



What do we mean when we speak of participation?

Throughout our day, we decide what we will do, how we will spend our free time, if we will spend time with our parents, or our neighbors, if we will dedicate our time to social or cultural activities... In a nutshell, we participate. In the homelessness field, there is still a long way to go. For homeless people, who decides? Do you consider their opinion when managing the resources used or when developing policy?

Beginning in 2015, the Arrels' management team began to seek out the opinions of those who have lived on the street. However, obtaining their opinions has not been easy: it took months of debate within Arrels, reflections on previous experiences involving participation, and a change within the behavior of employees and volunteers... The question was as easy as it was complex: what do we mean when we speak of participation?

FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless, makes it clear: those who have lived on the street are the experts and should be able to make decisions about their lives and influence the services and policies that affect them.

Participation is a tool that improves self-esteem and promotes the autonomy of a person while also making them aware of the things that can change. A simple example: in recent weeks, several people who have received aid from Arrels have moved into individual flats and were able to decide how to furnish them, and then go out and buy that furniture.

At a more individual level, participation is taking into account what the person wants and what capabilities they have, as well as facilitating their access to rights and resources that already exist in the standard network and that any citizen can use, according to Ester Sánchez, the head of the personal support team. Marta Olaria, a FEANTSA representative for Arrels, added that at the community level, participation is promoting the experiences of people who have lived on the street in the institutions that serve them and sharing their experience so that services can adapt to their needs.

To make this participation possible, it is necessary that the person has stabilized their situation and is aware that they will still need support as relapses occur often.

Towards a culture of participation

Five years ago, Arrels set a new goal for itself: to promote participation. Previously, there were ventures that involved participation, but participation was never considered in every endeavor organization-wide. The first step towards universal participation was creating a team of employees, volunteers and homeless people to discuss what is and what is not participation. In the first year, workshops for Arrels employees and volunteers were carried out. The challenge was to pass from participate in the decoration of the center or to write for the magazine, to taking part in the decisions that concern the services that Arrels offers.



Since then, a system has been created to make the voices of all people heard and those visiting Arrels for services are involved in almost every task of the organization. Still, there are challenges as some of the people involved are not convinced of the value of this participation.

And how we promote participation at Arrels?

- Give those who visit Arrels administrative tasks such as updating the social base, scanning documents, and delivering documents
- Create a team of volunteers and Arrels visitors to run the Arrels closet that contains clothing, blankets, shoes and hygiene products
- The maintenance and logistics team relies on people attended by Arrels to carry out small repairs and upkeep the various Arrels facilities
- Explain and raise awareness of the reality of living on the street to more than 2,300 girls and boys each year
- As usual, use the routes of those who have lived on the street to walk the streets and remember that it is not normal to have to sleep outside
- Allow employees, volunteers, and those served to propose improvements to services, such as showers, and organize leisure time activities