

PARTICIPATING TO TRANSFORM PERSPECTIVES

People with lived experience of homelessness should be able to participate in the decisions which “shape their lives”. That’s what Arrels Fundació argue in this article. Outline their experience with promoting the involvement of individuals with lived experience of homelessness, including opening spaces within its organisation, from its day-to-day functioning to the decision-making bodies. Participation raises awareness, and challenge societal prejudices. The article emphasises how such participation empowers individuals and transforms perspectives, ultimately aiding in the mission to end homelessness.



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Providing support for management and logistical tasks, working in reception areas, managing the internal mail service, deciding what we do and how we will do it in our occupational workshop, working on the Management Team and the Board of Trustees - in recent years at Arrels we have opened all these spaces and more for the involvement and participation of people who have lived on the streets. They actively collaborate in the day-to-day running of the organisation and are key players in raising public awareness, transforming views, and breaking down prejudices towards homelessness.

When Arrels was born, more than three decades ago, it was clear that our mission should be based on three important pillars: to accompany and care for people living on the streets in Barcelona, to raise awareness among citizens, and to transform unfair situations through political and social advocacy. Since then, we have done all this through various projects and actions, but particularly by promoting the involvement of a diverse range of people.

Workers, volunteers, partners and donors, educational centres, concerned neighbours, businesses, political parties... Achieving #nobodysleepingonthestreet will only be possible if everyone gets involved. However, about thirteen years ago, we realised that people with lived experience were participating in the decisions that affected their lives and our accompaniment, but we needed to open spaces in the organisation so that they could actively contribute from their experience.

‘There were specific experiences, but until then it had not been taken into account in a cross-sectional way. The first step was to create a team in which workers, volunteers and people with experience living on the streets began to discuss what participation meant for us. For a whole year, workshops were held for the organisation's workers and

volunteers, because they needed to understand and know more about homelessness. The challenge was to go from participating by decorating our day centre or writing a text for the magazine to participating in the decisions that affect the services we offer at Arrels,’ explains Ferran Busquets, current director of Arrels.


Currently, the entity's internal mail service operates thanks to the participation of people we accompany, others collaborate in the maintenance and logistics of our centres. In our Pere Barnés home, which houses people with a fragile state of health, the 40 people that reside there are involved in the daily running of the facility (reception, laundry, cleaning of common areas, accompanying other people, etc...), each within their ability. The people who participate in the occupational workshop elaborate and give ideas on new products and decide on the functioning of the group in the assemblies. The advice service in our open centre is led by a worker with lived experience. The voice of people who have been homeless is also heard in Arrels' Ethical Reflection and Action Group and the organisation's decision-making bodies, such as the Management Team and the Board of Trustees.

BREAKING DOWN PREJUDICES THROUGH PARTICIPATION

For us, participation is a tool that allows us to promote the self-esteem and autonomy of the person; to make them aware that things can change internally (in the functioning of the organisation) and in society. The pillars of our mission which are committed to raising awareness and making a social impact would be unthinkable without the involvement, vision and participation of people who know what it means to be homeless.

One example is the awareness-raising work we do every year with four thousand children and young people with the participation of volunteers and people who have lived on the streets. 'It's important to change the way we look at things. When you are on the street, people see you and run away, some change sidewalks and are afraid of you. In the talks we organise, what you can conclude from my story is that you don't always have to stay there, you can change if you want to and if they help you. This surprises the kids because many of them thought that people are homeless because they want to be, and that's not always the case,' explains Juan Carlos González, who for years has shared his experience with students.

In recent years, we have raised awareness and broken down prejudices in many different ways: talking about shelters, hygiene, love or friendship through the Twitter account @Placido_Mo; organising routes through different places in Barcelona in which people who have lived on the street act as guides and explain their experience; covering the facades of different buildings in the city with large photographs and murals that have as protagonists people who have lived on the streets; making artistic interventions at an art centre to attract citizens' attention with the message *Homeless go home*; using YouTube to make literary reviews through the channel StreetTubers; and providing the experience and point of view of people who have lived on the street when we organise campaigns and awareness-raising actions and when we talk to the media. All these projects and actions have been possible thanks to the involvement of people who are, or have been, in a homeless situation.

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Art, design, and the performing arts are, without a doubt, some of the formulas that we believe are most effective for changing opinions and breaking down prejudices towards homelessness. It is also a way for people with experience being homeless to participate. 'On the one hand, the person learns to approach the artistic world, to be in contact with beauty, sensitivity, and creativity. On the other hand, you discover that the other person has something to contribute and that the relationship between you and him is on equal terms,' summarizes Rocío Alonso, head of the Arrels occupational workshop.

When, in 2017, we took the play *L'últim crit* (The Last Shout) to the theatre, the roles of the people who had been homeless, the volunteers and workers of Arrels, and the professional actors and actresses were blurred, challenging the audience. A year later, the impact was similar when we premiered *Sis Personatges* (Six Characters) in one of the most important theatres in the city, and when we premiered the film *Sense Sostre* (Roofless), in which the main protagonist and some supporting actors were people with lived experience.

The first message of many of the artistic actions we carry out concerns the experience of living on the streets to change society's view towards homeless people. This implies making a great effort to confront lived situations, transform them into words or images and express what we want to transmit. Miquel Fuster is the best example of all this. He was an illustrator and, before being homeless, he worked in a publishing house drawing comics. After that, he lived on the street for 15 years, but he never stopped drawing. That helped him later, when he finally managed to have a home, to tell his experiences in a series of four comics entitled *Miguel, 15 años en la calle* (Miguel, 15 years being homeless). He produced drawings, gave numerous talks, and participated in conferences and projects; he did it as an activist, to tirelessly explain to everyone that no one should have to live on the street.

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SOME CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES

Since we became aware of the importance and the need for the participation of people who have lived on the street, we have tried to promote it in a cross-sectional way in our entity. This implies changing internal views; dedicating time; motivating, without forcing anyone; and knowing that there are some people with unstable situations and therefore their participation may change. In these years we have generated spaces and we have also encountered limitations and difficulties. However, we believe that we can still move forward and encourage more participation and involvement of people, individually and collectively, both internally in Arrels and to transform the general public's views.

With this intention, for example, we have exchanged knowledge with other entities in Spain and included it in a report that last year was sent to the Spanish government to influence the future national homelessness strategy. Also, we have participated in international meetings, such as the European project Homeless Talk, which aims to reduce prejudices, empower homeless people so that they can transmit their experience and raise awareness, and spread good practices on participation that can be useful to other organisations and entities.