

SERVICE USER PARTICIPATION IN FRANCE

Embodying the principles of participation, Cités Caritas (France) offers us the perspectives of Marie-Lucine, Jean-Pierre, and Daniel, three individuals with lived experience of homelessness. Through their voices, the article delves into the benefits of participation, both those experienced by participants and structural benefits, and outlines the necessary elements for its success, including training, clearer expectations, and better communication. The article underlines the importance of participation in creating meaningful change, and signals towards greater inclusion of participation at the national level.



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The participation of people with lived experience is recognised as being key to shaping and bringing about policy change. It is also seen as a powerful way to promote empowerment and change perspectives. The approach, which has been implemented in various fields, also applies to homelessness, as a guiding principle that runs through service provision. Service user voice and service user participation are also enshrined in the legislation governing organisations promoting social inclusion in France, through the 2002-2 law that redefined the provision of healthcare and support, and which aims to empower service users. Many initiatives also make it possible to "work with" people and "bring people in". This can be by letting their voice be heard (through consultation), by offering a space for co-production of services (joint decision-making where everyone has an equal say) or by making it easier for them to be involved. All these initiatives are guided by an understanding of the benefits of participation for individuals, organisations, and society as a whole.

Participation takes different forms. It can mean **representation** on different decision-making or governance bodies ([HCDL](#), HCTS, COMED, CNLE, CNPA, *Conseils de la Vie sociale* (CVS)¹, provider Boards, etc.), allowing people to contribute to the development of policies and the monitoring of their implementation. It can also mean "active engagement" through **involvement in activities** such as volunteering.

However, participation does not happen organically. To make participation possible, certain conditions must be met. These include listening, trust, respect, and universal positive regard. Several good practice guides have been published (e.g., Inclusion and "[doing together](#)", Service user participation, [Words without filters: Observations and recommendations by low-income households on the policies that concern them](#) (in French)). They all demonstrate the need to create specific spaces for participation so that it can work well.

¹ Resident, family and staff advisory councils in supported housing schemes.



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In this article, we wanted to give the floor to three people with lived experience of homelessness and experience of participation: Marie-Lucine, a member of the *Conseil national des personnes accueillies* (National service user advisory board, CNPA); Jean-Pierre, volunteer at *La Cloche* charity; and Daniel, formerly elected to the *Conseil de la Vie sociale* of a CHRS (supported accommodation scheme). Each outlines their experience of participation.

When asked how they felt about being "active participants", Marie-Lucine, Jean-Pierre, and Daniel all agreed that it was necessary and beneficial, both for themselves ("it increases your self-esteem and develops your skills"), and for their peers, as they saw themselves as spokespersons helping professionals and decision-makers to understand the reality of underserved populations. "We know because we have been there," says Marie-Lucine, "so we can explain the difficulties service users face" and this helps "to stop [others] speaking for them". "It is important to speak up, it can help those who do not know how to stand up for themselves". What is important though, they say, is understanding how the system works being able to make yourself heard: "you have to dare to speak up, be confident and know how to formulate an argument"; "you have to fight to be listened to – at times it is as if you don't have the right to speak" says Marie-Lucine. "You have to know the terminology and understand the role you need to play in your organisation." Daniel shares "feeling at ease in a debate," and his "knowledge of administrative subjects" thanks to his training as a lawyer. But, often, service users' opinions seem not to be taken into consideration: "a lot of people think we're worthless and not clever enough". Feeling judged and being subjected to the gaze of the other is also very present in their experience: "the way they look at the residents... they judge them a lot", says Marie-Lucine. "They don't really listen; they are condescending". To participate fully, people must feel comfortable and feel that they can really express themselves.

Another obstacle to be aware of is the need to manage participants' expectations. "When we give our views, we want things to change. How can we stay positive when we see that nothing changes?" Daniel explains that he stopped taking part in the CVS because it wasn't making any difference: "When I ask for something, I want it to happen. We are blamed for the lack of results when it isn't up to us. Plus, we have to deal with demands that are not always reasonable." When asked what would help enable effective participation, Marie-Lucine says that there should be "more time given to cases seen by the DALO committee²". People may feel cheated by participation that doesn't go anywhere, so it is necessary to clarify what these bodies are actually able to do so as not to create frustration, disillusionment, or resignation. It is essential to communicate well, to "explain why it takes so long," says Daniel.

Everyone should have a say and be supported to do this. To make this possible, training and support are essential tools. Not only must we "help [participants] understand what the authorities are for and how they work", but also increase the involvement of people with lived experience in the training of social workers, so that they value and make use of knowledge gained through experience, suggests Rachel Cohen of The Salvation Army. Services should also be sure to involve users from the outset, to avoid "only consulting people once policies have already been developed", say the interviewees.

2 A committee that agrees whether a person has a priority need to be rehoused.

Participation through resident engagement seems a better guarantee of people having an equal say. Examples of this form of participation include La Cloche charity's consultative councils (meeting with service users who have volunteered to organise activities locally) and how the Secours Catholique (SCCF) runs its family accommodation. Resident engagement allows changes to be made in line with people's needs and is also a tool for lobbying for bigger changes, says an SCCF representative. "More and more people who sleep rough or have slept rough or are in insecure housing want to be part of service user boards. This is a powerful lobbying tool that means representatives and service providers can change the way they operate. In many day centres managed by the SCCF, people with experience of rough sleeping are very involved in welcoming and supporting service users". In addition to being a tool to develop employability and help people make social connections, participation through resident engagement gives people

an established place in society and contributes to skills sharing. Above all, it ensures that these skills are valued and recognised. Jean-Pierre, who leads a training course called 'Aller vers' (reaching out), stresses that becoming a volunteer has brought him a lot: "it has done me good, has made me feel useful". He wanted to give something back: "when you see that you can help people, it's invigorating. It's something positive, which means a lot in a life where there is often more negative than positive." It is an investment that allows people to regain a sense of dignity: "no one knows who among us is on the street and who isn't and that's important". Daniel feels the same; joining the CVS in his accommodation kept him busy and made him feel he "wasn't totally useless and that [his] skills were recognised by the various services [he] had to deal with. When you find yourself on the street, you need to know that it's only temporary. Being part of something helps with that".

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However, it's not enough just to involve a few people experiencing homelessness. "Everyone on the street should rise up," says Jean-Pierre, "we shouldn't be satisfied with the status quo." "Participation will have been worth it when we can talk about people without labelling them. We have all gone through difficult times, but that doesn't define us", says Marie-Lucine.

To make this participation possible, several elements must be brought together. First impressions are really important – as Jean-Pierre says, "what is important is that there is no criticism, contemptuous looks, or hasty judgement". In his accommodation, "[he] was lucky to meet people who never made [him] feel that [they] were different from one another". The approach taken and the activities related to it are also important; Jean-Pierre mentions "getting together and talking to each other, activities, games, meetings" as examples of meeting spaces that make people feel comfortable and help them express themselves. It can be difficult to get involved unless people have the information and the means to participate, "especially when you are on the street" or experiencing poverty. "Giving out free bus tickets" is important. However, "it takes time" and you have to have the time to devote to it and have the headspace for it too - "some people don't want to participate because of their situation. They are wrapped up in their own problems".

Lastly, Marie-Lucine raises the question of how to give recognition to resident engagement, through listening to what people say, but also covering their out-of-pocket costs and potentially formalising the skills people develop through resident engagement with a qualification or certificate (such as a degree equivalent based on work experience (VAE), or recognising it as peer work, training of trainers/facilitators, etc.). She is thinking about service user representatives' future and how they might further benefit from their experience and contribution.

Service user participation is proving to be an exciting subject and a challenge, where the obstacles seem to relate to how the system is organised and to professionals, but also to the people with lived experience themselves - their expectations, and how useful they feel it is for themselves and their community. However, these exchanges are valued differently at local and at national level. At local level, service user engagement is beneficial and has results, while at national level, it seems people with lived experience will only be able to participate in national bodies if it is made mandatory and made effective by prior work on the obstacles to be removed and the tools to use to facilitate their participation.