

## 2. Definitions



### 2.1 Difficulties with words

As youth workers trying to work inclusively we encounter many challenges. One of these is how to find the right words to refer to those young people whose inclusion we want to build our projects around.

Over the years many terms have been challenged and many have been actively dropped, avoided or changed in response to criticism. Some for being obviously derogatory like “dead beat dads” or “the underclass”. Others like “the poor”, “the handicapped” or “the jobless” have been rejected for being insensitive or inaccurate. For example, in the European Commission’s YOUTH programme there has been a conscious shift away from the expression “disadvantaged young people” to the phrase “young people with fewer opportunities” (a term that is itself a little clumsy and liable to change over time) which we have used as much as possible in this T-Kit. (see 6.1 : *Ethos*)

Whatever terms we use, we should acknowledge that:

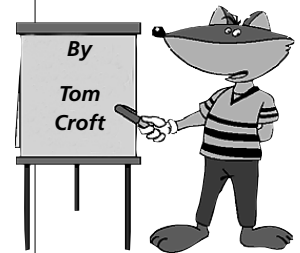
- words are powerful and complex and are quite capable of giving offence – even when the thinking behind them was well intentioned and no harm or disrespect was meant by the speaker;
- words shape the way that we think and respond. Descriptive terms, such as “young offender” or “victim of abuse”, for example, often have associations which are not proven or justified but can be hard to shake off, once used;
- and although words are important, we need not get too obsessed with them. If we spend too much time worrying about words we might not get anything useful done.

The problem with language is that there are two forces pulling in opposite directions whenever we work with people who are facing exclusion in their daily lives. We are tugged one way by governments, policy makers, managers, analysts, grant givers and other fund providers. For them we want to target and identify particular groups of young people. We want a label to express young people’s particular vulnerability, the severity of the problems they face, the difficulty of improving their situation, the injustice and suffering they experience. We need to do this in order to challenge society with what young people teach us about their situations and their aspirations. We also want to do this clearly and concisely to improve our chances of getting the funds and resources necessary to do what is really important: work with young people.

In our relationships with young people the pressure is from a different direction. We know the absurdity – and dangers – of labelling people. We know that young people are individuals, not a generalised mass. We know that they do not respond well to labels imposed by other people. We are aware of their right to dignity and self-respect. So we feel uncomfortable when describing them in ways that they would not choose to describe themselves. Thus a tension arises when we try to accommodate both groups.

Given that there is no ideal language category for describing socially excluded young people, it makes sense to proceed with care to avoid developing views that are too fixed. It would also be wise to follow some broad principles:

- We should be as accurate as possible, without letting our vocabulary become technical or too difficult to understand. Many disabled people object to words like “suffering” and “wheelchair bound” partly because of their pejorative and patronising overtones, but also because they are simply inaccurate. Wheelchair users are not necessarily bound to their chairs, and, without evidence, it is presumptuous and ill informed to describe anyone as suffering.
- We should listen to what young people want. Would young people of Turkish or Moroccan origin in the Netherlands describe themselves as “medelander” (a term invented by the Dutch Government to suggest that they were quasi-Nederlanders)? If not, should we? Would “young people with fewer opportunities” recognise themselves if they heard that description?





- We should always be aware of the dignity of people we are describing. A simple test - would we ourselves like to be referred to in this way? Would we be happy if this description was applied to someone close to us?
- We should be explicit that a description refer to young people's current situation, not to young people themselves. So if we do call someone "at risk" or "disadvantaged" we refer to their present or recent circumstances that affect their opportunities. It is not a label they will carry forever.

## 2.2 Who are the young people with fewer opportunities?

"When people don't go out from where they live, when they never leave their block or their estate, a wall develops. They don't see anything outside their estate or their country. That's dangerous. Getting out and about means seeing other people. It gives you the impression of changing the world. The wall which stops us going out and seeing other people must be blown up."

*European White Paper on Youth Policy: A Contribution from the Poorest Young People, International Movement ATD Fourth World, 2001*

### ***The missing experts***

These are the words of a young person speaking about her experiences of exclusion, discrimination and poverty; subjects that are much talked about but not always well understood.

Academics, policy advisors, social workers and even youth workers are sometimes put forward as experts on exclusion. Many of these experts have a valuable secondary knowledge gleaned from years of dedicated research or committed hands on work in the field, and many carry with them a deep conviction fuelled by the injustices they have witnessed. But few have the direct knowledge gained through a lifetime of overcoming exclusion. These are the missing experts in the debate and their expertise is not recognised or utilised enough.

Why does this happen? Partly it is a matter of the difficulty we all have to break free of socially accepted norms and beliefs about authority and knowledge. Educational achievement and professional status are qualities we are used to respecting and there is a lot of sense in this. But the flip side is that we can be easily trapped in these habits. Partly too, it is a problem with society's structures and institutions which are ill equipped and badly designed to reach and engage people who are excluded, a condition sometimes described as "institutional discrimination" and a prime contributor to exclusion itself. Last but not least, it is because, as we shall see later, discrimination, exclusion and insecurity reinforce one another over the long run and make it more and more difficult for people to rise above their day-to-day battle. Without support it is often impossible for people to be in a position to represent themselves or others. The upshot of all this is that society's understanding of exclusion suffers, as does our ability to combat it.

### ***Double jeopardy***

In much academic or policy work there is a tendency to focus on identifying and describing vulnerable groups. This categorising can be useful. It is a necessary tool for quantitative research and for statistically evaluating the impact of policies and programmes. The trouble is that, overly used, such an approach can place a rather distorting lens on young people and their situations.



For any list of excluded groups one can ask why are these groups seen as at risk of exclusion and not others? Someone could ask for example, “Where are teenage mothers or rurally isolated youth?” Some groups of young people are often neglected from such lists because they are very specific in nature, for instance young carers (young people who carry the main responsibility for caring for a severely disabled parent or relative). To do justice to all worthy claims would inevitably lead to a list as long as your arm.

Finally, the thing about grouping young people is that they can fall into more than one group at the same time. They may even only identify themselves as belonging to some of those groups or even to none at all. However, the realisation that someone can belong to more than one vulnerable group at the same time can lead us to a deeper understanding of exclusion itself. What, for example does it mean if you belong not only to an ethnic minority but you are also living in long-term poverty? Or if you are young single mother, on a very low income and rurally isolated? If all these groups are at risk of exclusion in our society are you doubly or triply at risk? This idea of “double jeopardy” or “multiple insecurity” is the basis for a more holistic understanding of exclusion, its causes and consequences.

### **A human rights approach**

“A lack of basic security is the absence of one or more factors that enable individuals and families to assume professional, family and social responsibilities and to enjoy fundamental rights. Such a situation may become more extended and lead to more serious and permanent consequences. Chronic poverty results when the lack of basic security simultaneously affects several aspects of people’s lives, when it is prolonged, and when it severely compromises people’s chances of regaining their rights and of reassuming their responsibilities in the foreseeable future.”

*Definition of persistent poverty adopted by the French Economic and Social Council (1987) and the United Nations Economic and Social Council (1996).*

The definition speaks about persistent poverty but it could just as easily describe long-term exclusion. The reality it points to is the reality facing many marginalised young people in our societies. It highlights three important aspects of people’s situations:

- *Multiple insecurities* – The most vulnerable young people are often facing a number of different insecurities in their lives at the same time, for example: unemployment, discrimination and isolation; or inadequate housing, health problems and inconsistent education and training.
- *Persistence* – If such multiple insecurities endure over the long-term they can build up and compound one another, for example: inadequate housing can lead to poor health; discrimination can lead to unemployment or problems at school; family break up to isolation.
- *Erosion of rights and responsibilities* – Eventually people’s basic social, economic, cultural, civil and political rights and responsibilities are undermined or under threat wholesale: it is difficult to succeed at school if you face discrimination on a daily basis. Without a basic education how will you find a decent job? Without a decent job how will you afford adequate housing? When your confidence is shattered and people do not understand your situation it is very difficult to join in cultural or civil activities. All these pressures can put intolerable strain on family life. This sort of vicious circle can go round and round, in the end affecting every part of a person’s life.

In these kinds of circumstances life becomes a daily struggle to meet responsibilities and enjoy fundamental rights that most of us take for granted and this means exclusion from society and its projects.

Through helping us to understand their experience young people like the ones quoted at the beginning of this section are also telling us about their aspirations. The role of youth work in the fight against exclusion is about providing more opportunities to young people who have few, but not simply as an end in itself. Through these opportunities we can support young people in their efforts to avoid the trap of violence and join them in bringing down the wall.