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Service de lutte contre la pauvreté,
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Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social
Exclusion Service

Dialogue, a fruitful approach for effective rights

Agora, an inspiring example

An experience of dialogue between people living in extreme poverty who come together within associations and youth assistance professionals

**COMBAT POVERTY, INSECURITY AND SOCIAL
EXCLUSION SERVICE**

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Preface

The text that follows tells the story of the very interesting approach adopted by the Agora dialogue group. It is the account of a group that has been active for 20 years and whose composition is particularly diverse, embracing participants drawn from associations that bring together poor people, from the youth assistance administration of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and from a number of the sector's services (the youth assistance services (SAJs) and the judicial protection services (SPJs)). The Combat Poverty Service has had and continues to have the privilege of accompanying and supporting this group, at the request of the Youth Assistance Minister.

The dialogue group meets on the basis of a strong and clear mandate, explained by the fact that it was set up at the request of the politicians. Throughout its existence this mandate has continued to take shape thanks to support from the group's presidency, exercised by successive officials of the administrations and currently by Lilianne Baudart, General Administrator. The Service would like to thank these individuals and their staff for the recognition granted to the Agora group from the very beginning.

The dialogue group was charged with the mission of providing a space for dialogue between parents in contact with youth assistance, members of the administration responsible for drawing up and implementing the legislation (that is, the decree of 18 January 2018 on the prevention code, youth assistance and youth protection), and professionals charged with its day-to-day implementation. The parents in question live in circumstances of extreme poverty and are confronted by that which hits parents the hardest as it is their very role as parents that is called into question, to the point where they are even forced to live separated from their children. It is on the basis of the needs of children, young people and parents that members of the administration endeavour to develop policy and support. At the same time, professionals from various services develop support in the field and seek to take a critical look at their own practices and to call them into question.

The desire to make this group a permanent tool permitted a number of things. Firstly, it enabled dialogue to be established between the various actors, each with their own context and point of view. During the discussions persons with very difficult living conditions were able to express that which is experienced as particularly problematic for those living in poverty. The dialogue group also provided the opportunity to flag up problems and points worthy of attention. Finally, the dialogue provided the opportunity to respond to new legislation on the basis of activities pursued during previous years, as was the case in regard to recent changes to the decree. For the most part, however, the process of drawing up legislative texts is not adapted to the rhythm of participation by the most vulnerable. The Agora group nevertheless succeeded in providing the occasion for such a participation

The fact that this work would not have been possible without huge investment on the part of the various parties involved emerges clearly from the following pages. This is true for the associations as well as for professionals and the Service. In the paragraphs on the working methods one can read of what this investment has meant in terms of time, preparation within the associations, the organising of training, and for the Service responsible for drafting the very comprehensive meeting reports to which the participants were able to refer when setting to work within their own organisation. We would like to take this opportunity to stress the courage, energy and commitment of the families and those who stood in solidarity with them in repeatedly returning to the dialogue and reliving particularly

painful experiences out of a desire to reflect with the professionals on a support and an assistance that would conform to the principles of the decree.

The experiences of the families constituted and continue to constitute the basis for the dialogue group and the framework for its work. This is a crucial point that must be stressed. It is striking to note that this was also the case when developing a line of research in which the associations were involved, including when formulating the research question.

For the Service it was and remains a particularly interesting experience to accompany and support this group. The characteristics of the approach comply in every aspect to its missions as set out more than 20 years ago in a cooperation agreement between the Federal State, the Regions and the Communities, adopted following the General Report on Poverty. We observe that the political texts and regulations, whose principles and measures result from careful reflection, are often not applied in full. The question posed here is that of the effectiveness of rights in situations of poverty, a core consideration in the Service's missions and work. Françoise De Boe, who was involved from the start in the Agora dialogue group and who was also the Service's coordinator for many years, played a major role in the work of both this dialogue and of the Service. We thank her for this.

With this presentation of the approach of the Agora dialogue group we are seeking to express our recognition of this initiative and hope also to provide a source of inspiration for others. Such a space for continuous, structural dialogue involving the poorest families is no doubt also possible in other areas of life, whether within other entities in Belgium or at international level. The Agora partners and the Combat Poverty Service are at your service to share their experience.

Henk Van Hootegem

Coordinator

Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service

* The Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service seeks to be attentive to gender discrimination. However, for reasons of legibility we do not use inclusive writing so as to avoid reading difficulties for certain categories of people (dyslexic or visually impaired persons for example).

Introduction

The 'Agora' experience that we describe and analyse in this text shows that in-depth dialogue between families living in extreme poverty who come together within associations, field professionals and an administration is both possible and fruitful. When such a collective reflection is based on listening to the needs and aspirations of poor people it permits progress towards more effective rights.

Just over 20 years since this approach was initiated in the field of youth assistance the participating associations believed that the time had come to think about keeping a record of this totally innovative dialogue. It was suggested that the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service should write a text with this aim. The Youth Assistance General Administrator, who heads the group, supported this request.

Although the approach in question here cannot be reproduced as such, it is interesting to reflect on the elements that permitted the discussions and dialogue as this could inspire other sectors. The youth assistance professionals who participated in the dialogue already asked the question, in June 2003, as to whether similar groups should be set up as part of the approach to other issues. *"One could imagine that the experiences in our context could be experienced in other fields in the face of other issues, such as school for example."*¹ In the early childhood sector, for example, the ONE [National Office for Children] is considering creating a space for dialogue with parents in the framework of its next management contract for the years 2021-2025 (being finalised at the time of publication).

This text has been written with this in view while remaining rooted in a unique experience. It is addressed to a wide range of actors who are in a position to initiate a dialogue of this nature while also seeking to pay homage to the commitment of the professionals and associations involved in this particular instance. It also aims to help make this experience visible to youth assistance professionals who were not directly involved and in particular recent and future recruits.

One of the missions of the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service, also founded just over 20 years ago, is to *"organise structural dialogue with the most disadvantaged... by using the dialogue-based methodology as developed when drawing up the General Report on Poverty."*² In this framework and at the express request of the Youth Assistance Minister at the time, the Service has actively supported the Agora approach since its creation and naturally responded positively to the request to write a text that would place the emphasis on this dialogue process. It very quickly became evident that Agora group members should be involved in this writing process.

We will start by recalling the genesis of the approach (1) as well as the legislative and social context in which it is situated (2). We will then look at the actors involved (3) and the meetings between them (4). Finally, we will consider the progress that the dialogue permitted (5). In the conclusion we will identify elements of a nature to fuel reflection in fields other than youth assistance.

¹ Interview of 20 June 2003 (non-published) led by the authors of 'Précieux enfants, précieux parents. Miser sur les « liens fondamentaux » dans la lutte contre la pauvreté des enfants en Europe. Repérages pour un dialogue. Editions Quart Monde, novembre 2003. Document réalisé avec le soutien de la Commission européenne au titre du Programme d'action communautaire de lutte contre l'exclusion sociale 2002-2006'

² Art. 5 of the Cooperation Agreement of 5 May 1998 between the Federal State, the Communities and the Regions concerning the continuation of the Poverty Reduction Policy, *M.B.*, 16 December 1998 and 10 July 1999.

So as not to burden the text for readers with little or no familiarity with the subject and to provide sector actors with access to the most comprehensive information, we are enclosing a chronology of the stages in the dialogue in an annexe. There is also a separate bibliography listing texts drafted jointly by the partners in the Agora approach.

Finally, we would add that it was the reports on the meetings held to give life to this dialogue that provided the source material for writing this text. Quotations taken from a report are given between quotation marks and in italics but without referencing the source. These sources are only accessible to the group participants.

We hope that this written testimony to the dialogue will arouse the interest of many actors in youth assistance and serve as a source of inspiration for a wide range of professionals active in other fields who are also confronted by situations of poverty, as well as for policy-makers in these areas.

1. The genesis of the approach

The elements that triggered the Agora approach are the 1994 General Report on Poverty (GRP)³ and the Inter-Ministerial Conference that was created subsequently.

1.1. The General Report on Poverty (GRP)

The Dehaene federal government⁴ agreement offers a number of possible approaches under the heading “*an emergency programme for problems of society*”. One of these is titled “*a society of solidarity*”. In this framework, the government entrusts “*associations representing the Fourth World and the Union of Belgian Towns and Municipalities, CPAS [social assistance centres] section, with drawing up a general report on poverty.*”⁵ It was later specified that, by mobilising people actually living in poverty and the social actors, this report must make it possible to tackle at root the structural causes of poverty and vulnerability. This marks a break with previous conceptions of the fight against poverty.

For the first time in Belgium, a government was approaching people actually living in poverty as actors able to contribute usefully to reflection and political action. The government no longer considered them solely as victims or as being responsible for or even guilty of the circumstances in which they find themselves but recognized that to develop a society of greater solidarity it is essential for the life experiences and expectations of the poorest to be known by enabling them to express their point of view and for them to be involved in decision-making.

*“It is said that the rich don’t ‘need’ the poor. This affirmation can be contested if you are thinking in economic and political terms, but it is perfectly correct in terms of knowledge, the rich regarding the poor person, the deviant, the excluded as somebody who has nothing useful to say on the building of society, on ‘living together’”*⁶

*“Here we find one of the roots of poverty and of exclusion, and one of the possible strategies is to win acceptance for the notion that the poor and the excluded not only have a right to a voice but that their voice can be usefully heard by everyone and that what they have to say must be included in the joint reflection on the global organisation of society. This would contribute to another way of conceiving of political action to one that is limited to listening to experiences founded on knowledge alone.”*⁷

The General Report on Poverty also marks a break with the past in another respect: the federal government requested that a dialogue be organised, entrusting it to two partners. “*A difficult dialogue between those who at first can only speak of their sufferings and struggles and those within the public services who are charged with implementing policy, whether social assistance, housing, access to work or health... How, starting with what is common to the participants in the dialogue, to look again at the joint interests and projects that motivate them, and to forge with other actors the necessary*

³ ATD Quart Monde Belgique, Union des Villes et Communes belges section CPAS, Fondation Roi Baudouin (1994). *General Report on Poverty*, Brussels. Online on www.combatpoverty.be.

⁴ Legislature from 7 March 1992 to 23 June 1995.

⁵ Parliamentary documents -290/1-91/92 (S.E.) (Chamber) - 224 (S.E.) 1991-1992 (Senate), p.13

⁶ ATD Quart Monde Belgique, Union des Villes et Communes section CPAS, Fondation Roi Baudouin, op.cit., p.13.

⁷ Ibid.

alliances to unlock the experiences of the poorest, to show that the aspirations are not in any way marginal but central to society's choices? How to start with aspirations rather than deficiencies or how to reverse the viewpoint? How to succeed in redefining the terms of a public debate in accordance with the points of view of those who never have a voice? These are the challenges to which the initiative to draw up the Report seeks to respond.”⁸

1.2. The Inter-Ministerial Conference for Social Integration

The Inter-Ministerial Conference (IMC) for Social Integration – subsequently renamed the Inter-Ministerial Conference on Integration into Society – was created very soon after the publication of the General Report on Poverty to ensure the necessary follow-up. It asked the Communities to “*evaluate their decree on youth assistance with a view to avoiding out-of-home placements due to poverty and to preserve the parent-child relationship*”⁹. The Minister-President of the French-speaking Community, responsible for Youth Assistance, Laurette Onkelinx, met with the Poverty Unit of the Centre for Equal Opportunities and the Fight Against Racisms – now known as the Combat Poverty Service¹⁰ – and a delegation from associations more particularly involved in drawing up the ‘Family’ chapter in the GRP, that is ATD Quart Monde and Luttes Solidarités Travail (LST). She agreed to set up regular dialogue between the aforementioned associations and her administration. She asked the Poverty Unit to participate in the meetings and to assist with their preparation and follow-up.

The IMC could have chosen to request an objectivation of the link between poverty and placement, contested at the time even more so than today, and the minister responsible for youth assistance could have entrusted this mission to researchers without involving persons living in poverty and professionals. But the IMC considered the link between poverty and placement as a starting point, this in line with the experience of people living in poverty as reported in the GRP and as would be objectified by researchers.¹¹ The recognition of this link marks major progress as if the reality of poverty is shrouded in silence then all preventive and curative measures will be designed to correct individual deficiencies without taking into account the fact that “poverty has its roots in the field or social injustices.”¹² In addition, the Youth Assistance Minister of the French-speaking Community favoured dialogue as a working method to evaluate the decree and requested that persons living in poverty should be involved. These options taken by politicians at the time were determining for the Agora approach. They have remained and will always remain the constant reference, even if the past 20 years has seen a succession of six Youth Assistance Ministers: Laurette Onkelinx, Nicole Maréchal, Catherine

⁸ ATD Quart Monde Belgique, Union des Villes et Communes section CPAS, Fondations Roi Baudouin, op.cit., p.15.

⁹ Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Public Health and the Environment, poverty unit. *Rapport d'avancement, mise en œuvre du Rapport général sur la pauvreté*, 2000, p.5 (non-published).

¹⁰ The poverty unit became the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service following the Cooperation Agreement of 5 May 1998 between the Federal State, the Communities and the Regions concerning the continuation of the Poverty Reduction Policy, *M.B.*, 16 December 1998 and 10 July 1999.

¹¹ M. Bouverne-Debie et al. (2011). *Existe-t-il un lien entre pauvreté et mesure d'aide à la jeunesse ?*, Academia Press, Gent. For a brief presentation of the research results : I. Delens-Ravier, F. De Boe, « *Pauvreté et Aide à la jeunesse : un lien ?* », *Journal du Droit des Jeunes*, April 2010, n° 294, pp. 24-29.

¹² F. Tulkens, « Justice et pauvreté » in Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale (2017). *Pauvreté et ineffectivité des droits. Non-recours aux droits*, la Charte, p.156.

Fonck, Evelyne Huytebroeck, Rachid Madrane and Valérie Glatigny, appointed for the 2019-2024 parliamentary term.

2. The context

The context of the Agora initiative has been both favourable and unfavourable. The dialogue was able and is still able to find support in a legislation¹³ whose basic principles include the adhesion of families living in poverty as well as youth assistance professionals (2.1). However, the decree was implemented in a context of society described as less than auspicious for respect of these principles (2.2).

2.1. The legislative framework

Dejudicialization and deinstitutionalization are two fundamental options laid down in the 1991 decree, confirmed in the 2018 decree,¹⁴ formulated in response to the many criticisms of the previous legislation,¹⁵ namely *“excessive interference by the judicial authorities in the life of the young minor in difficulty and his or her family, and the abusive recourse to placement in an institution to the detriment of maintaining the young person in their living environment.”*¹⁶ The adoption of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 also contributed to this development.

Article 1, 7° of the 2018 decree states that: *“Assistance is part of an approach aimed at dejudicialization and the subsidiarity of compulsory assistance to voluntary assistance.”* Voluntary assistance implies agreement between the parties on the assistance measures. This means upstream recognition of the children and their family as partners whereas previously *“the judge, assisted by the social service was supposed to be more aware than anybody else of the child’s interests”* and the persons targeted by the 1965 law *“are more the object of laws than the subjects of laws: little place is awarded to the voice of the beneficiaries and rights of defence.”*¹⁷

As to deinstitutionalization, this means that in future the priority will be to maintain the child in his or her living environment. The 2018 decree explicitly states as much in article 1, 10°: *“The priority is for assistance and protection to take place in the living environment, removal from which must be the exception. In case of removal, particular attention is paid to guaranteeing the child’s right to maintain personal relations and direct contacts with the parents, unless this is contrary to the child’s interests, and the possibility of a return to the parents is evaluated regularly so as to reduce as much as possible the duration of the removal. Assistance and protection shall respect and favour the right and obligation of the parents to educate their child.”*

This priority reflects Belgium’s international commitments. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes the rights of children not to be separated from their parents against their will,

¹³ Decree of 4 March 1991 on Youth Assistance, *M.B.*, 12 June 1991 repealed by the decree of 18 January 2018 establishing the code on prevention, youth assistance and youth protection, *M.B.*, 3 April 2018. Effective on 1 January 2019. We choose to refer to the 2018 decree whenever the content is similar to the 1991 decree.

¹⁴ The Agora approach has so far focused on the decree, even though the specific nature of the situation in Brussels, which is governed by an ordonnance, has been mentioned on several occasions..

¹⁵ Law of 8 April 1965 on the protection of youth, the support to minors who have committed an offence and compensation for the damage caused by this offence, , *M.B.*, 15 April 1965.

¹⁶ Repér’AJ, October 2018, p.6, reference to ‘Livre blanc de la protection de la jeunesse du Conseil de la jeunesse’.

¹⁷ *Le droit de vivre en famille. Dialogue entre professionnels et familles en situation de grande pauvreté.* Acts of te session « Justice et Quart Monde », 4 and 5 May 2001. Ecole nationale de la magistrature, Paris. Revue Droit en Quart Monde n° 35 et 36. Mouvement international ATD Quart Monde. Institut de Recherche et de Formation aux Relations Humaines, p.52.

unless this separation is necessary in the interests of the child and provided there is the option of legal recourse against the decision taken (article 9). It states clearly that *“the responsibility for raising the child and ensuring the child’s development lies first and foremost with the parents”* and stipulates that *“the signatory States shall grant the appropriate assistance to the parents... in exercising their responsibility...”* (Article 18). Similarly, for a parent and child being together represents a fundamental element in family life in the sense of article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights.¹⁸ Numerous judgments by the European Court render explicit the content of this article.¹⁹

Another fundamental principle on which the professionals and associations agree was laid down in the 1991 decree and adopted by the 2018 decree: the prevention, assistance and specialised protection to which children, young people and their families are entitled *“aim to allow the child or young person to develop in conditions of equal opportunity with a view to access to a life in conformity with human dignity”* (art.1, 3°).

One is forced to conclude that the gap between the stated principles and the realities on the ground is considerable. The reality has changed much less than the legislation. Judicialization is still experienced today as a “sword of Damocles’ by families living in poverty. Professionals agree that at the SAJ it is impossible to say that there is no risk. The number of judicialized situations does not seem to be decreasing significantly while the spirit of the decree is to make a clear break between assistance and the courts. The same is true in regard to the number of children placed in care, which is also not decreasing. The long-term vision for the child contained in the decree - to enable the child access to a life of human dignity or, in other words, to allow the child to escape poverty – is sometimes difficult to identify as a thread running through the proposed assistance measures. But the adhesion of the professionals and families to these fundamentals of the decree, even if applied imperfectly, remains beneficial for dialogue as it brings together all the partners irrespective of their essential difference of position. *“Without the decree we would not have been able to create this dialogue.”*

2.2. The societal context

The youth assistance decree applies in a given context. The perceptions on the part of families living in poverty and of youth assistance services strongly influences relations between them. This is why the Agora group partners wanted to draw up a joint text on the subject of the developments they identify. After having checked with each of these partners that, 10 years later, the comments remain pertinent, we are evoking this societal context with reference to this collective work.²⁰

“The difficulties faced by families in exercising their parental rights are becoming increasingly complex. As a result, the very existence of families is under threat. We live in a society that produces a great deal of wealth and that has, if it chooses, sufficient resources to ensure that everyone can exercise their fundamental rights. In such a situation it is an absolutely unacceptable violence to produce and tolerate extreme poverty and to impose this on the most fragile population... For most families, a lack of

¹⁸ Article 8 of the ECHR on the protection of privacy and family life..

¹⁹ See the jurisprudence compiled by the Combat Poverty Service on the subject: <https://www.luttepauvrete.be/droits-de-lhomme-et-pauvrete/jurisprudence-droits-fondamentaux-et-pauvrete/protection-de-la-vie-familiale/>

²⁰ Direction générale de l’aide à la jeunesse, ATD Quart Monde, Luttes Solidarités Travail (LST) and Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l’exclusion sociale (2009). *Aide à la jeunesse : appel croisé des familles et des professionnels pour une politique qui libère*, October 2009. Online on www.luttepauvrete.be.

financial resources makes it difficult to gain access to decent housing, to buy food, to receive medical care, to ensure school attendance, etc.

Faced with a relative inability to act on the major economic challenges, politicians are increasingly focused on responding to a public opinion concerned by security issues. In the name of which they mobilise a great deal of energy and of resources, but in most cases the responsibility for the difficulties is attributed to the persons and families themselves. Many media widely disseminate this view and thus contribute to creating a society that can no longer tolerate risk, a “zero tolerance” society. The task of educating, emancipating and increasing a sense of responsibility among parents and professionals, whether within the family, school or society, is therefore compromised because it implies an inevitable and necessary readiness to take a risk. A risk that consists of permitting different views and various evaluations within a partnership. This context exacerbates tensions, among professionals and among families. Families and young people in difficulty are referred too rapidly to the youth assistance sector, the psychiatry sector or to the courts. Social work is in danger of increasingly becoming a place of control and disqualification. Some families in serious difficulty fear going to professionals as they sense these risks as well as the guilt they are sometimes made to feel. In a context of general concern, families find it increasingly difficult to understand how the services function. Police intervention is increasing. Families are unable to identify clearly the connections between the different players, between the police, the youth assistance service (SAJ), the judicial protection service (SPJ), the members of the judiciary, etc.

The SAJs and the SPJs are of course aware of these increasingly difficult working conditions. Forced to act with limited human resources and faced with a critical lack of possibilities for approved services to assume responsibility, the youth assistance counsellors and directors and their teams find it very difficult to implement the priority principles of the decree on youth assistance, that is: to provide an appropriate response for a child in a situation of difficulty or danger; to assist parents by awarding priority to effective assistance in the living environment; to focus if possible on dialogue between the first line services, outside the judicial system and in partnership with the individuals concerned.”

3. The actors

Three types of actor participate in the dialogue: the central administration and the SAJs and SPJs (3.1.), the associations involved in the chapter on the family in the General Report on Poverty (3.2.) and the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service(3.3.). We will also make brief mention of the rules that govern changes to the group composition (3.4.).

3.1. The Youth Assistance Central Administration, the SAJs and the SPJs

The Youth Assistance General Management²¹ received the instruction from its minister, in 1997, to introduce regular dialogue between itself and the associations.

Initially, apart from the Assistant General Director, only a few members of the central administration drawn from various services (private institutions, individual case services, SAJ-SPJ-IPPJ) attended the meetings. The intention from the outset was, however, to open them up to professionals from the SAJs and SPJs. This was achieved in 2001. It was from the time of this expansion that the group felt the need to give itself a name and to establish its identity. It occupied a very particular place within the administration as its principal objective - continuous dialogue - set it apart from an advisory committee or decision-making body. It chose to call itself 'Agora'.

One SPJ director explains that *"When the field professionals joined the group it wasn't easy for them. At first, I felt that we were not managing to communicate easily. On one side there was the suffering of parents relayed by the associations and then on the other side our practice. One could say that the reality on the ground presented by the associations was not the reality of all the cases we were following, but this did not permit progress. The professionals who were there had to accept that their practices were going to be called into question."*²²

The SAJ and SPJ professionals are appointed by their respective Unions, on a voluntary basis: *"The dialogue must be open to social workers as well as to decision-makers. It is unthinkable to bring together everyone. It is therefore necessary to work with representatives charged with passing on input. Motivation must be one of the selection criteria."* This method of appointment makes it possible to bring together the reflections of youth assistance counsellors and assistant counsellors, youth protection directors and assistant directors²³ as well as the chief delegates and youth assistance delegates who do not attend the meetings. This is essential for obtaining the changes identified as necessary. This concern for ensuring that input feeds through to all the professionals is also the reason why particular attention is awarded to the geographical distribution in the various judicial districts as

²¹ From 1998 to 2008, the Assistant General Director, Danièle Gevaert, chaired the Agora Group; the General Director, Francine Bernard-Lachaert, closely followed and supported the work. In March 2009, Liliane Baudart became General Director and, as such, chair of the Agora Group; she appointed a member of the administration to lead the group while remaining very attentive to the work carried out. In 2014, the General Management became a General Administration, Liliane Baudart became General Administrator and it is in this capacity that she is still, at the time of writing, President of the group.

²² Interview of 20 June 2003 (non-published) with one of the authors of 'Précieux enfants précieux parents', *op.cit.*

²³ 'Youth protection director' is the name adopted in the 2018 decree which replaces the name used in the 1991 decree, 'youth assistance director'.

well as the balance between the different functions at the time of appointing the members. Transmitting the way of thinking beyond the Agora group is a constant focus of attention.

The presidency is assumed at the highest hierarchical level, this helping to validate the approach in the eyes of professionals from the central administration and the SAJs and SPJs. The strong involvement on the part of the hierarchy also facilitates relations with the successive ministers. *“... as president, I endeavoured to act as a genuine transmission belt for conveying the Group’s concerns to the politicians and to the Youth Assistance Minister in particular.”*²⁴ Beginning in 2006, such ministers have appointed an individual from their staff as contact person. Agora group members have been able to meet with each of the Youth Assistance Ministers.

Since the beginning and still today, the presidency has always respected the specificity of the Agora group mission – that is, to conduct a dialogue with a view to the continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of the rights laid down in the youth assistance decree - and all that this implies. *“Meetings within the Agora group between the administration and the associations representing families facing poverty have made it possible, over the years, to compare the views of persons from different ‘worlds’ and different ‘cultures’. This task required and will no doubt continue to require patience, a great deal of patience. At an initial stage, it is necessary to recognise and to name the different experiences, to recognize the inequality of positions. All sides must also be able to recognise the importance of emotions. It is a delicate task that makes it possible to progressively, sometimes laboriously, forge a relationship of trust and mutual recognition between the partners. That is what the Agora group is committed to achieving. It is what it will continue to do in the future.”*²⁵

3.2. The associations ATD Fourth World and Luttes-Solidarités-Travail

The ATD Fourth World (All Together for Dignity) and Luttes Solidarités Travail (LST) movements, which were particularly active when drawing up the General Report on Poverty, sought such a dialogue and were quick to show real commitment, both in preparing meetings and in their regular attendance at them, despite the fact that life remained and still remains very difficult for people living in extreme poverty.

ATD and LST are two militant and independent associations within which people facing poverty on an everyday basis come together freely with others who stand in solidarity with them to give a collective voice to their experience, with priority for the poorest. The point of view defended in the Agora dialogue is always that which is rooted in the experience of the poorest and that finds expression through a coming together in which each individual's role and opinions are respected. The associations are convinced that on this basis their contributions will be pertinent for all the families concerned. Firstly because youth assistance is essentially mobilised, as are most of the social services, by a population actually confronted by poverty and secondly because what is obtained by the poorest is obtained by all.

To guarantee an optimal quality in preparing meetings the two associations work in a spirit of continuous cooperation while respecting their own roots and commitments. They consult one another

²⁴ L. Baudart, « Du croisement des savoirs au changement des regards » in *Le droit face aux pauvres/Rechttegenoverarmen*, under the supervision of François Daoût, Marie-Françoise Rigaux, Anthémis, April 2020, p.142.

²⁵ Ibid. p.144.

at least once prior to each meeting to arrive at a common position on the subject that is to be on the agenda. A lot of time is devoted to reading the texts produced by the Agora group, the reports of meetings and legislative texts. All of which represents an enormous investment for the activists who have no hesitation in asking to receive training when they consider it necessary. *“Very often, when we requested changes on the basis of the experiences of the families we know, the youth assistance administration told us that these changes were already present in the youth assistance decree. Meaning that the decree is poorly implemented. It is very important for us to know and understand this decree if we want ensure it is applied in practice.”*²⁶

The two associations stress that daring to debate in a field as difficult as the right to a family life is a genuine challenge. *“It is not easy for parents to speak of a subject as difficult as the right to a family life when, for generations, you live with the anguish of seeing children placed in care. Our history is an open wound and it is only by getting together with parents who have lived the same history, with others who stand in solidarity with us, that we are able to take a little distance to analyse what we have experienced and are still experiencing. This coming together, this dialogue, is only possible provided certain conditions are met: we must understand that our opinion is evidently going to be different in the face of the same events, a father or a mother are not going to say the same thing to a social worker, even if they are both deeply affected by the situation and want what is best for the children; we must accept that our way of expressing ourselves is different and must recognize that we are not equal in the face of decisions affecting our own family. .. If measures must be taken, this must be done in dialogue with the family, never forgetting that this is a very delicate process as the parties in question are very unequal forces.”*²⁷

The associations also stress that the opinions of the families and of the professionals do not carry the same weight when they meet, whether in evaluating the situation at the outset or when deciding on assistance measures. Fundamental links as well as the role of children and parents as privileged partners, especially in situations of extreme poverty, are rarely regarded as priorities at the time of making decisions. Despite a decree that is particularly careful to respect the rights of children and parents, the latter have the sense of being nobodies, or even of being regarded as a threat against whom children must be protected by removing them from their family. Because this inability to make oneself understood can result in very violent reactions, families often choose to remain silent; these silences do not indicate agreement but simply the desire to avoid the worst.

Expanding the group to include the SAJs and SPJs was a difficult step for the professionals but also for the associations. *“... because the closer the participants are to the field, the more they feel they are being called into question personally when we speak of the suffering of families. So we needed to restore confidence between us by taking the time to meet. We felt it important, for example, for everyone to present themselves personally. (...). We are aware that our opinions are inevitably different to those of the social actors and that it is in fact only possible to meet if we accept that the participants speak of what they have experienced and that they accept that we are also going to speak of what we*

²⁶ Extract from the minutes of the 1st training session, 28 April 1999 (non-published). Brief presentation of this training further in the text, in point 3.3.§ 3.

²⁷ Extract from a text submitted by the associations ATD Fourth World and LST, February 2020.

have experienced...²⁸ The associations say that they had never imagined that the dialogue would last, on such a regular basis, for so long and that they would be so aware of the commitment of all the partners to ensure a work rhythm and mutual respect.

3.3. The Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service.

In 1997, the Youth Assistance Minister asked the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service to support the dialogue. We are setting out below a summary of the forms this support has taken to date. Drawing up reports on the meetings is also a constant task for the Service, one that is essential for effective meetings and their continuity. For this reason this task has specific mention below (point 4.3).

To help the dialogue to start up, the Service organized a meeting between the associations and the minister's office so as to identify precisely what the minister had in mind. The associations then decided to draw up a report to ensure as much as possible that the realities of life for those living in poverty would be at the heart of the meetings. The Service supported the associations in drawing up the text, titled *"The family and the placement of children due to poverty."*²⁹ It then contacted the Assistant General Director. The evaluation mission was precise in terms of aim - to avoid placements due to poverty and preserve the parents-children relationship – and method - dialogue – but gave no details on how to render these options operational. Nor were any deadlines set or obligation to achieve a result. The question was therefore how to bring this dialogue alive. The Service passed on the associations' proposal to start with a presentation of their work. The Assistant General Director accepted this point of departure, thereby immediately bringing the General Management into line with the options taken following the General Report on Poverty.

After this first stage the group decided to expand to include the SAJs and SPJs and to discuss on the basis of the decree's articles. The associations then expressed the desire to receive training. The Service replied to this request by contacting a lawyer specialising in youth assistance. Three sessions of three hours each were held. The Service, supervised by the lawyer, drew up a 'syllabus'. Reading the decree had been a difficult exercise in two respects: "firstly because militants are not used to reading the text of a law and secondly because the youth assistance decree is a particularly difficult text to understand, even for lawyers."³⁰

The Service writes texts at the request of the Agora group. It was in this way that, for example, it wrote the presentation page on the joint approach attached to the invitation to the first meeting expanded to include the SAJs and SPJs or the text setting out the essential points of the philosophy of research into the voice of families in the written texts, requested with the aim of starting the work on bases supported by all. In this way it also contributes in various ways - contacts with potential participants, addressing a public or contributing to the drawing up of the proceedings of a conference – to the

²⁸ P. Godefroid and C. Januth, « L'expression collective des familles, indispensable pour un vrai partenariat », in the file *Aide à la jeunesse : j'ai dix ans et j'ai des choses à dire...*, Revue Travailler le social, n°33, 2002, Gembloux, Belgium.

²⁹ Partner Associations of the General Report on Poverty on the French speaking side with the support of the Combat Poverty Service, *La famille et le placement des enfants pour cause de pauvreté*, January 1998. Online on www.luttepauvreté.be.

³⁰ Extract of the minutes of the 1st training session, , 28 April 1999 (non-published).

events organised by Agora, such as the reflection day on the first contact with an SAJ or the day devoted to transparency and the transmission of texts.

Eighteen months after the first meeting, the administration appointed a representative from among the group members to work together with the secretariat that was principally operated by the Combat Poverty Service. In particular, this representative ensures coordination with the group president.

The Service also supports the approach more indirectly. For example, it organised a dialogue on a publication by a youth assistance institution³¹ that highlighted the fact that a placement often weakens a child because it breaks ties, as opposed to making a sufficient investment to maintain them. It should be noted that research on the law on the declaration of abandonment³² had already reached the same conclusion: both in the development of contacts between children placed in care and their parents and in the development towards the neglect of children in care, the concern of the actors regarding the project for family relations is a more reliable risk indicator than the characteristics of the family itself. Following this, the Youth Assistance Minister instructed the Service to pursue dialogue on this question with the actors concerned. A report on this dialogue was published³³ and subsequently a video.³⁴ The president of the Agora group requested that this be shown to all the SAJs and SPJs. Agora group members, both associations and presidents, invested a great deal in showing this video at local level. The group then decided to look further into this issue and to make it the subject of its next monthly meetings (under consideration at the time of going to press). Parallel to the activities of the Agora group, the Service is preparing a compendium of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights concerning the preservation of family ties.³⁵

3.4. Changes to the group composition

The question of opening up the group to other actors than the SAJs and SPJs, such as approved services or prevention services in the sense of the 2018 decree, was raised on the occasion of a change of function for members wanting to continue to participate in the reflection. The Agora group did not respond on a case-by-case basis but always referred to the rules that govern the group functioning³⁶: the designation by the Unions, the search a geographical spread in the various districts and a balance between the different functions. At the time of each change the Agora group is very attentive to the fact that the professionals in the field must not be involved in a case concerning a family which is also present. The interest of the meetings is precisely to be able to talk free of any individual interest. The Work Charter of the Agora group also stipulates that: *“At the time of every change in its composition, it is important for the proposal to be first transmitted to all the group and approved by it. It is important*

³¹ Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale, *Lutte contre la pauvreté. Contribution au débat et à l'action politiques*, biennial report. December 2011 pp. 68-96. Online on www.combatpoverty.be.

³² I. Delens-Ravier, « La loi sur la déclaration d'abandon d'enfants en Belgique : de l'élaboration vers l'abrogation, dix années d'existence », *Revue de droit pénal et de criminologie*, June 1998, p. 637.

³³ Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale, with the support of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, *Familles pauvres : soutenir le lien dans la séparation*, octobre 2013. Online on www.luttepauvrete.be

³⁴ Contact address for those interested in the video: agora@cfwb.be. See also the trailer of this video available online: <https://vimeo.com/143977425>.

³⁵ This second thematic casebook will be published in 2021.

³⁶ See above in the text, point 3.1. §4.

*to avoid any member being placed in a difficult situation due to the presence of someone he knows and with whom he has (or had) professional relations. The final group composition is decided by the General Director who seeks to ensure the group's continuity and organisation.”*³⁷

The question of opening up to other youth assistance actors was also raised at the time of turning to a new subject, for example maintaining the link between parents and a child placed in care. The Family Reception Support Services (SAAF) and the agreed accommodation services play a vital role in maintaining this relation. Again, a decision in principle was taken: when it seems appropriate to involve a key actor in the reflections the latter is invited on an ad hoc basis. Already at the time of expansion to include field professionals the question was raised as to the maximum number of participants. *“If you want to allow each participant to have a voice, a group cannot consist of more than 15 to 20 persons. Yet initially a lot of people are targeted. There must be a balance of representations.”* A militant from one association had pointed out that *“It is all the more important to be attentive to the conditions for participation as this is a field of great suffering.”*

³⁷ Work Charter of the Agora Group adopted on 27 February 2008 (non-published).

4. The meetings

The meetings are the central elements of the approach as it is a question of establishing permanent dialogue between youth assistance professionals and families living in poverty and of comparing the way the text is understood and implemented. *"The spirit of dialogue that fuelled these meetings aims to give legitimacy to the thoughts originating in the life experience and combats of persons living in poverty and to imagine the appropriate methods of collaboration with various professionals."*³⁸ Such work requires time (4.1.). The procedural aspect of the meetings is another central element (4.2.). Also, it is essential to have written records of the discussions to ensure a continuity of dialogue (4.3) and a certain visibility to the work (4.4.).

4.1. The rhythm

The rhythm of the meetings is set by mutual agreement: with some exceptions, they are held monthly (10 meetings a year) and last two hours. A timetable of meetings is drawn up 6 months or a year in advance. The meetings are therefore held on a regular basis, a fact that has certainly contributed to the continuity of activities.

During the actual meetings, the rhythm is slower. At the start of the activities, the question was already asked as to how to maintain the group dynamic given this slow rhythm but already the fact that the participants could *"take the necessary time to meet, without rushing"* was seen as an opportunity. The partners began by discussing a six-page text over the course of a year, taking it point by point. They took six months to set out possible action following these meetings, and three months to draft jointly a research framework. Preparations by the central administration and the associations to meet with professionals in the field extended over a period of years (3 years).

The rhythm may seem too slow for some but taking time is an inherent part of the dialogue. Time is needed to get used to the process *"... at first, the associations came with a certain apprehension in regard to the administration and with well-substantiated demands. It took a little while to calm the atmosphere and to realise that there were not two opposing parties... In 2001,... we widened the reflection to include counsellors, directors and representatives of the delegates... After two or three meetings during which it was again necessary to calm the atmosphere we realised that there were reasons for the discrepancies highlighted by the beneficiaries and that the points of convergence were more numerous than we thought."*³⁹

In addition, the inequality in the positions of the families and professionals makes it necessary to very progressively arrive at the most equal relationship possible between them. In particular, this involves recognising and naming differences in experiences, one of the consequences of which is that words do not have the same meaning or carry the same emotional weight for all. A number of terms were therefore the subject of in-depth exchanges. Danger, for example, is a central notion in the decree as it can contribute to the judicialization of a situation if it is serious and actual. How to evaluate danger? On the basis of what criteria? The term 'danger' evokes very painful experiences and very often parents have the feeling that they are seen as the ones who place their child in danger. *"It is*

³⁸ Youth Assistance General Direction (1999). *Rapport d'activités*.

³⁹ D. Gevaert, « Agora : créer un lieu de parole » in Direction générale de l'Aide à la jeunesse, *Rapport d'activités 2002-2003, Etat des lieux et objectifs d'un secteur*, pp. 35-36.

surprising to see what is described as such and for which the families are blamed: not having decent housing, for example. For families, having children put into care because of having insalubrious housing is a much more serious danger." "How to take a distance from one's own values? This is a task that nobody can accomplish alone. And how to guarantee that the facts observed by both sides will receive attention in the framework of a dialogue?"

It is therefore understandable that it is a long road to arrive at a joint text supported by all the group members. The group nevertheless achieved this on several occasions.⁴⁰ The speed with which the group was able to respond to a request from the minister for an opinion on an implementing decree⁴¹ for the new decree is remarkable in this respect: this only proved possible because the request concerned consulting and providing copies of the file documents of the youth assistance counsellor and the youth assistance director, a subject on which the group had been working for a long time.

On the fringes of the meetings, it is necessary to invest time in familiarising oneself with the texts, in particular the 1991 and 2018 decrees, and in preparing the meetings. Since the approach was launched the associations have met between each meeting with the administration and field professionals. The latter meet on a more ad hoc basis, for example whenever any of the Agora group partners are requested to draft a text setting out their opinion.

4.2. The procedures

The procedures for meetings were not set in advance but evolved progressively on the basis of experience and always in line with the specificity of the approach.

Given the group's very broad mission, it proved necessary to regularly set and reset the goals that were stages along the way. All decisions are taken jointly, whether concerning content or method. For example, at the time of expanding to include field professionals the core group had in mind to place on the agenda a reading of the decree. However, at the first meeting, the realisation that some families do not even come into contact with an SAJ immediately caused participants to pause for thought. What are the reasons that cause families to refuse to request assistance from an SAJ? What do persons who do contact an SAJ expect from it and what are the expectations of the counsellors and delegates? The decision was thus taken to deepen the reflection by focusing on a greater awareness of respective expectations, in a global manner. The Agora group would set the goal later: that is, to draw up a joint text on the first contact between a family and a youth assistance service. A reading of the decree did not therefore take place as such but there would be very frequent reference to the text.

The working method is constant: discuss and compare on the basis of the situations experienced by families living in poverty and by the professionals in regard to the decree that is a federating element. The meetings *"are moments for very intense talk, but always while respecting the other's point of view, during which we analyse situations on the basis of actual experience..."* From the very first meetings, faced with the gap between the words and spirit of the decree on one hand and practices on the other, the response was one of surprise rather than any questioning of what the families said.

⁴⁰ The published texts are listed in the chronological overview in the annex.

⁴¹ Decree of 15 May 2019 of the Government of the French Community laying down the procedures for consulting and issuing copies of the documents in the file of the youth assistance adviser and the youth protection director, *M.B.*, 29 July 2019.

Discussions and comparisons are at the heart of the approach that does not exclude ad hoc recourse to another method to fuel the dialogue, namely research. This was the case, for example, following the discussions on the basis of the report titled "*The family and the out-of-home placement of children due to poverty*". In this the associations explain "*their diagnosis of the functioning of youth assistance on the basis of their story. The suffering of families forced to live in poverty, in conditions that do not conform to human dignity, their suffering at not being recognised as partners, as actors in their own story, at not seeing their point of view taken into account, was the central element, and understood as such by the administration. To delve deeper into this significant but incomplete diagnosis the youth assistance administration launched the idea of commissioning a university study with the aim of assessing the present situation in relation to the decree's implementation... For that, the researchers were invited to study the way in which the point of view of the family - parents and young people - appears in the case file. ... This line of research will make it possible to establish how the point of view of families served as a basis for programming with them approaches of a nature to respond to the starting situation and the subsequent evaluation. Did it serve as a basis for specifying the commitments of the partners, both the parents and various social actors? Did the evaluation concern the commitments of all? Or on the contrary did the families lose even more control of their history and of their combats?*"⁴². This research project was designed in a completely innovative way within the administration as the associations were involved in drawing up the research framework and were members of the Support Committee. Agreement was quickly reached on the need to continue the work of the Agora group during the time of the research that was not an end in itself. The question of the research originated in the discussions between the administration and the associations and the results are destined to fuel regular dialogue.

During the reflections on this research the Deputy General Director wondered "*to what extent a research action would enrich the approach: the personnel of certain districts would be mobilised to experiment with report writing with the families. The research would therefore go beyond a simple analysis of the past and would constitute a support in working in the desired direction.*" While adhering to the desire to achieve changes in practices the associations believed that research that looks at verifiable data is a first step that makes it possible to evaluate things as they happen. It should be remembered that at the time field professionals did not yet participate in the group's activities and there had not yet been a period of mutual adjustments.

Nearly 10 years later, at a time when the dialogue was focused on the transparency of texts, a youth assistance counsellor and a youth protection manager, both Agora group members, said they were ready to activate their service to experiment with greater transparency concerning text content. This research action, which lasted two years, was seen immediately as a new stage. "*The next stage would be to relaunch reflection on the basis of this experimentation. It is possible that this will give rise to questions that nobody has yet thought of.*" A day of reflection and dialogue was indeed held to learn the lessons from this experience, attended by 150 SAJ and SPJ professionals as well as the approved

⁴² *L'apport de la parole des familles dans l'aide à la jeunesse*. Research framework developed by the Youth assistance General Direction, the ATD Fourth World Movement and the Luttes Solidarités Travail Movement, written with the support of the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service, 3 March 2000 (non-published).

services. The Agro group subsequently summarised its reflection in a brochure,⁴³ drawing on the pilot experience and the reflection day. The fact that the services were prepared to put their practices to the test in this way is seen by the associations as a major mark of confidence. *"We had never imagined such a commitment on the part of the professionals."*

4.3. The reports

The Service draws up the reports of each meeting with great care as they are an essential tool for meaningful discussions. The fact that it is not an association or a part of the administration places it in an ideal position for carrying out this task and to be recognised as legitimate by the two partners. When necessary, the way of presenting the reports is the subject of discussion. Again decisions are taken by mutual agreement. *"It is a rigorous and demanding task that was taken on but an essential one as the written word makes it possible for the group, which is often in the grip of emotion, to take a distance from the work done and to refine and structure its thinking. It is painstaking work as to write a sentence, to sometimes write a paragraph, it sometimes takes several work sessions as you have to find the right word, be sure you are understood by the partners and then this also means that you have a record of the group's work."*⁴⁴

The Service draws up the reports so as to be able to transmit as accurately as possible the content of the discussions. Group members considered that it was preferable to identify the speakers. At the same time, allowing families and professionals to speak as freely as possible and to ensure the protection of the individuals involved is the reason why it is essential for these reports to remain confidential. *"The situations exposed in a meeting sometimes concern third parties, including families living in precarious circumstances. Despite the usual precautions, it could be possible to identify some of these families. Comments risk being interpreted out of context and thereby proving damaging to them. The draft report is approved at the subsequent meeting. Even approved it remains an internal working document and cannot in any way be consulted externally."*⁴⁵

The reports are the occasion for the participants to check whether the various participants were understood correctly, with a view to advancing on the basis of a language that is as common as possible. The goal is also to help professionals and the association militants to report respectively to their colleagues via the Union that charged them with their mission and to the families living in poverty as represented within the ATD and LST. The reports are also useful to the associations that prepare the meetings both individually and jointly, as well as to professionals when they take the time to make joint preparations.

During the first two years draft reports were read in advance by the General Management, at the request of the Service employee who wrote them; this practice was to avoid any unnecessary misunderstandings as the draft reports circulate prior to approval. After the expansion this rereading was no longer systematic. It was reintroduced when the drafting was taken over by a new Service

⁴³ Groupe Agora (ATD Quart Monde, Luttés Solidarités Travail Fédération LST, Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale, Administration générale de l'aide à la jeunesse [AGAJ]), *La transparence et la transmission des écrits*, Etat des réflexions du groupe Agora, March 2017.

⁴⁴ J-M. Delcommune, « A quelles conditions un processus de participation peut-il se construire ? » in Agora, Le premier contact entre une famille et un service de l'aide à la jeunesse. Actes de la journée d'étude du 17 October 2005.

⁴⁵ Work chart of the Agora group, approved on 27 February 2008 (non-published).

employee at the end of 2018, following the retirement of the person who had been writing the reports for the past 20 years.

4.4. Publicizing the activities

While the group requires and guarantees that all the debates should remain confidential it is essential for the ideas that result to be widely disseminated. The transmission of the experiences lived within the Agora group is fundamental but at the same time a challenge: "*How to transmit what is based essentially on the singular experience of interpersonal relations?*"⁴⁶

The Agora group charter of work states clearly the importance for the group to communicate its activities. "*The Agora group members participate in the activities as representatives of their peers. It is important for them to be attentive to communicating developments in the group's work to these peers. They are invited to do this orally at every opportunity. In addition, on the basis of these regular discussions, the Agora working group seeks to develop youth assistance practices with a view to an improved response to the needs of young people and their families, to favour improved dialogue with them and to combat violence in society. Innovative ideas that emerge from this form of laboratory need to be disseminated so that all youth assistance professionals are aware of the content of these activities. This dissemination takes place within the training sessions given to SAJ and SPJ personnel but also within all the spaces for dialogue and coordination. With this aim, the working group is careful to disseminate whenever possible the texts that punctuate the different stages in its work and to ensure visibility for its work in total transparency, to answer any requests it may receive and to organise public events.*"⁴⁷

⁴⁶ L. Baudart, « Lutter contre la pauvreté : un enjeu éthique et politique pour l'aide à la jeunesse » in Groupe Agora (ATD Quart Monde, Luttes Solidarités Travail (LST), Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale, Direction générale de l'aide à la jeunesse), La transparence et la transmission des écrits. Actes de la Journée de réflexion et de dialogue organisée le 29 November 2011, 2013, p.7.

⁴⁷ Work chart of the Agora group, approved on 27 February 2008 (non-published).

5. The progress

There have been very different kinds of progress. Some progress is in terms of dialogue (5.1.), some relates to developments to which Agora has contributed within the administration and in the field (5.2.), and some is of a legislative nature (5.3.).

5.1. Dialogue within the Agora group

The longevity of the dialogue, which is still continuing, is indicative of its interest for the participants and, beneath the surface of a slow work rhythm, of its dynamism. The General Administrator, president of the Agora group, presents the approach as *"a process, long since initiated and of which we can be proud. It is not often that one sees a constructive dialogue develop and endure between professionals and users rendered fragile by the tribulations of life."*⁴⁸ The associations speak of a process in which the professionals, *"people who believed us without understanding,"* commit for their part in the long term and take seriously the very poorest people.

To evoke the progress in terms of the quality of the dialogue we are setting out below some excerpts from the meeting reports that seem significant to us in terms of shared perceptions.

"... things have changed for the better even perhaps more so than imagined at the outset... that seemed impossible, to find a place for dialogue between associations and professionals. Today, this is beginning." (association) *"Effectively, the atmosphere has tended to become more relaxed."* (field professional).

"The notion of continuing education is pertinent in describing the approach: a mutual learning process is at work. The participants have learned progressively by sharing their experiences, their worries, their difficulties. A climate of confidence has been built up; partnership has become more than just a word." (association)

"When professionals really listen to families, as did the administration's employees who met with them regularly, they become aware of the immense suffering of these families." (association)

"At the SAJ, it is impossible to say that there is no risk. It is already a large step forward to be able to say that one is afraid." (field professional).

*"... the associations arrived with a certain apprehension in regard to the administration. It took a little while to reassure and to realise that there were not two opposing parties."*⁴⁹ (administration)

"What I found very interesting from the start in this work is that it provided a view of the field different to the one we had. For example, demands on the subject of resources were already known by the services, but what was new was the way the beneficiaries described the reception at the SAJs or SPJs, the great importance they attach to the first contact... What was also very clear was the importance of the written word... In addition to the importance of the written word, something we were already aware of, it became clear that the associations stressed that these written texts should reflect the position of the families, even if the representative was not in agreement with that position. They

⁴⁸ L. Baudart, op.cit, p. 3.

⁴⁹ D. Gevaert, « Agora : créer un lieu de parole » in Direction générale de l'aide à la jeunesse, Rapport d'activités 2002-2003, *Etat des lieux et objectifs d'un secteur*, p. 35.

stressed the need for a place where their voices could be heard. One of the elements highlighted is that as the children have access to the files of the Counsellors and Directors, on reading this file they must be able to learn of everything that their parents did to avoid them being placed in out-of-home care. It is in a way the memory of their own history that they are seeking."⁵⁰ (administration)

Expanding the group to include the SAJs and SPJs " ...enabled the associations to hear the questions put by the counsellors, directors and representatives. This approach put the participants on more of an equal footing than at the start of the activities when the associations always introduced their contribution first." "We have also all come to realise what their fears can be, the worries, the pressure exercised on the professionals in the field. Members of the associations can sometimes be surprised: 'What? You can be afraid?'" (association)

"We arrived in the group and everyone had his own magnifying glass that magnified their own perception of the issues and experiences. You learn to change this magnifying glass. For us, this enables us to identify more precisely our limits and to gauge exactly what institutional ill-treatment can mean... I have also been marked by the way in which the associations are becoming increasingly aware of the difficulty of developing a quality service in their day-to-day work where the lack of resources is evident." (field professional)

"Fifteen years of monthly meetings that have permitted major progress in the reciprocal knowledge of the resources and the weaknesses of the two parties. But above all, rooted in the 1991 decree, a continuous questioning of the place reserved for families and those close to them in the findings, analyses and decisions of the services. These people started to speak with the associations, with the ATD and LST, who are trying to ensure that the parties have a collective voice on fundamental issues: the worst contempt is when you hear it said that we are unable to speak or that we are 'toxic' for the children... People have a voice for what they experience. They are not saying that they don't need assistance, as when you are living in poverty you know that you need help, but we do not need somebody who takes our place to say what we must do. We have a place in this dialogue."⁵¹ (association)

5.2. Practices within the administration and in the field

The Agora group has an impact both on the professionals who participate in it and on the quality of the internal communication: *"It is clear that the positions I take in the face of colleagues on other matters or in different circumstances are influenced by what we experience within the Agora group. A meeting of this kind is also interesting as it enables staff at the central administration to be confronted with the experience of agents in the field and of users."*

One member of the administration adds that: *"the Agora group's activities are already having a direct influence, notably in that when a service moves to new premises account is taken of the reflections made here on the subject of the reception."* Improvements in terms of texts of greater transparency, a subject of in-depth reflection, have also been identified, notably in terms of a language that is more respectful. *"When the person writing knows that the report will be passed on to others or read then*

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.35.

⁵¹ Quote of Marc Otjacques in: Van Hootegem, Henk (2017). « Les services et administrations face au non-accès et au non-recours aux droits. », in Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale (2017). *Pauvreté et ineffectivité des droits. Non-recours aux droits*, Brussels, La Chartre, pp. 117-118.

that makes all the difference. Several professionals have testified to the fact that apart from a change in the way the reports are written, the prospect of transmitting the report brings a change in the way people are approached."⁵²

*"Following these meetings the administration has been very attentive to the experiences of the beneficiaries." These meetings are "a source of extraordinary wealth as we have so much to learn about our respective competences, these not at all being the reserve of the professionals."*⁵³ The reflections during these meetings fed through into the training of representatives, especially those concerning writing or the expectations of youth assistance on the part of families living in poverty, and in particular the automatic reflex of answering before having heard the question.

The Agora group's activities played a part in the creation of the 'harmonisation of practices' group in 2002. *"The dialogue that the administration has entered into with the ASTD Fourth World and LST associations in recent years revealed that the practices of the youth assistance counsellors and directors and their respective services differed depending on the arrondissement. The same conclusion was reached by the counsellors and directors themselves. These differences represent a wealth that can be usefully exploited. They also present a potential pitfall: that of a lack of equality between citizens when it comes to action by the public authorities. As the direct superior to the youth assistance counsellors and directors, the General Director of the DGAJ wished to encourage these bodies to harmonise the practices of the SAJs and SPJs. A working group, headed by the central administration and consisting of representatives of the latter and the youth assistance counsellors and directors, has met regularly since 2002 to pool and analyse the practices of the different parties. This aims to identify, for each stage in the activities of the services, a sufficiently flexible framework for the action of the parties and to place the beneficiaries in equivalent situations irrespective of the district they live in. The discussions of the "harmonisation" group are parallel to those of the Agora group but viewed from a different angle.*"⁵⁴ The Agora group's reflections focus on the way the beneficiaries perceive the action of the SAJs and SPJs while those of the "harmonisation" group focus more on the administrative practices and procedures of the SAJs and SPJs. At the end of 2007 the "Harmonisation of practices" group organised a study day to conclude the first stage of its activities. The Deputy General Director informed the Agora group that in its introduction it would highlight the Agora group's contribution to the reflections. This remains pertinent and applies for example to the consultation of the file elements and the addition of the opinions of families in the written reports.

⁵² Groupe Agora (ATD Quart Monde, Luttes Solidarités Travail Fédération LST, Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale, Administration générale de l'aide à la jeunesse (AGAJ)), *La transparence et la transmission des écrits*, Etat des réflexions du groupe Agora, March 2017, p. 78.

⁵³ D. Delatte-Gevaert, « Belgique: la Communauté française et les placements », in *Le droit de vivre en famille*, Dossiers et documents n°11, Revue Quart-Monde, 2002, pp. 51-54.

⁵⁴ Direction générale de l'Aide à la jeunesse, *Rapport d'activités 2002-2003*, p.32.

5.3. The legislation

To seek together, on the basis of the situations experienced by the families and professionals, the possibilities offered in the decree, whether applied or not: that is the essence of Agora's work. The adoption of the decree of 18 January 2018, which replaces the 1991 decree, nevertheless gave the Agora group the opportunity to make some progress in terms of the legislation.

Globally, the new decree is more explicit than the 1991 decree on the role of the family as actor in the process of youth assistance. The latter was clear on this subject in the preamble but no more than implicit in the main body of the text. Title II of the 1991 decree is titled "The rights of young people" and the chapters that constitute it speak of "guarantees for respecting the rights of young people" while book II of the 2018 decree is titled "Assistance measures for children and their family" and title II of this book is "The rights of children, their family and those close to them ...".

The activities of the Agora group have had an impact on changes to articles concerning access to the case file (articles 27 and 44 of the 2018 decree). It should be remembered that a member of the minister's staff follows the Agora group's reflections: even if not present at every meeting, he or she remains informed by reading the reports., The Youth Assistance Minister requested an opinion from the Agora group regarding the draft decree setting the procedures for the consultation and issuing of Agora texts. The group members were positive on the subject of the decree's content and the way in which their work was taken into account. The same is true of the decree concerning the project for children, on which the minister also requested an opinion. One member of the Agora group described such an opinion as having no formal authority but it proved authoritative.

Conclusion

On the basis of the Agora experience as described, we have identified and summarised the essential conditions required to initiate fruitful and lasting dialogue between people living in poverty and professionals, irrespective of the subject in question. These conditions are centred on four key concepts: conviction, commitment, common references, legitimacy. Their practical expression in other fields will no doubt not be identical, but the aim is to inspire other initiatives and not to reproduce existing ones.

The conviction that dialogue between professionals charged with implementing a right and people living in poverty in contact with these professionals is necessary to improve practices in an area where legislation is the starting point. In the present case it is a politician who, following an initial experience with such a dialogue – the General Report on Poverty – showed proof of such a conviction and charged her administration with acting on it. The latter was under an obligation to respond to the minister's request. No doubt therefore we cannot speak here of an a priori conviction but rather of an open attitude towards a unique mission, a healthy curiosity and a certain initial interest that was strengthened throughout the process. The associations within which the persons living in poverty came together were for their part also in favour of a dialogue of this nature.

Commitment is a corollary of this conviction because the coming together of the two partners is an arduous one: they see things from a radically different point of view – in the literal sense, namely the position from which one views a situation –and this explains why the words do not always mean the same thing for all the parties and do not carry the same emotional weight. In addition, they do not come together on an equal footing, one partner having authority over the other, in this case that of being involved in a decision for the out-of-home placement of children. In such a context, speaking freely and truly is only possible if every effort is made to defuse the potential for friction, to find a common language and to establish a relationship between equals. With this in view, the Agora group adopted a number of operating rules such as to take decisions jointly on all aspects of method, including the group composition, and on content; to discuss on the basis of situations experienced by each party and to undertake joint reflection outside of any individual interests; to be ready to call oneself into question under the scrutiny of the other; to work on mutual representations in a way that is respectful and well intentioned; to come together in a spirit of awareness and not accusation; to keep strict written records of discussions. All of this requires a considerable human investment, especially in time. One can add that initiatives in other areas will no doubt reveal still more interesting and specific avenues to be explored.

The search for common references helps to arrive at agreement on the goals to be pursued step-by-step and on the underlying long-term vision, this despite the inherently different and unequal positions of the partners. It permits a joint questioning of the functioning of the institutions. It soon became clear that the youth assistance decree was a federating element for the Agora approach to which there was constant reference. In another field it is possible that the applicable legislation will not have the support of one or more partners in the dialogue. In which case human rights will be the joint reference and the dialogue will be likely to concern changes to or adoption of the legislation as much as the actual practices. In all cases the reference to rights is at the heart of the approach as it is a question of improving these rights, of recognising the person living in poverty not as the object of action but as the subject of rights. The creation of common references, through the joint drafting of texts, is also an

avenue explored by the Agora group. It published a text on the societal context, for example, and in doing so the partners realised that they share certain findings and analyses.

Finally, the legitimacy of the dialogue, in the eyes of all the professionals in a given sector, is essential. In the experience described a number of elements contribute to this, notably the political mandate without the obligation of a result, thus without institutional pressure; the involvement of the youth assistance administration at the highest level as well as the staff of the successive ministers; the method of designating the professionals in the field (mandate of the professional unions); regular communication on the state of activities through publications and events open to all the SAJs and SPJs and to other sectors concerned (IPPJ [Public Institution for Youth Protection], approved services, AMO [Assistance in an Open Environment], etc.). Dialogue is an enriching experience in itself for all those who participate in it but it is only if it is recognised more widely as legitimate that the results of the activities pursued by a small number will be susceptible to achieve progress in practices, or even in the legislation, in the desired direction of a common accord on the part of the professionals and of people living in poverty.

Annexe I: Outline of the stages in the Agora approach

Group composition

- Members of the youth assistance central administration and the ATD and LST associations (May 1998 to January 2001)
- Expansion to include the SAJs and SPJs (March 2001, still applicable at the time of going to press)

Principal subjects discussed, in chronological order

- The first contact between a family and a youth assistance service (SAJ)
- Transparency and transmission of texts
- Maintenance of link between members of a family with one of more children placed out of the home (current at the time of going to press).

Work at legislative level

- Draft decree of 18 January 2018, articles 27 and 44 concerning file access
- Draft decree setting procedures for the consultation and issue of copies of file documents
- Draft decree concerning the project for the child

Research, in chronological order

- Contribution of the voice of the families to youth assistance
- The notion of danger
- A research action at the Tournai SAJ on the transmission of the social investigation report and at the Tournai SPJ on the transmission of the annual evaluation report to the interested parties (2008-2010)

Annexe II: bibliography

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