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*DEVELOPING PARTICIPATORY WELFARE STATE. CAN SERVICE
USERS PRODUCE SOME ESSENTIAL LOCAL KNOWLEDGE ON
PUBLIC SERVICES?*

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Summary:

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1. SERVICE USERS' PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL WELFARE SERVICES

Finland is a Nordic welfare state where the public sector bears the main responsibility for the provision of social services. The state regulates the basic level of social welfare by law, but it is up to municipalities to decide how they operationalize actual social services in practice. It is thus the municipalities that are responsible for social welfare, as well as for producing the bulk of social services.

In this article I am going to ask if the Finnish social welfare is too much centralized on local authorities. The development of social welfare services is concentrated on official organizations and professionals instead of NGOs and service users. Can service users participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of social welfare services?

2. DIRECTIONS OF DEVELOPMENT

The following analysis is meant to help clarify the direction of the development of social welfare services. Cooperation between either official or unofficial actors can be considered to be one direction of development. Development of either the activities or the structure of social welfare can be considered another direction. These dimensions form the four sectors of development¹. The targets of development can be the activities and qualifications of social work professionals themselves, official cooperative structures and systems, cooperation with clients and service users, and cooperation with NGOs and other civic actors. (See Figure 1.)

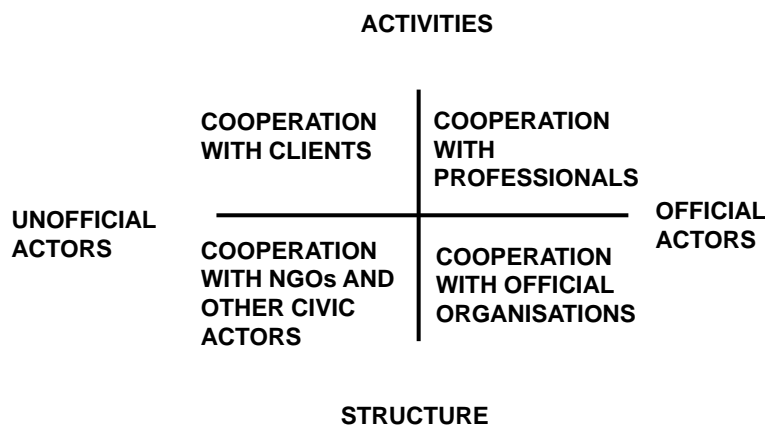


Figure 1. Sectors of social welfare development (Toikko 2006; 2007).

¹ The development is examined from the viewpoint of official services.

The development of social welfare services can be directed at the improvement of the skills and expertise of professionals from the viewpoint of official actors. The National Development Program for Health and Social Services², for instance, has strived to attain this aim by funding projects that seek to create good working practices and well-functioning action models, such as the development of action models for early intervention in child protection in cooperation with the day care and school system. This is the type of development that means first and foremost development of the qualifications and skills of professions.

The development of social welfare services can also be directed at structural and, primarily, cross-sectional activities. The point of departure of the National Development Program for Health and Social Services has been the renovation of the official service structure. The development of the service network has progressed as a collaborative effort between professionals, administrative management and elected officials. However, the discourse has been kept strictly within the framework of the official system. This type of development is therefore primarily directed at the structures of municipal social welfare.

Even though the structural development of social welfare services could also rely on civic activities, the Finnish model has not supported this direction of development. Non-governmental organizations have not been in the centre of social welfare development. If this direction was to be emphasized, the question would mainly be of local social political solutions that would involve NGOs and other civic actors in the creation of new service structures. However, it is needed to underline, that the third sector's organizations can get support from other sources than directly from the state. The Slot Machine Association's (RAY) task is to raise funds through gaming operations to support the work of voluntary health and welfare organizations. Each year the RAY's funding enables the organizations to take care of tens of thousands of people from all walks of life.

Development of social welfare services can also be directed towards increasing client cooperation, which means that clients themselves participate in the design, implementation and assessment of social welfare. The question is of highlighting the position of service users side by side with the traditional official perspective. The principal outline of the social welfare development has always placed emphasis on the role of the official actors in the field. The participation of non-official actors in development work has been largely ignored.

The development of social welfare services has progressed in a very traditional direction. It has followed quite traditional models which emphasize the role of municipal social welfare and professionals in the field. It has not been able to open up alternative development channels. In practice, it is not only the social welfare NGOs that have been ignored but the clients themselves. It certainly is an object of social policy to empower the citizens to participate in political discourse, but at least in regard to social welfare recipients this demand for participation and partnership has succeeded poorly. (Toikko 2006; 2007.)

In social welfare development can be seen four different directions. The targets of development can be the qualifications of social work professionals themselves, official cooperative structures, cooperation with NGOs, and cooperation with clients and service users. This paper focuses on the forms of service users' participation.

3. SERVICE USERS' PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT

Even though client-centeredness is considered one of the central principles of social work, it is not extended to pertain to development work or knowledge production. Service users and their organizations demand to contribute with their own analyses, interpretations and incentives; they want to develop working methods, services and organizations instead of remaining the target of the development work conducted by others (see Turner & Beresford 2005).

The participation of the client-citizens in knowledge production is often respectively categorized as three different levels. The first level consists of working methods where the voices of service users are heard

² The National Development Program for Health and Social Services allow municipalities to both develop good practices in social services and renovate the structure of social welfare. Municipalities can apply for state funding for up to 75 % of the costs of their development projects. This leaves them with the remaining 25 % to finance themselves.

and they are consulted. Their opinions and views are called for. The User Participation in Quality Assessment (UPQA) model developed in Denmark is an illustrative example of this (Krogstrup 2004). In the UPQA model, the clients can openly express their views and feelings of the services and their feedback is presented to the workers to comment on. After this, the client feedback is forwarded to both the management of the organization and political decision-makers for further comment. Other tools can include focus groups, discussion groups and various other forums, which give a voice to service users.

Another level of knowledge production requires a dialogue between the clients and the professionals. The question is no longer of one-way client feedback, but the clients participate also in its interpretation. The idea is to see the clients as experts who have a role in the development of services. Experts from outside are often consulted in service development; the clients are no less valuable experts of the services they use. Together with professionals, service users conduct clarifications and chart services. They are seen as experts by experience. (Clark, Davis, Fisher, Glynn & Jerreries 2008.)

On the third level of knowledge production, it is the service users who control research and development. Service users determine the research question and methods of both data collection and analysis; furthermore, they themselves are responsible for the analysis and the argumentation of the data. Social work professionals and researchers have the role of consultants. User controlled research has its origins in service users' dissatisfaction with traditional research, which many feel has disempowered them. (Turner & Beresford 2005; Sweeny 2009.)

The emphasis on the viewpoint of service users transforms the conception of expertise in social work. Participatory expertise evolves alongside the specific expertise of subject matter. This, in its part, is considered to guarantee the quality and correct targeting of services, but also to support the service users to achieve full citizenship. The expertise of professionals is thus not absolute expertise of subject matter, but also expertise in the dismantlement of hierarchical structures and interaction on equal terms.

4. TWO APPROACHES TO PARTICIPATION

Two key approaches to involving service users can be identified: the consumerist and democratic approaches. Both may have their merits, but they should not be confused. The emergence of consumerist thinking in welfare services has coincided with the expansion of commercial provision. Service users are now conceived of as consumers and issues reframed in terms of market preferences, consumer rights and product development, echoing the language and thinking of the market economy from which they have been borrowed. (Beresford & Croft 1993.)

Consumerism starts from the idea of buying the goods and services we want instead of making collective provision for them. It places an emphasis on concepts of individual choice and competition. Two competing meanings underpin the idea of consumerism: first, giving priority to the needs and wants of the "consumer"; and the second, framing service users as consumers and converting their needs into markets to be met by the creating of goods and services. The user involvement is then presented as the feedback mechanism for the expression of consumer views. From that point of view clients-consumers' choices change service provision. That is the reason it is an essential component of markets. (Tritter & McCallum 2006.)

Citizenship is a helpful concept for exploring democratic approach, because it is essentially concerned with people's participation as members of society. In her classical article Arnstein (1969, 216) claims, that "citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power". A client has not citizenship, if he or she has not power over his services. She sees that the participation is a process, where "nobodies are trying to become somebodies with enough power to make the target institutions responsive to their views, aspirations and needs".

From a democratic point of view it is about more than having a choice and voice, however important that is in social welfare services. It's also concerned with how we are treated and regarded more generally and with having greater say and control over the whole of our approach. Its objectives are civil rights and equality of opportunity. Service users' participation emphasizes their empowerment in relation to service organizations. For instance, disabled people campaign for their rights to access buildings and to get public transport. (Beresford & Croft 1993.)

CONCLUSION

In recent year service users' participation has developed at a rapid pace. The question is no longer whether service users should have a voice in local life and services, but how this is to be achieved. It is not just the promise of greater service user involvement that's now needed, but ways of realizing it. It's time to move from rhetoric to reality. Service users' involvement can change the culture of social welfare services. Activating clients does not mean they become active only in managing their own lives and living environments, but also in participating in public management and the activities of private organizations.

Service users' participation has increasingly become a significant part of social welfare services. The core question of Finnish social welfare services concerns the border between the official and the unofficial in the development of social welfare. In what ways do the service users and unofficial organizations participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the services? There are a lot of good practical examples of participation, but still there are challenges to get service users involved in social welfare services.

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