

Theses

Representation of the interests of people with disabilities in communities

These theses summarize the results of a survey in North Rhine -Westphalia in mid-2013.

1 The impulse to develop community interest groups goes back to the 1970s. Important incentives has come by the legislation against discrimination and disadvantage in North Rhine -Westphalia (2004). The concrete forms of advocacy are very different. Based on similar challenges the development is shaped by local characteristics. The impulse is coming from different stakeholders. For successful development support by local politics is a very important factor.

2 Advisory councils to represent people with disabilities can be found mainly in larger cities. In some communities we find self-help organisations or other umbrella groups, representing with different binding the interests of people with disabilities. The most common way to represent interests of people with disabilities is the assignment of an ombudsman (unpaid or full-time). Their activity is shaped by the balancing act between involvement in the administration and advocacy.

3 Most interest groups value their development as positive .It is often characterized by an increase of influence. and in some cases also by an improvement of formal representation. Successes are primarily connected with the implementation of concrete projects to realise accessibility and the establishment of interest groups .

4 A huge problem for many groups is to find new people, who are willing to engage for the interests of people with disabilities in the community.

5 Most of the interest groups are usually very active. They see themselves predominantly as a partner for individual persons with disabilities and as an independent acting pressure group. The ombudsmen see themselves more as part of the administration board. Regardless of the form of representation one can distinguish more politically active and more politically reactive interest groups. This is mainly dependent on the self- perception of their own role and the culture of participation in their municipality.

6 People with physical disabilities and people who are blind are dominating in interest groups, while other groups of people with disabilities are significantly less represented in the committees and offices. Financing an assistance requirement is not a matter of course, but in most communities possible. The cooperation in the committees is usually characterized by a large consensus, majority decisions are the exception .

7 Despite of the very wide range of topics which are edited in the interest groups, a clear focus falls - particularly in advisory councils - on the issue of accessibility. Issues of developing support services for people with disabilities are much less picked out as a central theme.

8 The work of interest groups is often placed in the context of the UN Convention for Rights or People with Disabilities (UN-CRPD). Therefore the Convention is an important

topic in the committees. Up to now the issue is rather information and discussion of the meaning than concrete implementation plans.

9 The influence of interest groups is rather characterized by counseling, networking, coordination and maintenance of informal contacts than by formal involvement. In the statutes of councils rights for participation are weak. However, it is said by a majority of respondents that recommendations of interest groups have a binding character and are usually implemented. This is in the opinion of the respondents also favored because they make more and more experience that there is sensitivity in the administration board, especially in the field of architectural accessibility. Administration staff members themselves ask for involvement of the local interest groups.

10 The financial support from the municipality for interest groups is very different. More than half of councils receive attendance fee. Others receive a fixed budget per annum, support from the administration staff, grants for different purposes or resources like rooms free of charge are provided. Only a few of volunteers get an allowance. Around 20 % of surveyed interest groups get no support from the community.

11 The legal obligation in Northrhine-Westfalia formulates a commitment to draft a statute with the concerns of people with disabilities at the local level. Only 20% of municipalities have been complied with.