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Discussion paper: Three attempts to escape

The first attempted escape: the question about good and bad

In his paper Bart asks very provocative if we, as the Steps-network, say that there is no difference between good and bad. His assumption is that the organisations are "not capable to deal with bad people or cultures". I my point of view this is an attempt to escape. Please let me try to formulate my personal answer to it.

In my opinion the question about good and bad is not very justifiable - as well in the Steps context as in the general discussion about diversity and equality. 'Good' and 'bad' are not appropriate categories to value man or cultures – above all, if the majority refer to discriminated minorities in our countries.

Human dignity has to be recognised for every men and woman – independent from their performances and abilities, independent if he or she is in prison or lives in a group home for people with learning disabilities. Human dignity manifests itself in the human rights which guarantee everybody the innate and inalienable fundamental rights. "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status." (Article 2, Universal Declaration of Human Rights)."

So the justifiable and perhaps not very comfortable question remains: How can we guarantee that everybody's individual needs and rights will be met? No argument or excuse will help to escape from this demand.

Even if it is a big challenge the positive effects will gain the upper hand. To say it with Hector's words: Differences contribute towards a 'culturally' richer and more energetic society.

The second escape attempt: the question about solidarity and friendship

Friendship and solidarity are pointed out as central values in the discussion about inclusion and fighting discrimination. Concerning this Bart asks: "Friendship can not be organised, can it? Theo argues in a similar direction with the question: Is it possible to develop solidarity in a social and political climate of egoism and economic pressure? Implicite I hear the answer "no", at least big doubts.

The second – and in the current social discussion very frequently made – attempt to escape is in my opinion to shift the responsibility for friendship and solidarity to the society in general or to individual relationships of the people or voluntary workers.

Consequently there is no possibility to address this problem properly? General assumptions are not very helpful. I have the impression that the above mentioned argumentation recognises the problem but leaves it nearly untouched at the same time. With the following thoughts I built on a weak foundations – please don't mind me if I nevertheless write them down:

In this context I think about the political- and care-institutions as cart-horses (cold blooded horses) drawing their cart the predestined way of de-institutionalisation. They always aim – besides the improvement of life for people with learning disability – at the protection of institutions, of power and possession. Stations on that way are among others "friendship building", "solidarity", community care", "inclusion", "networking" and "partnership building" which could at least be integrated in the concept of de-institutionalisation. This should not be the strategy of "Steps". We should dare to think uncomfortable and unusual ways – even if cuts in social services and the orientation to individual output, competition and disassociation may dominate the current social discussion.

I would like to answer the question: "Could friendship or solidarity be organised?" as follows: Institutions – as well providers as political institutions - can well organise possibilities for friendship and are able to support solidarity!
Our Rotterdam colleagues are working successful in the field of work. The closure programmes in England and Sweden set examples for the will to integrate people in society. The opening of the office for non-discrimination in Barcelona takes seriously care of everybody's human rights. Such activities might influence the social climate towards solidarity. Institutions initiate changes of the social environment, determine the subjects in the social discussion and hold an exemplary function.

The negative influence of an attitude of non-solidarity can be also demonstrated in many fields. For example: All over Europe the number of racist attacks increases since politics discuss the limitation of immigration and asylum or make a distinction between 'useful' and 'useless' foreigners. Denmark has yet decided to close the national office of non-discrimination. And in Hamburg the funds for integrative and social projects are extremely reduced. This development is not suited to produce a climate of friendship.

The third escape attempt: the ignored/overlooked forgotten administrations/politics

In all our contributions we focus on services as main actors for a change and for fighting against discrimination. In connection with living, future planning, work, personal assistance the care-providers are asked to change and develop their practice. Everybody has very concrete and interesting ideas in mind.

But what about the administration? In our proposal we have described the social service departments as one of the main stakeholders in the field of care for people with learning disabilities. In our previous discussion the administrations didn't play a prominent role. Against this blind spot I would like to encourage a discussion about the role of the administration with some questions:

Why do we overlook the administrations or rather politics?

Do we have no confidence in the possibilities of politics to influence the services? Do the administrations themselves believe in their influence on the daily practice and development of the services? Do services perhaps not want the administration as a partner or controller in the organisation of care?

What could be their action fields and possibilities?

How could politics impose targets and measures? Are white papers and law acts suitable instruments? What is further needed?

Besides the implementation of political targets – should controlling of the services be a central task of the administration and politics? How could they best organise the evaluation of the services?

Which ways could be recommended to co-operate with care-institutions, advocacy groups and the people with learning disabilities for example in the area of care and case management?

What are the differences between governmental organised and private services concerning their relation to the administration?

In this context I am not only interested in advantages and disadvantages of an open market of service providers. I would like to know whether there are differences in the co-operation, the implementation of political targets and quality control? In other words: Are governmental services easier to control and to influence concerning the implementation of targets and the quality of care than private institutions? Or offers money and contracts enough controlling instruments to guarantee a high quality of services?