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Report on the STEPS users advisory group

Group co-ordinators:

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Background

STEPS has established a group of users from service-providing organisations in Hamburg to monitor and evaluate the outcome of “STEPS” as experts for their own life and interests. The results of the meetings are returned to the International Network.

In the group both women and men, young and elderly people and people who work in sheltered workshops or day care are represented. Some of them live in group homes, others in their own apartments.

The group is supported by Bärbel Mickler, Forum e.V., who co-ordinates the participation of group members and writes the invitations and the minutes.

Objectives:

Discussion claims, concerns and issues.

Methodology and Strategy:

- Brainstorming sessions.
- Reflection on daily-life experience and the user's life stories.
- Organisation of the User Conference “Independent Living in Europe”.
- Working on the basis of questionnaires.



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Description of the activities of the project:

The advisory group of professionals held six meetings:

- 15.10.2002 Presentation of STEPS and its objective.
 Discussion: What does self-determination mean?
- 27.11.2002 Report on the Rotterdam-Conference
 Discussion: Work, employment and education
- 04.02.2003 Discussion: The User Conference "Independent Living in Europe"
 Discussion: Housing
- 23.04.2003 Report on Conferences and Congresses
 Discussion: Finances and Financing; advocacy and independent support
- 08.07.2003 Reports on Conferences and Visits; User-Conference
 Discussion: Human Rights
- 7.10.2003 Report on the progress of STEPS
 Discussion: User Conference "Independent living in Europe"

Achievements/Outcomes:

The users want to be able to make decisions about their lives. They want to learn about their chances, to express their claims and demands and to get in contact and co-operate with other people. In this context STEPS is a small contribution to the empowerment and participation of people with learning disabilities.

Due to the fact that an international user-meeting is not planned in STEPS, the user group has decided to organise its own International Conference in Spring 2004: "Independent Living in Europe". At the Conference participants have the opportunity to learn about people's lives in other countries. Joint demands should be expressed. The user group has invited people with learning disabilities from England, Sweden, Spain and the Netherlands. The conference, which has been initiated in the STEPS context, but is not part of the project, is a continuation of the activities for the European year of people with disabilities.



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In addition, some of the users took part in an exchange with Swedish and Dutch partners.

The demands of the advisory group of people with learning disabilities are as follows:

- A guarantee of participation. Adequate support and communication is essential
- Self-determination and participation of people with severe disabilities
- Self-determination on service and housing issues
- The opportunity to negotiate about services
- Services should be provided independently from money
- Flexible services according to the person's needs
- Free choice
- Independent advocacy or self-advocacy
- Self determination on money
- Self determination on education and further education
- Paid employment and work
- The opportunity to work on the first labour market
- Support for leisure and social networking
- Participation in culture and research
- Simple language, simple laws and simple structures
- An enhanced awareness in society of people with learning disabilities

Information on co-operation between the partners involved and other interest groups:

The users' claims have a significant influence on STEPS as reference points for all proposals and discussion. The International Network is still looking for an adequate way to integrate people with learning disabilities equally in the co-operation process.

The user group has agreed to pass on the results of the International User Conference to STEPS. Its outcome will have a great impact on the project, especially the London Conference in May 2004.



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Forthcoming events:

The user group plans to meet five times until the end of the second year of STEPS.

The project management will suggest to the user group the discussion of and agreement on joint recommendations in order to enable self-determination and participation in all social spheres.

Products developed and available:

- Report from Ivan Wittfoot and Oliver Millies: "In Schweden lebt es sich besser!", August 2003.
- Article from Ursula Uderstadt in "RH intern": "Besuch der Schweden im Rauhen Haus", June 2003.
- Information about the User Conference "Independent Living in Europe"
- Minutes from the meetings

Anne Ernst

10. November 2003