developing of projects for professionals from politics, economics and social services, as well as for people affected by poverty (cf. 6.2).

Positive impacts and conditions for the Council for Poverty Issues in Switzerland

The positive potential impact of the council can be summarized for three target groups:

1) for professional organizations, administrations and politics:

- direct access to knowledge, experiences and perspectives of people affected by poverty and increased awareness of the issue of poverty

- mutual understanding and clarification of misunderstandings between those affected professional stakeholders involved in poverty prevention and reduction

- visualizing blind spots among professionals from politics, social work and business

- improved cooperation and communication between people affected by poverty and the respective players.

2) for people affected by poverty:

- access to information and acquisition of knowledge

- building and utilizing skills

- experiencing appreciation, understanding and belonging

- taking responsibility and utilizing room for maneuver

- strengthening self-esteem and self-efficacy (empowerment)

- improvement of social integration

- better understanding of the options for action available to professionals in politics, social work and business.

3) for society:

- improved effectiveness in poverty reduction and prevention
- dismantling prejudices
- strengthening social cohesion.

Further, the council can achieve the following positive effects in a distinctive manner:

- processing of **collectively formulated statements** by people affected by poverty themselves.
- **empowering and strengthening the participation skills and interdisciplinary competencies** of both, people who have experience of poverty as well as professionals from politics, social work and business.
- **cooperating** among people affected by poverty, professionals and other stakeholders in poverty policy is strengthened.
- This in turn has a positive effect on the **legitimacy of the position statements** of people affected by poverty, because the issues addressed correspond to the interests of a broad group. Bringing together different interest groups in poverty policy also strengthens the representativeness of and identification with the position statements and thus enables mobilization for the call to implement them.
- **developing more effective solutions** that bring economic benefits (e.g., solutions that enable people affected by poverty to be weaned off welfare more effectively).
- promote the **recognition of poverty as a structural and social challenge** (and not as individual guilt).

At the end of the project, we found positive effects for the further development and implementation of the council. The participants in the developing process made themselves available to serve on the core group of the council (which includes both people affected by poverty and professionals from politics, business and social work). In addition, the Federal Council's review of the proposal and the associated media work and academic publications made it possible to raise public awareness of the issue and the council's proposal. This was met with positive interest.

The challenges facing the implementation of a council can be met by ensuring that the necessary conditions for a council are fulfilled. I will therefore discuss these conditions below.

A key finding of the analysis and a key condition is that six dimensions need to be defined in order to successfully implement a permanent structure. These dimensions can be formulated as questions and, where possible, should be answered together with the people affected by poverty and professionals.

The analysis crystallized six main questions that arise in connection with the implementation of a permanent participation structure:

1. What is the aim of a permanent participation structure? (aim)
2. Who participates in the permanent participation structure? (members)
3. Who does the work of the permanent participation structure address? (addressees)

4. How does a permanent participation structure work? (functionality)
5. What resources are needed for a permanent participation structure? (resources)
6. Who finances the permanent participation structure? (financing)

I will formulate the most important findings along these six dimensions below.

1. Aim:

The participatory process used made it possible to set clear and explicit goals that were confirmed by all participants. This added value achieved through participatory processes emphasizes the strong will of people affected by poverty to engage proactively to be heard by policy makers. They clearly want to go beyond a purely consultative approach (consultation). In our opinion, the objectives defined in the participation process seem to correspond to the findings from the literature review in which the two main objectives identified are addressed (1. assessing the business of poverty policy and 2. dialogue among all players involved in poverty policy). In addition, the people affected by poverty clarified the mandate as far as possible (avoiding ambiguity) and secured a certain amount of justified autonomy (e.g. room for maneuver or being able to make suggestions). The extent to which people affected by poverty experience stigmatization also came to light once again. Objective 5, which relates to raising public awareness of the need to reduce prejudice, reminds us that effective measures are urgently needed at this level.

2. Members

Both the literature review and the workshops highlight the need to place the voices and expertise of people affected by poverty at the center of the permanent participation structure. It is also important to give them sufficient space and time to develop a collective voice before a dialogue with other players takes place.

The advantages of basic cooperation with other players become clear in terms of the legitimacy and credibility of the voice of people affected by poverty (e.g. these players can act as supporters or even advocates). In addition, familiarity is promoted in their cooperation as well as the systematic linking of the statements and further activities of the structure to different target groups, such as decision-makers in politics, administration and civil society.

In this sense, regardless of the different models discussed, the aim is to allocate the main decision-making power (in terms of content/strategies/output of the structure) to the people affected by poverty and at the same time to mobilize the other actors in support of the issues under consideration. It remains open as to what extent which other actors should be members of the structure or outside the structure. One way to fulfil this requirement is to combine different degrees of participation and assign different responsibilities to the people affected by poverty and other actors.

In addition, the research team recommends prioritizing systematic cooperation with professionals from politics, social work and business for the time being, rather than entering cooperation with other stakeholders. These professionals should be located at the organizational level of the permanent participation structure within this structure and given an advisory function. The other stakeholders should be located outside of the structure and assigned the function of exchanging of views.

According to the research team, in the context of Swiss social policy, which attaches great importance to the diversity of the population and political participation, it is worth locating the decision-making authority over the participation structure primarily with people who have experience of poverty, because people affected by poverty in Switzerland have had little to no voice in social policy to date.

3. Addressees

Based on the results of the literature review and the workshops, the research team emphasizes the importance of ensuring proximity between the permanent participation structure and the political decision-makers.

In this sense, it would be ideal if, as a first step, the permanent participation structure was integrated into an existing decision-making organization chart at federal level. The main aim is to ensure that the decisions taken at this level automatically submitted to a consultation process with the future permanent participation structure.

As there is no legal basis for this in Switzerland, there is a need for a permanent participation structure that establishes such participation processes in political, administrative and civil society institutions and provides even more targeted support for people affected by poverty in their efforts to impact decision-makers in politics, administration and civil society. In addition, courses of action and processes could be identified to increase proximity to decision-makers in politics, administration and civil society. In Switzerland, for example, the permanent participation structure could be included in the list of organizations to which political offices send consultations.

In addition, the permanent participation structure must be categorized within Switzerland's federalist social system, which has different decision-makers in politics, administration and civil society:

Social insurance is allocated to the federal level, while social welfare and the implementation of federal decisions are allocated to the cantonal and communal levels. The Swiss Conference on Social Assistance (SKOS) has a coordinating function for the individual cantons regarding the SKOS guidelines, but not in other social policy matters. The guidelines are by no means implemented in the same way in all cantons, nor are they enshrined in law and therefore binding in every canton.

Against this socio-political background, the central and potential addressees for the permanent participation structure are located at these three political levels. Individual examples are given below:

- at the federal level: e.g. the responsible federal councilor or the Federal Office for Social Insurance
- at the cantonal level: e.g. the cantonal government councilors for the social welfare directorate, The Conference of Cantonal Directors of Social Affairs (SODK) or SKOS
- at the municipal level: e.g. municipal and city governments.

Even in centralized systems, it has been proven as useful to create regional structures (e.g. in France). This is particularly important in a federalist system such as Switzerland. It is therefore worthwhile (as in Canada, for example) to first focus on the addressees at federal level to then address the connections with cantons and local activities, which have different regulations, offers and possibilities and at the same time define social policy laws and measures at cantonal or municipal level.

In the medium term, it is therefore advisable to dovetail the permanent participation structures at cantonal and federal level, as poverty policy is shaped at cantonal level.

Furthermore, in cantons where participation activities with people who have experience of poverty are already well advanced, it makes sense to build on existing structures and experiences with participation processes on the part of people affected by poverty and professionals from politics, social work and business. In addition, other effective addressees such as the media or interest organizations, e.g. the social work union AvenirSocial⁴, NGOs and organizations of those affected (for political lobbying), should be targeted centrally and with great effort, especially in the constitutive phase up to the implementation of the permanent participation structure. Their commitment is necessary for the successful introduction and continuation of the participation structure.

4. Functionality

Despite their different modes of operation, "committee/council/commission" and "conference, meeting or network", both formats provide spaces for dialogue between people affected by poverty and decision-makers in politics, administration and civil society.

The "committee/council/commission" format is certainly more effective due to the direct contact with the decision-makers. This allows people affected by poverty to be consulted directly on measures and developments in poverty policy and to initiate initiatives (which requires, for example, a high level of responsiveness and immediate feedback from people affected by poverty). This format thus achieves a greater and more direct influence on political decisions in poverty policy. However, this service can only be guaranteed if the necessary resources are secured (see 5). These resources can vary, depending on the composition (only people affected by poverty or "mixed" with professionals) and the number of members and can thus be controlled: e.g. large labor input for all participants.

The "conference, meeting or network" format has a greater distance from the decision-makers in politics, administration and civil society, so that the concerns and work of the conferences have a longer and more indirect path to the political decision-makers. At the same time, this format seems to be particularly conducive to the goal of raising awareness of the issue of poverty (see sub-chapter 1 Aims).

5. Resources

As the findings from the literature review show, it is crucial to not underestimate the resources to be deployed in order to avoid various risks associated with participation processes.

In addition to logistical and financial resources, the implementation of such a permanent participation structure requires the long-term support of a permanent secretariat with various competencies. This should ensure the continuity of the structure by performing a range of tasks:

- strategic support (e.g. prioritization of activities and timetable)

⁴ <https://avenirsocial.ch/>

- methodical and didactic support (e.g. neutral moderation, preparation and management of meetings with methods for participation processes, the time frame and clear information on what is involved)
- preparation, information and training of all participants (people affected by poverty and other actors)
- support in the development of position papers
- logistical, financial and administrative management.

It is essential to ensure compensation for the costs and participation (hours attended) of people affected by poverty. After all, their experience and commitment are just as relevant as professional or scientific knowledge for the further development of poverty policy.

They should therefore be valued accordingly. Ideally, an agreement on the specific modes of compensation and the introduction of a possible advance on costs should be discussed and negotiated with the people involved who have experience of poverty.

5. Financing

Ideally, the main funding for the permanent participation structure should be provided by the state. This is because experiences with projects for the participation of people affected by poverty shows that public funding guarantees the continuity of public and varied activities of the permanent participation structure.

In addition to continuity, public funding also ensures greater credibility and legitimacy and has an impact on the work that emerges from the permanent participation structure, and which aims to optimize poverty policy and raise public awareness.

However, financing by the state can give rise to concerns that the structure might lose its independence. A mandate (e.g. from the Federal Social Insurance Office) is useful to this end in order to guarantee a certain degree of "neutrality". As soon as the state has taken over the financing and mandates the project, the services to be provided must also be clarified and state independent decision-making spaces for the organization of people affected by poverty must be ensured.

Positive impacts and conditions for the training and project development for professionals from politics, economics and social services, as well as for people affected by poverty

The positive impact potential of the training and project development for professionals from politics, economics and social services, as well as for people affected by poverty are like those summarized in section 6.1 for the council.

The training format and project development place particular emphasis on self-reflection among participants (people affected by poverty and professionals from politics, economics and social services), especially regarding the development of their participatory skills. Another added benefit of this format is that the combination of practical experience and professional knowledge results in a sustainable product that is presented to a wide audience in politics, economic and social work, thereby establishing a network for the further development of the project and raising awareness of the issue of poverty and the practical experience of people affected by poverty.

The participants' experiential and professional knowledge, combined with their freedom to choose project topics, resulted in innovative projects that were taken up by public and private social institutions. This meant that their voices and concerns were heard, deemed useful and followed up on.

The challenges facing the implementation of the training and project development can be met by ensuring that the necessary conditions for it are fulfilled. I will therefore discuss these conditions in general and regarding didactics below.

General conditions:

- The **commitment** of the participants, the **clear division** of tasks between the participants and the training team, and straightforward **communication** provided a stable basis on which the training could build upon.

- The **support of the training team in recruiting training participants** ensured that both professionals and people affected by poverty were equally accessible. In addition, it was ensured that the **travel expenses** of those affected by poverty were reimbursed in an uncomplicated manner and that **information** about the course was **disseminated widely**, including door-to-door, to ensure open access.

- On the first day of the training, both professionals and people affected by poverty expressed confusion about **the aim of the course** and their role in it. As a result, participation was defined more **by existing relationships** than by the content. It is worth considering whether the benefits and objectives of the training could be explained in more detail in the written and verbal invitations and whether the role of the participants could be clarified. At the same time, it seems that this is only really established and understood **through the activities in the training** (cf. learning by doing and think tank approaches to poverty). This could be given greater emphasis in the next training and replace the description of the training.

- The cooperation between the participants and the training team was based on **positive group dynamics**, which enabled valuable and direct peer feedback and an open culture of discussion in which critical feedback was also allowed and even welcomed. This improved the quality of the work and enabled a noticeable learning process for the participants and course instructors.

This positive group dynamic can be attributed to **several factors**: the inviting premises, the refreshments and snacks provided to encourage informal exchanges during the breaks, the willingness to engage in a constructive feedback culture, and the positive and motivated attitude of all participants, which was evident during the first afternoon of the module.

- The diverse premises (sitting area, standing tables, two meeting rooms) for the specialist course were perceived as **conducive to learning**. This was particularly the case as there was sufficient space for discussions and input in plenary sessions, but also for individual group work.

- The realization that cooperation between professionals and people affected by poverty is a **time-investment** can be highlighted. 'Involving experts with own experiences requires more effort for the project outline than "just" involving professionals.' (Quote from a professional) It can be concluded that the added value of combining professional and experiential knowledge must be linked to an **investment of**

time and to skills that promote participation: **mutual willingness to learn, understandable language, clear objectives and respectful communication.**

Didactic conditions:

- The **research-based input** and joint topic search on the first afternoon of the module were found to be helpful in ensuring a successful start to the training and clarifying the course objectives.
- As the course progressed, participants found the balance between short research-based input at the start and **sufficient time for project outline development in groups, peer feedback and professional support for the groups** to be beneficial.
- It became apparent that the participants in the small groups had very different work and everyday commitments, which made it impossible for the groups to meet between the individual training modules to work on their outlines together. At the same time, the **six training afternoons** that were already planned were a challenge for the participants, as they had to take this time away from their work and everyday commitments. The participants and the training team considered the timing and time commitment of six four-hour module days for the course to be appropriate. They viewed this as positive, as they would not have been able to devote more time to the training and were pleasantly surprised by what was achieved in such a short period.
- **Heterogeneous approach to presentation:** The idea of presenting the project outlines to a broad professional audience motivated most participants. However, the presentations were perceived as challenging in some cases by both the professionals and the people affected by poverty: on the one hand, the participants felt happy and proud to present their project ideas in public. On the other hand, some of the participants were not used to speaking in front of large groups of people. In addition, some of the professionals had colleagues and acquaintances from other contexts in the audience, or they were presenting on a topic that went beyond their area of expertise or belonged to a different field.
- For the participants, the evening event provided **a platform where they could present their concerns** in the form of a project outline developed jointly with professionals from politics, economy and social work. In addition, motivation was strengthened by the positive response to the social significance of all six projects.
- The **reception after the presentations** was particularly positive, as it gave participants and the training team the opportunity to talk to interested key figures from different fields, gain a more nuanced appreciation of the project ideas developed and network with each other.
- The evening events **raised awareness about the issue of poverty** among the audience and the media and even during the course.
- When preparing presentations, participants should also be given support in identifying **alternative formats** if they do not want to present or find it very difficult to do so. Examples of alternative forms and different types of participation should be highlighted verbally in a positive manner during the group work and at the evening event, e.g. designing graphics, jointly developing ideas and presentations, administrative work 'behind the scenes'.

Conclusion

After referring to the user involvement approach and presenting the findings from the two research-based projects 'Council for Poverty Issues in Switzerland' and the training in project development for professionals from politics, business and social work and people affected by poverty, I conclude this article by answering the research question mentioned at the beginning.

In order to give people affected by poverty a meaningful voice in poverty policy and to achieve the potential impact outlined above, including developing more effective solutions that bring economic benefits, the continuity of participation projects, the credibility and legitimacy of the collective statements and concerns developed, certain prerequisites must be met.

- a sharing structure supported by social policy administrators and led by external experts, e.g. a council for poverty issues or a training with developing projects
- the sharing structure is adapted to the socio-political conditions of a country and is being developed together with people affected by poverty, or at least their feedback must be obtained and discussed when designing the platform and to adapt the platform accordingly
- the sharing structure consists of participants with experiential and professional knowledge
- for the sharing structure the following elements are clarified and transparent communicate: the aims, members, addressees, functionality, resources and financial situation
- general condition for the sharing structure, e.g. willingness to learn, strengthening of positive group dynamics, a comfortable workplace, compensation for travel expenses, clear language, transparent communication, flexibility and time
- didactic condition for the sharing structure, e.g. variety of work forms, a group format for decision-making (consent) and heterogeneous approach in giving inputs
- it is worthwhile to pursue longer-term projects to maintain and further develop the network of people affected by poverty, organizations representing those affected, and professionals in politics, business, and social work.

In addition to the two formats presented and discussed here, there are many others that give people affected by poverty a voice in social policy, thereby ensuring effectiveness, continuity, credibility and legitimacy in these decisions.

However, it should be noted that potential effects have been identified, but further long-term impact analyses, if possible, on an international scale, are necessary to gain comprehensive insights.

References

Beresford, P., Branfield, F. (2006). Developing inclusive partnerships: user-defined outcomes, networking and knowledge - a case study. *Health & social care in the community*, 14(5), pp. 436–444.

Beresford, P., Carr, S. (2016). Social care, service users and user involvement. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 28(2).

Bray, R., De Laat M., Godinot X., Ugarte A., Walker, R. (2019). *The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty*. Montreuil: Fourth World Publications.

Chiapparini, E. (ed.) (2016). *The Service User as a Partner in Social Work Projects and Education. Concepts and Evaluations of Courses with a Gap-Mending Approach in Europe.* Opladen, Berlin & Toronto: Budrich. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvbkjvpm>

Chiapparini, E., Bitsch, K. (2024). *The added value of combining the expertise of people with experience of poverty and professionals in joint project development: contextualisation, implementation and evaluation of the BFH specialist course "Sharing experience and expertise"* Bern: Edition Soziothek (in German). <https://doi.org/10.24451/arbor.21954>

Chiapparini, E., Eicher, V. (2019). User Involvement in der Sozialen Arbeit – Anknüpfungspunkte für Praxis-, Forschungs- und Lehrprojekte in der Schweiz. *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziale Arbeit*, 24(18), 117-134. <https://doi.org/10.24451/arbor.9955>.

Chiapparini, E., Guerry, S., Reynaud, C. (2025). *How can the expertise of people with experience of poverty inform Swiss poverty policy in the long term and have an impact on it? Foundations and concept for a permanent participation structure, which was developed on the basis of research conducted with people who have experience of poverty.* Federal Social Insurance Office. <https://doi.org/10.24451/dspace/11266>

Chiapparini, E., Schuwey, C., Beyeler, M., Reynaud, C., Guerry, S., Blanchet, N., Lucas, B. (2020). *Modelle der Partizipation armutsbetroffener und -gefährdeter Personen in der Armutsbekämpfung und -prävention.* Forschungsbericht Nr. 7/20. Bern: Bundesamt für Sozialversicherungen (BSV). <https://doi.org/10.24451/arbor.11878>

Chiapparini, E., Willener, D., Domonell, K., Hegedüs, A. (2023). Digitalisierung: Hürden für vulnerable Gruppen. In Soziale Sicherheit CHSS. Bundesamt für Sozialversicherungen BSV. <https://doi.org/10.24451/arbor.18933>

De Corte, J., Kerstenne, C. (2015). *Rapport final. Évaluation de l'apport des experts du vécu en matière de pauvreté au sein des services publics fédéraux.* Gent: Universiteit Gent: Liège: Université de Liège.

Beresford, P., Boxall, K. (2012). Service Users, Social Work Education and Knowledge for Social Work Practice. *Social Work Education*, 31(2), 155–167.

Dierckx, M., Vandenbroeck, M. & Devlieghere, J. (2024). Child and Family Social Work as a Space for Promoting Social Cohesion. *Child & Family Social Work*, 12(3), pp. 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13178>

Federal Statistical Office (FSO) (2023). *Statistics on Income and Living Conditions.* <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/economic-social-situation-population/economic-and-social-situation-of-the-population/poverty-deprivation/risk-poverty.html>

FSO (2024a). Poverty rate 2022. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken-querschnittsthemen/wohlfahrtsmessung/alle-indikatoren/gesellschaft/armutsquote.-assetdetail.30526410.html>

FSO (2024b). At-risk-of-poverty rate 2022. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/wirtschaftliche-soziale-situation-bevoelkerung.assetdetail.30865436.html>

Güttler, A., Bruse, T. (2022). *Beyond agile. A new system of corporate organisation in practice.* Berlin: Springer Gabler.

Herriger, N. (2014). *Empowerment in der Sozialen Arbeit*. Eine Einführung. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag.

Hill, D., Bell, M., Laredo, E. (2024). Solidarity is not a dirty word: exploring and locating solidarity as a theory and model for a radical community social work practice. *Critical and Radical Social Work*. 12(4). pp. 442-455. <https://doi.org/10.1332/20498608Y2024D000000022>

Kern, T. (2008). *Soziale Bewegungen. Ursachen, Wirkungen, Mechanismen*. Wiesbaden: VS. Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Kristiansen, A., Heule, C. (2016). Sweden: Power, Experiences and Mutual Development. Using The Concept of Gap-Mending in Social Work Education in *The Service User as a Partner in Social Work Projects and Education. Concepts and Evaluations of Courses with a Gap-Mending Approach in Europe* (ed. Chiapparini), Opladen, Berlin & Toronto: Budrich. pp. 27-53 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvbkjvpm>

Krumer-Nevo, M. (2016). Poverty-Aware Social Work: A Paradigm for Social Work Practice with People in Poverty. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 46(6), pp. 1793–1808.

Kuckartz, U., Rädiker, S. (2022). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung*. Grundlagentexte Methoden. Weinheim, Basel.

McLaughlin, H. (2009). What's in a Name: 'Client', 'Patient', 'Customer', 'Consumer', 'Expert by Experience', 'Service User'--What's Next? *British Journal of Social Work* 39 (6), 1101–1117

Müller de Menezes, R., Chiapparini, E. (2021). «Wenn ihr mich fragt...». *Das Wissen und die Erfahrung von Betroffenen einbeziehen Grundlagen und Schritte für die Beteiligung von betroffenen Personen in der Armutsprävention und -bekämpfung*. Bundesamt für Sozialversicherungen (BSV), Nationale Plattform. <https://doi.org/10.24451/arbor.15093>

Schön, U.-K. (2016). User Involvement in Social Work and Education-A Matter of Participation? *Journal of evidence-informed social work* 13 (1), pp. 21–33. DOI: 10.1080/15433714.2014.939382

Sen, A. (2000). *Ökonomie für den Menschen. Wege zur Gerechtigkeit und Solidarität in der Marktwirtschaft*. München, Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag.

Sevinç T. (2022). Three approaches to social unity and solidarity. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 25(4), pp. 459–479. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2019.1697843>

Stern, S., Rüegge, B., Wick, A., Thomas, R. (2024). *Evaluation Nationale Plattform gegen Armut* (NAPA). Im Auftrag des BSV. Beiträge zur Sozialen Sicherheit. Forschungsbericht Nr. 01/24. [01-24D-eBericht neu.pdf](https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2019.1697843)

Thallmaier, S. R. (2014). *Customer Co-Design. A Study in the Mass Customization Industry*. 1. Aufl. s.l.: Springer.

Zask, J. (2011). *Participer. Essai sur les formes démocratiques de la participation* (Les voies du politique). Lormont: Le Bord de l'eau.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.