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## Training or social exclusion: competences for the social inclusion of groups at risk

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to report the results of ongoing research on the integration of groups at risk of exclusion, in order to facilitate decision-making processes that allow their consideration by social protection mechanisms. The main objectives of the research were to construct tools to explore and assess entry to the workforce based on skills training and risk factors. Study participants comprised groups using services in the area provided by Social Action, which included women at risk, people with disabilities, immigrants, ethnic minorities, present and former drug addicts, and other groups such as homeless people. The methodology is qualitative, through ethnographic fieldwork. We conclude that, unlike poverty and marginalisation, which manifest as an economic deficit and thus may be tackled by economic measures, social exclusion corresponds to a social deficit. Exclusion produces deficits in terms of social cohesion, in which factors related to training and the skills acquired play an essential role.

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### 1. Introduction

Poverty has traditionally been studied in terms of economic inequality and the associated low-income bracket of the population. Nowadays however, changes in our society have given rise to other mechanisms of marginalisation besides purely economic processes, and these act as triggers for social exclusion.

Various policies on preventing social exclusion, including the European directives, indicate that the best way to achieve this is through education and training. The objective of most of the policies and actions that have been proposed is for the subject to obtain employment. The wide range of strategies advocated to attain this goal encompass a diversity of approaches to this problem, and have met with varying degrees of success. To fulfil this

objective, interventions must take a comprehensive and open approach to addressing the needs that arise in specific contexts. The study discussed here, consisting of a case study on the employability of certain groups at risk of exclusion, was conducted in the province of Leon, Spain, throughout 2012 and in the first half of 2013 in order to gain a better understanding of the current status of these groups that would contribute to informing decisions on social protection mechanisms. The main objectives of the research were to construct tools to explore and assess entry to the workforce based on skills training and risk factors. Study participants comprised groups using services in the area provided by Social Action. These groups included women at risk, people with disabilities, immigrants, ethnic minorities, present and former drug addicts, and other groups such as homeless people, etc. The group consisting of women could be further sub-divided into single mothers, separated women, sometimes with family responsibilities, who were seeking a standard employment relationship for the first time, abused women, victims of intimate partner violence and women over 45 years. In some cases, a single individual presented more than one of these profiles concomitantly. The research team worked directly with these groups, and the study was primarily based on a qualitative methodological approach, as explained below.

## **2. Theoretical and conceptual background.**

In a prior synthesis of the perspective from which we addressed the issue of marginalisation, it is first necessary to note that the two fairly closely related concepts of poverty and social exclusion rapidly emerge when speaking of vulnerable groups. In general, research on social exclusion has formed part of studies about poverty, since these are increasingly taking social rather than strictly economic considerations into account, and as Hilary Silver (2007) has indicated, social research has begun to focus more and more on indicators to measure social exclusion. For example, the indicators proposed by Barnes (2005) encompass seven dimensions of social exclusion: financial status, ownership of durable goods, housing quality and habitability, neighbourhood perceptions, personal social relationships, physical health and psychological well-being. In an earlier study, Barnes and others (2002) measured exclusion as multidimensional disadvantage in the areas of housing, health, education, social relations and participation. Meanwhile, Kronauer defined it as labour market, economic, cultural, spatial, social and institutional exclusion (cited in Littlewood and Herkommer 1999). Petra Böhnke (2006) used the Eurobarometer surveys to measure social exclusion in subjective terms, creating an index of belonging that is related to social support, family ties and trust in institutions. In Spain, the Observatory of Social Exclusion and Inclusion Processes created by the Sartu Federation in 2001 has attempted to bring together institutions, social organisations and businesses in order to address these issues. To this end, its work has focused on the construction of social indicators of social exclusion and inclusion and on the factors that influence this, conducting studies and forming specific working groups. Unlike poverty and marginalisation, as Fitoussi (1998) and Castel (1997) have also indicated, the phenomenon of exclusion is related not only to an economic deficit - which could be tackled through minimum wage policies - but also, above all, to weak social ties. In extreme cases, situations of exclusion can lead to the breakdown of relationships and the isolation of individuals, producing a deficit in terms of social cohesion. Importantly from a sociological perspective, exclusion is not the unique preserve of any one particular social stratum. On the contrary, one characteristic of advanced technological societies is the "risk of destabilisation of the previously stable" (Fitoussi, 1998) caused by accelerated processes of downward mobility.

## **3. Methodology.**

We applied a qualitative methodological design to ethnographic fieldwork, using in-depth interviews and focus groups with the groups concerned to investigate a number of factors that render people belonging to groups at risk more vulnerable to exclusion. These factors related primarily to the personal, family, educational, training, social, cultural and experiential trajectories of the different individuals. Based on the analysis of the data, we propose a set of tools, strategies and skills to consider in order to achieve their social inclusion.

Prior to conducting the ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interpretation, we administered a semi-structured questionnaire to users of the social services in order to determine their profiles. A total of 79 users participated, of

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