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Solidarity

Reading the contributions of Hector, Bart and Michael I got the idea that our discussions about the aims of STEPS focus on much important items as discrimination, exclusion, integration equal opportunities and so on and do not face the world behind the last “s” in Steps being Solidarity.

Solidarity seems almost to be a strange thing belonging to the past and not to our modern society dominated by singles, agents of globalisation, one person enterprises and failing neighbourhoods. Individuality is not a slogan, it`s our reality. In this society of individuals caring for themselves and the success of their lives solidarity plays the subordinated role.

But the question we face is anyhow: thinking and developing new structures of care for disabled people, is there a need of solidarity and what function is in it?

People with learning disabilities do effectively belong to the most vulnerable groups in the society and we all know best that most of them need a lot of support on the way of participating in community life with much challenging complications inside. Empowerment, strengthening self-advocacy, education and support of self advocacy structures may be good answers to the challenges to be met. They are based on the knowledge that sharing the community life and taking part in it can only succeed by offering own contributions and gaining attention for the own interests, even more than that by bringing to powerful fulfilment the rights you have.

Nevertheless full participation may not succeed, at least not only by that and facing the most important need in everyone`s life being happiness.

Solidarity with people with learning disabilities has played an enormous part in the past. The whole traditional system of care has raised up from that. By breaking down this system traditional solidarity gets involved and attacked. Building the care institutions for this people was a strong expression of solidarity. De-institutionalisation may bring a loss of solidarity.

So we face the question of building new solidarity when we go ahead building new structures. Can we build this? Taking in account the main characteristics of our societies as remarked above I cannot believe that new solidarity will generate on its own. Participation in community life we may declare as right in our bills and discrimination can be forbidden by law, solidarity however we never can order. Without solidarity I fear full participation in community life and combating discrimination will not succeed.

Some good impulses we find in the idea and good practice of inclusion. Including a priori the people with learning disabilities and their issues by all things we undertake in our communities is the right way. This is the first priority task of our politicians and boards.

More important than that is the building of sustainable personal networks. This will be the first priority of professional staff, for sure the most challenging and difficult task in giving support to people with learning disabilities. We all experience the meaning and importance of having connections and a lot of good friends not only when we are in need. People with

learning disabilities do need them more and usually they are found without them. Its neither enough for them to have friends who are disabled nor to have good connections with their relatives nor even professional staff.

Important as well may be the resources we find in our societies in voluntary workers. To find and involve them may be the aim of good publicity work, its also the task of well trained staff.

These ideas of new solidarity are characterised by involving larger parts of our communities and society in the practice of restructuring care. They bring the traditional institutional solidarity to where solidarity belongs: in our communities and society. They will change by that.

These ideas are not so new and we need more. I pledge for intensive discussion in order to find out their importance and to come to an answer to Michaels remarks on a possible roll-back of re-institutionalisation.