

Case study

The Peak Rural Women's Network

The Peak Rural Women's Network feeds into the Grassroots Network, giving the socially excluded a route to debate and influence policy and decision making.

Grassroots Network

The idea of having a grass roots network has two origins; firstly, CEFET (Coordinating European Funding for the East Midlands Third Sector) used to run local social capital projects in the region, which gave small grants to very small grass roots community organisations. Secondly, the regional network aimed to provide a path for local networks to think about the 'bigger picture' i.e. policy issues that affect them at a less local level. By collecting all the various local networks, there is a regional focus, which provides a channel for those voices to be heard. People can come together to talk about shared experience, to collaborate and learn lessons from each other at a local level. The network is also an opportunity to exchange ideas and exchange information.

Connecting local action to European policy

CEFET did some research with the European Anti Poverty Network about whether people in excluded communities wanted their voice to be heard in policy; the answer was 'yes'. The European Anti Poverty Network works to make the voices of people who have suffered from exclusion or poverty be heard. Policy discussion includes national issues like benefit levels, problems accessing benefits and the inflexibility of the benefits system. The network enables those involved to draw up a connection to national policy opportunities and to identify how European level policy connects right down to local level.

The Grassroots Network creates a space for sharing experiences at a local level. This includes addressing support needs and potential for positive action. A key aspect is campaigning at the local level to talk about people's attitudes to poverty. There is a need to get more exposure so that people understand what communities can do themselves and the massive difference that makes. There is a lot of work going on at community level that is not appreciated.

Peak Rural Women's Network

Judith Higgins was involved in the earlier project on local social capital run by CEFET. The project empowered local people to identify local needs and gaps. The project was important for individuals as many of the people involved had skills but had never had the opportunity to share and develop them. It also improved individual's self esteem and made them feel valued. Judith contacted local people who were part of the original project in Derbyshire. The Grassroots Network

supported and funded a meeting and as a result the Peak Rural Women's Network was set up.

Thinking ahead

2010 is the European Year Against Poverty and Social Exclusion and this provides a great opportunity for the Grassroots Network to get more exposure for people who are excluded and to enable them to tell their story in a more influential way. The goal is to keep the Grassroots Network running while there is a specific window of influence about telling stories and there is actually money to do that. In the longer run the aim is to affect the policy so that it is seen as an important part of an overall strategy around inclusion.

"There needs to be grass roots opportunities, to give people an understanding of how they can be heard." Judith Higgins, Volunteer

"We wanted to enable a networking forum, which would also offer opportunities for individuals to influence decision making." Clare Caves, Coordinator for Grassroots Network Development, CEFET

"There are many different approaches to overcoming the problems of social inclusion; this project brought people together in order to creatively build connections and social capital." Laurie Moran, CEFET

For further information visit www.cefet.org.uk