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Introductory Words at the Steps-workshop

During the preparation of the Conference I had in my mind the slogan "Let's become clear". I think in English you could say as well "Let's put the cards on the table".

According to that slogan I would formulate the aim of our discussion during the next two days. In my eyes it could be the aim to collect and share all our practical experiences and knowledge about exclusion and discrimination.

I think about both: the negative and the positive experiences.

The 'negative' experiences should help to recognise the challenges and will help as well to avoid mistakes. For example:

Which institutional or financial structures, which laws still lead to discrimination and exclusion in our countries?

Which attitude hinder in the fight against discrimination?

Michael writes in his discussion paper that we need to share the obstacles and traps on the way towards participation and solidarity. To have a self-critical view at the own institution and structures and to analyse the own and other's practice might be a precondition to find starting points to fight against discrimination.

To make progress we should collect 'positive' examples and experiences as well:

Which are best practices in fighting discrimination against people with learning disabilities?

Which legal and financial structures, which organisational structures help to realise equality and diversity?

At this point we would like to take up the demand to take the national backgrounds into account to learn about the differences and the characteristics of the structures in the different countries. This interest has been formulated frequently in our previous discussions and will be the focus of the working groups this morning.

I hope you share the interest to start an intensive discussion about these topics. The exchange via email nevertheless back up the idea to concentrate on practical experiences.

To quote Josep: We have to “avoid excessive theorisation” and to reflect the actual conditions of the people: We must not forget the immediate surroundings of the people.” End of the Quotation.

Paul makes the proposal to use “case studies, user stories and user voices to illustrate the general analysis”. In his opinion it is crucial to ground the work in Steps “in the experiences of oppression of service users themselves”.

Background of this demand is the conviction that new policies and services bring their own hegemonies. He writes: quotation marks - “It is perhaps simply that the newer service institutions we have constructed in the community mirror in different ways, our need to control and our incapacity to share power. “ end of the quotation.

I hope that you share the interest to recognise the hegemonies which are combined with new management forms as for example ambulant care, guardianship and advocacy or personal budgets.

On the other hand there is the claim to centre our work on the wishes, rights and interests of the people with learning disabilities. “We must begin to support people to speak for themselves”, Hector demands. The results of the first meeting of the T-group with people with learning disabilities which Michael will present in some minutes may help us to keep this in mind.

The question about definitions and terminology is a third topic we should take into consideration. It is on the Steps-agenda since the project has started. And with the discussion papers the necessity to clear the most important terms and concepts became more obvious.

Josep and Hector for example refer in their papers on different concepts of “guardianship” or rather “self guardianship”. Josep and Hector, I am sorry, but I really didn’t get this point. We hopefully will have the possibility to deepen this question during the next two days.

Firstly I think that it is a language problem or a problem of definition. Therefore it is in my eyes very important to explain in details what we are talking about.

Michael started in his paper with definitions of the terms “exclusion”, “discrimination” and “social immunity”. He distinguishes exclusion as a lack of opportunities in participation from discrimination as the assertion of inferiority based on apparently “naturalistic” arguments and characteristics. Thirdly he describes social immunity as the consequence of non-contact between the people with learning disabilities and the surrounding community. In his opinion STEPS should take into account every three phenomena.

Another topic of the internet discussion was the question about diversity and equality which is not easy for me to summarise. With reference to diversity Hector and Bart seems to disagree whether any differences are positive and consequently whether every need should be met.

Hector says: We aim to ensure that service planning and provision will take into account the particular needs and values of the individual ensuring that any 'differences' are regarded as positive and contribute towards a 'culturally' richer and more energetic society.

Bart replies by saying: We, on the meso level of organisations, more often than not fail to meet the challenge." He argues that the organisations are not capable to deal with people or cultures which challenge the basic values and practices of the services.

Corresponding to everybody's human dignity and human rights I personally would say: Even if it is a big challenge the question remains: How can we meet everybody's individual needs? How can we guarantee everybody's individual rights recognising his or her culture, age, gender, sexual orientation origin and personal history?

I am very interested to hear your opinion about this question.

Connected with the question about diversity and equality might be the demand of a cultural shift. All papers share the conviction that a shift in culture is necessary not only in organisations delivering services but also in the wider community.

Kent calls it a change on a cultural level towards a citizen perspective: I quote him: "People with learning disabilities are citizens, are members of society. They do not need to prove their competence for participation as it is a consequence of their right as a citizen.

Consequently a citizen perspective or human rights perspective needs to be formed". End of the quotation.

Bart and Theo, both are sure that participation will not succeed without solidarity and friendship. Bart asks in this if friendship could be organised. And Theo Maas would like to discuss the question how solidarity could come into being.

In my point of view the institutions – as well the providers as political institutions – are well able to support solidarity. Institutions determine the social climate, set – among others - the topics in social discussions and hold an exemplary function. Lots of examples could verify this claim. Therefore the institutions should not hand over the responsibility for friendship and solidarity only to the society in general or to private relationships.

I would like to come to the end with a question which I have missed in our previous discussion. And that is question about the role of the administration. Certainly this question

has developed on the background of our experiences in Hamburg but I am very interested to learn how the partners from the other countries would answer these questions, such as: How could we describe the tasks of the political institutions and the administrations – for example in the field of quality control? What are effective instruments to formulate and implement political targets?

Combined with the question about the role of the administrations and the political institutions is the questions about responsibility. Who is responsible for the costs and the use of the taxes, for the quality of services, for safety and security or for the fulfilment of everybody's rights and wishes.

To come to the end: I hopefully have caught the main points of the debate. If not I am glad to have offered you first starting points for a lively discussion.

It was a big pleasure to follow the Internet Discussion. Thank you to everybody for the contributions and your attention.